

**ALLEGORIES OF TRANSITION: REPRESENTATIONS OF PAST AND PRESENT REPRESSIVE
REGIMES IN GYORGYI PALFI'S FEATURE FILM *TAXIDERMIA* AND THE *HOUSE OF TERROR***

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ABSTRACT: This paper will deal with the representation of the recent past in Hungary concentrating on material culture in two different cases and mean of reproduction: The House of Terror (*Terror Háza*) museum in opposition the movie *Taxidermia* (Gyorgyi Palfi, 2006). In the first part I shall build the theoretical framework of my study. I will discuss the figure of baroque allegory as opposed to that of the symbol as used and Walter Benjamin's notion of writing "history against the grain" in representation of the past. In the second part I shall reflect on two case different ways of representation of repressive regimes in Hungary from the 20th century. I shall contrast the representation of the same era in the House of Terror Museum and Gyorgi Palfi's *Taxidermia* in three moments: World War II, state-socialism, and post-socialist Hungary. In the light of the harsh audience perceptions and conservative critique which introduce *Taxidermia* as a film bordering to pornography, I will use another "pornographic" example of representation of the recent past. This comparison, I believe, could throw light on the daring and thoughtful social criticism that the movie displays in a rather allegorical way, as opposed to the treacherous straightforward symbolic representation on display at the Terror House Museum.

I. I. Theoretical Framework: Symbol vs. (Baroque) Allegory

The name of Walter Benjamin is far too often quoted in texts on historical representation of repressive regimes. He is usually recalled through his tragic fate trying to escape the advancing Nazi army in World War II, through direct references to his claim that fascism aestheticizes politics, or through rather epigramic quotes from variety of his essays. Only seldom, however, do authors from the interdisciplinary field of memory studies refer to his philosophical system in order to draw conclusions lines

between theory history and representation. Yet, as this brief outline claims – alongside with Greame Gilloch’s reading of Benjamin’s theory (Gilloch 2002) – his work could use both as a rich and an instructive theoretical framework which could throw light on means of representation in both arts and history.

In his completed but unsuccessful habilitation work *On the Origin of German Tragic Drama* (Benjamin 1998) Benjamin introduces the figure of baroque allegory as opposed to symbol. He uses it to underline the peculiar genre discrepancy between the representation of events the German baroque tragic drama – *Trauerspiel*, and the classical tragedy, re-established by late Romanticism. According to Benjamin 16-17th century Baroque drama is not an heir of the Greek tragedy as interpreted in Aristotle’s *Poetics* (Benjamin 1998:60). It is a unique dramatic form: a parody of tragedy, rich in expressive buffo means. The dramatic action is often interrupted by untimely predictions of the culmination: the death of the main character, the baroque sovereign. Thus, the action is deprived from secrecy and the audience – from the expected catharsis. Devoid of heroism, it represents an event in the ‘unfulfilled’, empty time of profane history, as opposed to the ‘fulfilled’ absolute time tragedy seems to expand over. The mourning over the untimely death of the monarch – the central event in the Baroque drama – is expressed in a cacophony of exaggerated gestures and onomatopoeic sounds. The sovereign’s dead body represents a ruin of mortality. Thus both in its form and its content *Trauerspiel* opposes romantic understanding of art as a supreme translation of the language of nature into the language of men, as an indivisible unity of form and content, of beautiful and divine. Instead it reveals the transience and fragmentation of human existence (Benjamin 1998:160).

Allegory is the central figure and a critical instrument of *Trauerspiel*. According to Benjamin the tradition of German Romanticism perceived allegory as a dogmatic, fixed means of representation, while the symbol was affirmed as a supreme expression of perfection and totality. However, (as in the differentiation between *Trauerspiel* and tragedy) Walter Benjamin considers this the pretension of the totality of symbolic representation problematic and false. It discloses the object of art in its unproblematic, perfect, distant, unapproachable auratic expression, and leaves no space for interpretation and critique. “Whereas in the symbol destruction is idealized... [allegory] is the form in which man’s subjection to nature is most obvious and it significantly gives

rise not only to the enigmatic question of human existence as such, but also of the biographical historicity of the individual” (Benjamin 1998, p. 166). This is so because allegory never stands for a direct representation, hence shows historical reality in its crystallised moments, in its ruins. “[I]n allegory is *the facis hippocratica* of history that lies like a frozen landscape [is revealed] (Benjamin 1998, p. 166). As a ruin, as a disintegrating human corpse, allegory does not serve the purpose of salvation, of immortality. It is there “to disclose in the ruined body the truth and hopelessness”, and to point in a grotesque gesture towards creaturely condition (Gilloch 2002, p.83). “What is expressed here portentously in the form of a riddle is not only the nature of human life in general, but also the biographical historicity of the individual in its organically corrupted form...” (Benjamin 1998, p.166).

Within his broader philosophical system, Benjamin’s aim to redeem allegory and Baroque *Trauerspiel* from classical symbolism is interwoven with his belief in alternative canon of redemptive, subversive forms of art that sparkle in every period of decay. In modernity he sees allegory as inherited by the “dialectical image at a standstill” – the critical tool he uses in his unfinished *Arcades Project* (Benjamin 1999). This figure does not even need to perform a synthesis; unlike allegory which, at the end of the day finds the counterpoint of the profane in the divine order of existence, the dialectic image of standstill does not need to point helplessly to the order of divine (Benjamin 1998, p. 233). In its fixedness it inherits allegory in showing in one condensed instance discrepancies between the world of nature and the world of man; of pre-historical past and present. It is used in the transgressive means of representation in decadent modern art. Displaying with immediacy and urgency the ambiguous co-existence of new and old, it represents a grotesque, a paradox. In this, the shock effect of the material appearances it contrasts should have a redemptive function in ordinary, mundane life: it should serve as a tool to tear down the mask of any vicious ideology that fosters unreflexive consumption and guides culture industry.

Benjamin ascribes the dialectical images to the changes in the function of modern art that uses technology to perform a shock effect, representing things as stripped of their romanticist aura. Only in such techniques, could modern art approach the attention of the indifferent masses. Parallel to the rediscovery of the redemptive powers of modern art and technique in the shocking, montage-like, immediate

representations of cultural artefacts, Benjamin examined critically the new function of history. He instructs the historian to turn towards the past in order to redeem its lost moments. In Benjamin's words, 'progress' is actually the eternal return of what is always the same: the disguised eternal catastrophe of human mundane existence. To counteract it, to make people aware of its fraud, history should rest collected in a focal point. In this stance Benjamin uses the dialectical image at a standstill as a critical tool with which he could read history. He tries to escape from any position reading history as progress, and conforming the modern ideology, according to which history is a perfect law-governed causal sequence of events spanning over a homogeneous continuum of time (Benjamin, W., SW, 2003, vol.4, p.393). For Benjamin, precisely such understanding of history as a social evolution, is what enables the victors of history to present their violent acts as predetermined by fate. As such, its perfection can be brought to a standstill and "read against the grain" (Benjamin, W., SW, 2003, vol.4, p.392). "Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad (Benjamin, W., SW, 2003, vol.4, p.393). The way to carry out this analysis is to "to carry the montage principle over into history. That is to build up the large structures out of the smallest, precisely fashioned structural elements (...) to detect the crystal of the total event in the analysis of the simple, individual moment" (Benjamin 1999, p. 461)

II. II. Case Studies of Visual Representation of Repressive Regimes: the House of Terror Museum vs. *Taxidermia*

The differences and similarities of my chosen case studies could be displayed through the materials they include and the eras they represent. Both the House of Terror Museum and Palfi's movie engage to represent visually the life of a Central European country – Hungary – in its problematic historical transitions in the 20th century. Both the Museum and the film show a heightened interest in the material culture of the periods they represent, and a peculiar fascination with different materials in general. Yet the similarities seem to finish here. The difference between the museum and the movie lie much deeper than the mere fact that those are different means of representation: it is in their reading of history, their use of materials and

messages where the real distinction between the two representations of the recent history of the country diverge.

Based in the premises of the former Arrow-Cross regime during World War II, and of the state security in a portion of the subsequent Socialist regime, the House of Terror Museum was opened in 2002 by the right-wing government of Hungary. Situated in the centre of Pest – a building from 1880 on Andrassy Boulevard – it claims and aims to display terror “in all its sensational aspects, to invite visitors to a historical ‘happening’” (Museum director quoted in Kovacs 2003, p.164). For this purpose, it traces the history of the country from the clash between German and Soviet forces in the very centre of Budapest to the moment of the last Soviet advisor leaves the country in 1989. On display there are paraphernalia trying to capture this time-span of almost fifty years: photos, statues, movies and recorded speeches, room interiors, uniforms and big paneaus with propaganda art. Displaced from their original meaning and location, partly fabricated or with questionable origin (Kovacs 2003, p. 164; Rev 2005, p.316), they are arranged in an orderly sequence to represent the recent history of the country. Symbolic glaring colours, figures, and many a logo central for the regimes that have been governing the country are ambitiously competing for attention, seemingly devoured in their specific, most natural environment. The history of the nation is represented in a single line, with no display of individual destinies in more than one instance: victims’ and victimizers faces and speeches are instrumentalized to symbolize the logical progress of the narrative of the twenty-seven rooms of the building. They all come to display a sequence of evil regimes, all of which, the narrative tells, have plainly victimized Hungary and its people¹.

Taxidermia, the second movie of the Hungarian director from the young generation, Gyorgyi Palfi², represents the same periods of Hungarian history. Yet, it does not have any explicit say on the fate of the Hungarian people as victims or

¹ The “Hungarian people” here is understood interchangeably as both the “native” Hungarians, and the latter plus all ethnic minorities in their land, including the Jewish population.

² Palfi’s debut movie “Hukkle”(2002) uses sounds of nature and everyday life in a village to reveal a sinister story of a village where several men are killed or disappear. Despite the fact that this movie is rather experimental and the plot barely sneaks between varieties of sounds and images, it shows the acute talent of the director to deal with human perversity on a seemingly naïve and innocent everyday scale.

perpetrators. Instead, Palfi joins together three stories into a confusing and confused saga of sorts, showing the representatives of three generations of a family, which has found strategies to survive through the fascist and a socialist era, and is exposed to decay in the post-socialist society. Yet, Palfi does not slide on the cliché of recent Eastern European movies in the representation of this past. He does not occupy to discuss in a bitter-sweet nostalgic tone the fate of a whole country, or, for that matter to build a revisionist epic narrative of the national past³. Neither does he represent the years 1944/1949, 1956, or 1989: the “turning”, emblematic points in or commonplace imagos of Hungarian history. Instead, he follows a more subtle and reflective convention: he represents the regimes as concentrated in fate of the rather lonely, marginalized, isolated individuals, which his three main male characters are. With this decision he shows the problematic past and present of his country as crystallized in individual fates, which the historical context could only partly help explain, and which could only partly be (mis)used to explain the historical context. In this, Palfi uses the collage technique of represent visually historical developments in a two-fold manner. Firstly, he uses a rather buffo, allegorical language and extremities from both human and natural history to present the stories of his characters and the context in which they happen. Secondly, the movie itself represents a collage of two independent stories from the recent past of the contemporary Hungarian writer Lajos Parti Nagy – which the director recognizes as very close to his own worldview – and one about present-day Hungary, added by Palfi himself (see interview G.Palfi; directors’ conception on *Taxidermia* webpage). Furthermore “deforming, amplifying and turning upside down” Thomas Mann’s convention of saga, the film does not simple represent three “generations” of Hungarians (see interview Palfi 2006). Both the family name and the genetic inheritance are completely confused and mis-taken: neither the son, nor the grandson’s fit into the family tree of the name they carry, as they are conceived in extramarital arrangements, symptomatic for the specific era they have happened into. The father never really manages to reach the top of his desires and ambitions; and, finally, the grandson does not necessarily break through with the guiding norms and

³ On the further discussion and samples of these two recent trends of Eastern European cinema, see Deltcheva, R. 2005.

values of the family, but rather interprets them loosely, in an isolated and de-contextualized self-perception. Thus, it is only the director's vision and the team that make the rather patchy and seemingly loosely interconnected stories a part of a weird, riddle-like and eccentric "warped allegory of 20th century Hungarian history" (see Anonymous review).

1. *1. World War II and Double Occupation*

Entering the House of Terror one is guided by sombre and solemn music and the display of two parallel marble (tomb)stones representing in black and red the Arrow-Cross and Pentacle symbols. This strange concurrence is reaffirmed in the first room of the exhibition of the museum, where the double occupation by Nazi and Soviet troops of Hungary which started in 1944 are shown on a two-sided large mural of TV screens. The screens on the "Soviet part" show military parades in Moscow, working camp footages and speeches of Stalin; the screens on the "Nazi part" show grave and aggravating, but also widely known footages symbolizing the World War II in mainstream representations – speeches of Hitler, trainings of Nazi soldiers, and footage from the mass grave of concentration camp inmates in the end of the war. The fact that Hungary did take the part of the latter in the Second World War is not explicit; a screen on a wall perpendicular to the mural shows the great loss of Hungarian territories and population with the Trianon Treaty at the end of the First World War. Thus, not only is the martyrdom of Hungary opposed to the victimizing practices of both the foreign totalitarian regimes. The very fate of the Hungarian nation during the occupation is unproblematically equated to the experience from Gulag work-camps, and – what is even more striking – the Nazi concentration and death camps in which countryside Hungarian towns also sent their Jewish compatriots. Furthermore, beyond the sad picture of the blasted Budapest bridges, pointing to the central place of the city in the development of the war, one follows a corridor and two rooms dedicated to the Arrow-Cross "Hungarian Nazis." These premises are a beginning of a pathway into the museum, which already show a "weird fascination" (Rev 2005, p.344) with war-time luxury (a fancy Arrow-Cross supper table headed by a high-rank uniform), and marauderish display of "war souvenirs" (in the Gulag section, some of which also sold in the souvenir shop at the exhibition entrance). Thus, the whole exhibition is tuned

into a reproduction of Nazi art: “National Socialism—more broadly, fascism—also stands for (...) ideals that are persistent today under the other banners: the ideal of life as art, the cult of beauty, the fetishism of courage, the dissolution of alienation in ecstatic feelings of community.” Amongst these ideals Sontag also suggests a general fascination with uniforms as a symbol of “community, order, identity”, guaranteed in competence, legitimate authority, the legitimate exercise of violence. Last but not least, Sontag argues that it is exactly Nazi art that manages to deface individuals and turn them into amorphous masses (Sontag 1975).

Such an idealized vision of community and uniformity (both senses) is reflected and problematized in the first part of Palfi’s tri-logical movie. Palfi does not directly reflect on a martyrdom of a nation; neither does he represent the humiliating and tragic fate of Hungarian Jews in World War II. Yet, humiliation, maltreatment and isolation as a basis of war-time human condition are topics reflected in the first part of the movie. A character of Lajos Parti Nagy’s story “The Leg of a Frozen Dog” (Parti Nagy 2006), the grandfather and generator of the movie genealogy, Vendel Moroscovany – is a servant, who lives in a Hungarian village in the middle of nowhere during the WWII. Sleeping in the barn of the family he serves and who exploit him in inhuman manner, he survives on the edge of “human condition”, deprived from any material basics, normalcy and intimacy of everyday life. Besides the daily routine of an actual slave he lives in aggravating circumstances: he sleeps in the wash-tub that, as the movie shows, hosts all the minimalized war-time family rituals, which he can only approach in their sensual representations in the wash-tube. To cope with the brutal and offensive reality, Vendel finds a sole consolation in sexual fantasies and violent masturbation. This – in the words of Parti Nagy’s story – the intense, but lonely sexual life is dedicated to the dream to “reach for the stars” and leave an imprint of his sperm in the universal history. Yet, his most beautiful dreams turn are contrasted on the grotesque reality of his practice (his generous desire to console the Little Matchbox Seller in an act of wishful dreaming, turns to be yet another strive for sexual relief), whereas his most grotesque dreams turn out to be fatal reality: the recurrent dream of sleeping with his commander’s wife and penetrating into the dead body of the newly slaughtered pig results in the commander blasting his head with a single bullet from behind.

The story of Vendel is represented in the original story through the first person narrative of a doctor examining the tailor's orderly. The latter is forced to hear the confessional complaints of his patient and recreate them in their true form: a partly demented language, betraying lower-class upbringing. Yet, for the purposes of the story they are also mediated through the doctor's scarce narrative representing the clash of Vendel's story with the former's sophisticated perceptions of shame and embarrassment with the brutally honest and natural discourse of the patient. Yet, this mediation steps back in Palfi's visual representation of the story. Thus, what the audience is made to see from the first moments of the movie is rather a shocking challenge in visual terms. In more conservative sources (see e.g. *Hollywoodreporter* review; IMDB users' comments) the movie is commented on as true pornography because of the close-ups of Vendel's penis – in repose, in process of arousal and in erection leading to culmination.

A more critical audience, however, could see Vendel's story obsessions as an allegory of the life of a repressive regime during the World War II. Palfi has not chosen a mainstream representation of the suffering of either the Hungarians, or the Jews in this troubled time. He does not give an answer if Vendel – a Hungarian soldier doing the war, in which his country sides with Hitler's Third Reich – is a victim or a perpetrator. He does not try to show him as good or bad, or not even merely as a helpless pawn in the hands of a vicious master. The director rather puts on display a subtle riddle of resistance practices and morality perverted by the extreme situation in which the character lives. In the obsession with his own body one could read deprivation, loneliness, and the impossibility to reach any human affection. Yet, with turning the body of the character into a constantly agitated sex-machine, Palfi goes even deeper into the discussion of the era that provides the context for this story. He represents in a seemingly reverted way the erotic bodily aesthetic of the fascist dictatorships – one of which the war-time Hungarian Arrow-Cross regime could be considered as. As Susan Sontag provocatively emphasises in her essay "right-wing movements, however puritanical and repressive the realities they usher in, have an erotic surface" (Sontag 1975). Yet, whereas Sontag's main point is obsession of Nazi art with beauty, athletic forms and bodily perfection, exactly this aspect is erased by Palfi in his interpretation of the everyday life in the same era. He shows the sinister

fascination with beautiful bodies in Vendel's dreams of the daughters of the commander, but the acts of sexual relief are confined to the old, droopy and obese flesh of the wife of the latter, or – for that matter – the flesh of the newly killed pig. The ambiguous life-conditions and performance of Vendel however fit into what Sontag calls the seemingly opposite states of fascist aesthetics: "egomania and servitude". In his servitude both to the commander and to his own agitated flesh, Vendel is turned into a thing – a (sex)-machine. In the contrast between his own bodily imperfection and the tamed ability to extravagant effort, endurance of pain, and mindless, reactive behavior, he becomes a representative player in a form of Nazi erotic (Sontag 1975) – aesthetically discrepant but true to the demented morality of the era. Last but not least, he is the one who fulfills the imperative of the epoch: he reverts the rule of the game following his commander's "vagina monologue", similar to that of Hitler, in which leadership is seen as sexual mastery of the "feminine" masses. And, finally, in the long-awaited sexual act with the commander's wife, both redemptive and pernicious to his own flesh, he is the one able to leave his imprint in the line of humanity, creating a male child with a pig-tail: a sad symbol of the life of the father and the inhuman era the young offspring survives.

Contrasting the representation of World War II life in Hungary in the House of Terror and *Taxidermia* one could see a genuine discrepancy. The symbolical direct representation and narrative of the former displays a revisionist school of history that equates (and judges with perverse sense of satisfaction) instances of terror in world history and speaks of the victimization of the Hungarian folk (Kovacs 2003, pp.163, 167). Exactly this narrative is highly problematized in Palfi's movie, which – in the decision to deal with individual fate in this context – turns to much more profound problems of human existence and repudiates direct judgment.

2. 2. State Socialism

After the so-called "change of clothes" of Arrow-Cross regime and State-Socialism, House of Terror museum shows how terror merely finds a new disguise to torment the Hungarian people. It is represented in all the rest of the 27 rooms of the exhibition, which take the visitor through a sequence of events spanning over almost half a century: the raise of power of the Socialist regime in the Stalinist era and its

repressions, the mass collectivization and the difficult postwar life in the fifties, the 1956 revolution and its martyred heroes, the Kadar era its two-faced “democratic” freedom and surveillance. After the crimson pedestal-like tribune set for the party officials and displaying the new symbolic logos and faces of the regime officials, the mighty ghost of foreign (Soviet) intervention hosts the narrative of the museum. One could constantly read and see not only signs of this intervention, but it could also read the “civilizational” abjection of rank-and-file Hungarians against these “strange and unusual practices,” the “untranslatable word kulak” and the whole mass collectivization and justice system – “on the Soviet model”⁴. Thus, even if the repressive and dominant role of the USSR in Hungary and in the whole Soviet bloc is to be neglected by no means, the narrative of the Terror House is more subversive. It shows the Hungarian people captured in a system of evil, imposed from above; any narrative of a “participatory dictatorship” or a more subtle and ambiguous collaboration based on the desire to build the utopian communist society, are simply missing. Collaboration is seen only on the higher levels of the socialist Establishment; even the case study of such collaboration – the room of the secret police under the Jewish-Hungarian Peter Gabor – has a rather ambiguous retrograde anti-Semitic message of the merit-based betrayal of an “internal enemy”. Passing through rooms, representing the heyday of a blended propaganda materials and commercials (unmediated by any supporting materials), and the (overly mediated) presence of the Church in the resistance practices of the ordinary Hungarians, the exhibition ends in the cellar of the Terror House. A recorded interview in an elevator going to the cellar and a variety of “reconstructed prison cells” (isolated prison cell, incarceration room, room with gallows etc.) mediate dexterously all the stages of torture, confining it explicitly only the state-socialist regime.

Unlike museum’s grave and condemning narrative of the terrors of socialism, Gyorgyi Plafi’s interpretation of the era is full of much more caustic irony. The director connects two stories of Parti Nagy to create a family genealogy between the two first parts of the movie. The son of Vendel Moroscovany Kálmán is born into the family of the commander and as a man-child inherits the latter’s surname: Balatony. Despites

⁴ After the English handouts at the House of Terror Museum, collected on 15.04.2007, Budapest, Hungary.

Balatony's attempt to crop out the pig-tail, it is not the only trait that the new generation Balatony and the boars have in common. Parti Nagy's story is a nostalgic monologue of Kálmán in his late years: it displays the proud reminiscence of the protagonist of his glorious past when he ran for Hungary in Soviet bloc championships in speed-eating. Coming to age under the post-WWII socialist regime, is a true defender of the pride of his country. The most cherished hope of the obese athlete is to travel to Norway, where he could represent his country in the Eating World Cup. Yet, unlike his main contestant Miszlényi (who wishes to possess both his sport prizes and his similarly obese future wife Gizella), Kálmán does not wish to emigrate and to betray his country. Instead, seemingly depressed but motivated, he is trying to train with the given conditions and catch up with the First-world developments in his sport in constant eating and practicing vomiting techniques (recommended practice between the cross-swallowing rounds). Miszlényi manages to escape, having made – seemingly – a baby to Gizella in her and Kálmán's wedding night, thus, again, interrupting the family history. The couple remains happy with the pregnancy even if they need to bribe a doctor in order to perpetuate the career of the Speed-Eating Champion Gizella, and keep both the baby and the petit-bourgeois life-standard. However, the family happiness is interrupted by a tiny intervention by regime officials. While having a romantic commercial-like weekend at the "Hungarian sea", Lake Balaton, the two whale-like figures are recognized by a delegation of Soviet officials. The latter invite them to display competitive excellence in their discipline. An exhausting attempt, which they both dedicate to the dream of a weekend-villa, it brings to the premature birth of their son – Lajos, who, to the dismay of his giant parents, is born tiny and weights only 1.5 kilos.

In her essay on fascination with Nazi art Sontag dares to make a rather early connection between the aesthetics of the Nazi and the Soviet regimes in their mutual appreciation of the monumental, the "immortalization" of heroes, leaders and doctrines. The Terror House seemingly condemns this fascination, creating an "alternative cannon" of immortalized martyrs: the heroes from the 1956 revolution, and the suffering population of Hungary. However, it also shows in an unmediated way socialist-time statues of communist leaders and perfect athletes; as mentioned above, the exhibition also leaves unmediated the commercials and propaganda materials that

advertise the morally and physically healthy socialist individual/family/community. The repulsion that they should evoke seems to be taken for granted: they symbolize a repressive regime which the narrative of the museum condemns; fascination that might be the actual effect of their display is simply neglected, but by no means rendered impossible. Sontag also draws the following parallel: “the art of the gymnast, so popular now in Eastern Europe, also evokes recurrent features of fascist aesthetics; the holding in or confining of force; military precision.” If Sontag’s suggestion that people are indeed genuinely fascinated by such representations is true, the Terror House falls short of mediating a message of content with its displayed statues. Unlike the curators of the museum, in the visual representation of Parti Nagy’s story, the *Taxidermia* team manages to revert in a disturbing allegory the imagery of this so-desired perfection. The choice of cross-swallowing as a discipline has a two-sharp allusion. On the one hand, the body of the socialist “athlete” is deformed into a grotesque by his ambition of reaching perfection in “opening new and new rooms in the flesh.” In line with both his family and the regime obsession, this is his own strive immortality of flesh. On the other hand, in displaying verbally the excessive consumption both in the competitions and in the intimate life of the Balatony couple, Palfi reflects one of the greatest ambiguities of Hungarian state-socialist regime: the preoccupation with consumption in the so-called “goulash-socialism” of the post-1956 Kadar era. In this light, one could also see how “minimal” the intervention of “the system” (the corrupt doctor and the Soviet officials) is. These simple and unquestioned dishonest procedures are not simply an impediment to Gizi’s and Kalman’s life-standard: they also reflect on the ambiguous and bargain-able value of health and human life under the socialist regime. Thus, without leaving serious issues aside, but also in a rather allegorical reading, the director manages to show the discrepancy between communist megalomania: a grotesque moral ideal incorporated in an aesthetically deformed body; an excessively eating-and-vomiting machine.

3.3. *Life in the Aftermath of Repressive Regimes*

A discrete line that connects socialist and post-socialist society in Hungary is the ongoing debate about consumption practices (Dombos 2004). The “perpetrators” in the former case were recognized in a variety of staged public debates in the socialist

“democratic media” as petty-bourgeois; in the latter era they have been referred to as consume-idiots following blindly commercials’ life-style (Dombos 2004, pp. 36-37). Yet, despite the different direction of the critique (the pre-socialist bourgeois past or the post-socialist rapid globalization and brutal capitalism) the message is always against consumerism that replaces the responsible and deliberative *citoyen*. As a remnant of socialist-time people’s atomization, limited political influence, and a public sphere restricted to the family circle, citizens of post-socialist Hungarian society are discussed as “not concerned about moral issues; their social ethos remains amorphous”. In the same line, the post-socialist society is seen as a “pathological society characterized by growing atomization, intolerance of conflicts, suppressed aggression, and disintegration” (see discussion in Zentai 1999, p.7, p.11).

Against this background, and without any direct reference to the regime change and its actors, without any explicit judgment about “winners” and “losers” of the transition, Palfi creates the story of the last generation in the protagonist family: Lajos Balatony. The presence of Lajos is mentioned with a few sentences in Party Nagy’s story where the main protagonist is his father – Kálmán. There the son is described as a professional hunter and a figure which rather scares the father. As Palfi recreates the stories representing the Hungarian past, which he has been too young to witness, in the movie Lajos is the one who meditated his family history. Seemingly different from his grandfather and father, a puny young taxidermist, he lives a sole and alienated life surrounded by atelier with stuffed animals. Yet, the family resemblance is repeated in both the impossibility to encounter any long-lasting friendship or intimacy, and once again, is compensated with vast ambitions for immortality of flesh. In the case of Lajos however, flesh is not an object or subject of carnal or alimentary consummation. He is obsessed with it in a not less brutal and perverse way: his profession in the movie reflects – even more than that of a hunter in the story – a world where flesh turns into a new corpo-reality, as an utmost commodity. The story of Lajos deals with the moral ambiguities encountered by the new generation of Hungarians: the acute need to cope with the value vacuum and vacuum of loved ones in the vast waves of migration and uncertainty in the transition period. The lonely life in the lack of a migrant-mother and the huge, consuming defunct body of his obscenely obese and cynical father, in the lack of any intimacy or friendship, make Lajos’s own values perverted and distorted. The

fact that Lajos's consciousness has been penetrated by ideal-images of commercials about body perfection is represented in his decision to compensate his own bodily imperfections: in a moment of extreme agitation he goes to "pump" his skinny body in a gym, helplessly and numbly, but with a dreadful determination. The decay of his commonsense moral is further displayed in unscrupulous "stuffing" not only of wild and domesticated animals, but also of human embryos, the corpse of his own father, and finally, himself. Lajos finds his father – the beheaded monarch of the family – dead in his flat. Kalman is partly eaten by the huge competition cats which he fosters in ambition to make new champions and compensation for his lost sports career. In the act of stuffing the dead corpse of his father, and the merciless self-operation of his still alive own body, by the end of the movie Lajos seemingly defeats mortality: he creates the ultimate piece of art in a consummate torso of his own body. As his father and grandfather he turns his flesh into a body-machine, but not a sexual machine or an eating machine. He creates a Deus-ex-Machina, opposing the stream of time, and human transience.

Beyond the representation of the last Soviet troops leaving Hungary, the House of Terror museum does not engage to speak about present-day Hungary. The reconstructed prison-cells are followed by premises dedicated to deportation, disappearance and loss; to silence and commemoration of the victims in an installation of illuminated crosses. The exhibition ends at a staircase: in its basis one could read the names of the "Victimizers" of the regimes; a primal selection of denounced perpetrators – a possibility given on the website of the Museum – these stand for a direct representation of the victimizers, thus exempting the Hungarian people from "having to look the past in the eye" (Kovacs, pp. 167-168). On taking the stairs up to the exit, on the first stair-landing wall one faces a single plaque from 1968. The plaque represents an athletic Hercules-like figure which smashes the head of a huge snake: it represents directly and unquestionably the end of history of evil; the heroic figure of the post-socialist (Hungarian) society that have won the battle with terror...

Coda

Leaving the victorious staircase of the House of Terror, the visitor is called into the book-shop of the museum. Beyond a variety of historical books and magazines, the

visitor is tempted to buy a variety of glossy postcards and souvenirs from the museum: t-shirts, note-books with merging arrow-cross and pentacle logos, or even war-time and socialist paraphernalia as aluminum cups and flags. Such a practice is of course, not a novelty in present-day museums; yet, one could draw a strange parallel between this ending of the museum and the end of Palfi's movie. After his death, Lajos's torso is found by a manipulative culture entrepreneur. Creating a fake narrative about his own role in the creation of this grotesque piece of art, he turns the body into a worship and an exponent of high art. Thus, in the de-privation of the life-work of Lajos and the creation of a hype culture commodity out of his in-corporated strive for eternity, one could see yet another rising fashion that will soon decay and make his torso yet another ruin of human mortality.

These last examples are but a crucial element in the narrative of the represented case studies. Against the background of the straightforward – and thus utterly problematic – romanticising narrative and exponents at the House of Terror, *Taxidermia* appears as a macabre piece of Baroque art. It is such not only in its use of allegoric mode of expression and the disclosure of all masturbation, vomiting, and human dissection, of transience, ruination and mortality of human beings. *Taxidermia* refuses to give an easy answer or any explicit judgment of life under the regimes which it describes. In its extreme and challenging visual representations, however, it needs to be considered in a more complex constellation. As this paper has shown, entering an opposition and thus creating “dialectical images at a standstill”, the moments that Palfi's movie represents could become an emblematic form in a dialectical image at a standstill: crystallized representations of problematic historical moments that permit a reading history of multiple historical transitions “against the grain”.

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FILMOGRAPHY

Taxidermia

Fortissimofilms, Eurofilm Studio, Amdur Fou, Memento Films and La Cinefature, in co-production with Arte France Cinema; *Director*: Gyorgy Palfi; *Screenwriter*: Zsofia Ruttkay, Gyorgy Palfi; *based on the short stories of* Lajos Parti Nagy; *Producers*: Gabor Varadi, Peter Miskotczi, Alehander Dumreicher-Ivanceanu, Gabriele Kranzelbinder, Alexandre Mallet-Guy, Emilie Georges; *Cinematographer*: Gergely Poharnok; *Production designer*: Adrien Asztalos; *Costume designer*: Julia Patkos; *Editor*: Reke Lemhenyi; *Music*: Amon Tobin. *Cast*: Csaba Czene; Gergo Trocsanyi; Marc Bischoff; Adel Stancel.

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