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Back to the Past: Mnemonic Themes in Contemporary Hungarian Cinema

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László Strausz (Eötvös Loránd University) surveys the narrational and stylistic tactics engaged by contemporary Hungarian directors in their representation of the historical past. Contrary to critical charges of cultural amnesia, Strausz discerns several thematic trends that seize the political past as a reference point for meditation on contemporary identity, in particular specifying the topics of generational change, the figure of the immigrant, and the use of the human body as a mnemonic canvas. Despite the disparities between the films he treats, Strausz indicates that the deployment of mnemonics suggests the frailties involved in directly broaching matters of memory in post-socialist Hungary.[1]

It is difficult to discover trends in the work of young Hungarian auteur filmmakers about the historical past. However, this does not mean that the new generation of contemporary directors – who started making films in the early 2000s – would not engage with the past at all. The films focusing on the Kádár years[2] and the fall of the state socialist regime in 1989 – and, most importantly, those focusing on how these epochs or events have impacted contemporary Hungarian identities – use different narrative and stylistic strategies and address viewers in diverse ways; mnemonic themes are present in Hungarian cinema.

Conceivably, this lack of coherent trends has resulted in the recurrent critical opinion that contends contemporary Hungarian film stays away from topics related to cultural memory, or even that it is amnesiac[3]. Before accepting the above thesis, it seems worthwhile to examine how the state socialist years, including 1989, appear in the films of the generation of directors that started to work shortly after the millennium. There are several reasons supporting the analysis of these films. Firstly, Ágnes Kocsis, Szabolcs Hajdu, Kornél Mundruczó, György Pálfi, and Ferenc Török are almost the same age; therefore,

their social experiences (which they articulate in widely different ways) are roughly similar. Additionally, they graduated from the Academy of Theatre and Film Arts and achieved success with their work at international film festivals within a couple of years (which, unfortunately, did not result in a large number of viewers at home). However, the most important reason seems to be the fact that they have personal memories about the state socialist regime and the fall of the system – but none of them began her/his career in the solely state-financed production system that prevailed prior to 1989. Their films, therefore, which directly or indirectly examine the socio-political shifts after the regime change, investigate the causes of those social changes from the vantage point of the results they've yielded. In this respect, the five films discussed here (Ferenc Török: *Moscow Square*, 2001; Szabolcs Hajdu: *White Palms*, 2006; György Pálfi: *Taxidermia*, 2006; Mundruczó Kornél: *Delta*, 2006; Kocsis Ágnes: *Pál Adrienn*, 2010) will be examined as works that focus on cultural and/or political identity. In these films, the past is thematized in order to serve as a reference point for the filmic subjects (whether as diegetic characters, or as enunciators of the films themselves, i.e. the director) as they attempt to construct their own contemporary identities. The films will be discussed with regard to three interconnected thematic questions, the relevance of which will be highlighted through the analysis of their roles in three out of the five works.

The first – perhaps somewhat evident – question to consider is the relationship between successive *generations*. This issue allows the viewer to consider the relation between the young characters and their parents or grandparents, and thereby highlights shifts in the individual or collective value systems which can be traced back to social changes. The classic story pattern inherited from literature, which analyzes the linear causality of historical epochs through successive generations, is dissolved in the helpless, impotent synchronicity of the generations in the films under consideration. Thus, the films evince a shift towards the disappearance of the linear cause-effect pattern between generations – and older generations' loss of authority. My second topic is *migration*: characters leave their East European homeland by crossing into foreign geo-political spaces. In what directions do the characters move? Do they return home after the political changes? Finally, my last theme is *corporeality*, the human body and its role in remembering. In the films analyzed here, the memory processes are not of a conscious kind. The filmmakers and their characters do not want to or cannot speak directly about memories. Rather, they investigate traces of these memories in the form of corporeal affections, deformations and wounds. What type of corporeal processes, functions or gestures carry these memory-imprints? Do we witness individual or collective rites here?

The notions of generation and migration can be described in terms of the fairly straightforward critical categories of space and time as far as mnemonic processes are concerned. On the other hand, corporeality and the human body as a mnemonic surface is a different type of motif that escapes our traditional

critical vocabulary. I argue that by focusing on the human body, we can unearth indirect mnemonic processes in contemporary Hungarian cinema to which little attention has been paid so far. Contemporary Hungarian cinema is not amnesiac or ahistorical; it simply uses different themes in their attempt to register the effects of the past on our contemporary identities.

The vast and rapidly growing interdisciplinary field of cultural memory and its relation to cinema is an area that I do not intend to survey here. However, it seems important to make a few conceptual remarks. I look at cultural memory as a collective sociocultural phenomenon connecting the present with the past, which materializes in commemorative, formalized rites and memory of interpersonal habit[4]. The consumption of motion pictures is a similar rite or habit. Throughout the watching of a film the connection between the present and the past, i.e. filmic memory, is firstly an affective, and only secondly a representational process[5]; the expressive language of the medium works mostly on an emotional basis. For this very reason, an examination of the filmic rhetoric of the five aforementioned motion pictures is of importance both from a formal and a mnemonic standpoint.

1. Generations

The values in any given era can turn into tradition only in a more or less stabilized social landscape, where repetition plays an important role[6]. From this perspective, one can look at 1989 as a paradigm shift that interrupted the series of invented traditions of the Kádár-era, and regarded them as illegitimate. Perhaps that is the reason why several young directors in Hungary address the question of generations: through this lens, the breaking point between the near past and the present can be illustrated easily. The common denominator in the films examined here is the breakdown of communication between the younger and the older generations, or the failure of generational authority. In different ways, the films display the incomprehension, the resistance and the rebellion of teenage characters against the lifestyle, gestures, and habits of their parents and grandparents.

In Ferenc Török's *Moscow Square*, a comedy about a group of teenagers finishing high school in 1989, the aforementioned generational antagonism takes place in a seemingly ahistorical context, where the rebellion of the protagonists has nothing to do with the Eastern European geopolitical landscape. The film's characters are fairly conventional young rebels, behind whose backs and without their noticing, radical social transformation is taking place. In this typical coming-of-age story, the teenage characters are understandably more interested in sex, alcohol and music than the tectonic shifts in Hungarian society. "Who the fuck is Imre Nagy?!" asks Rojál, as he sits

with friends in front of the TV set, which broadcasts live the re-burial of the leader of the 1956 revolution. The film, however, clearly does not display this ignorance as something that the protagonists should be blamed for. Both visually (handheld point-of-view shots play a central role in the style of the film) and emotionally (due to the romantic subplot and the coming-of-age themes addressed), the viewers are encouraged to identify with the young characters. Their disinterest rather is the result of their parents' inability to speak to them about history, tradition, and their personal memories surrounding these events. The 1956 revolution was a taboo topic in the official narrative of state socialist Hungary. Thus, the silence that surrounded the anti-Soviet revolution has been passed down through the generations and reached the teenagers of *Moscow Square*. Even after the demise of state socialism, the adults in the film are unable to communicate to the adolescents the significance of 1956: its place in collective memory is unrepresentable, and they have no words to express or describe it. In this sense, the deep disconnection between the teenagers and their parents becomes a generational issue, where the parents and even the grandparents transmit the lack of cultural memory.

The director illustrates this disconnection repeatedly in the film. Protagonist Petya visits his grandmother, who also watches the same TV broadcast of Imre Nagy's burial ceremony. Petya asks her what she is watching, but she does not respond at all. Rather, she gives him some change to go and have lunch in a nearby eatery hoping that she will not have to answer her grandson's questions. The scene clearly creates the impression that the grandmother cannot/does not want to engage in a conversation about the past: Petya leaves for lunch, and she returns to stare at the TV screen. While the hero of the 1956 revolution is being buried, Petya eats his lunch alone in the typically socialist space of a deserted and run-down eatery, which is thereby transformed by director Török into the image of empty mnemonic space. The characters' relation, or rather, their lack of relation to 1956 and 1989 — or to history in general — is thereby visualized through the diegetic spaces of the film.

There are many other indicators in *Moscow Square* that hint at this generational communication rupture. This "thesis" is probably most effectively displayed in a scene wherein the protagonists realize that their history exam requirements have been changed; their teachers have removed all questions on the post-1945 era. In this gesture, the educational institution itself has enacted the erasure of the past from collective memory. Petya and his friends no longer have to study the material that stretches from the the end of World War II to the end of the Cold War era. Török's strategy to speak about the complete ahistorical attitude of his young characters as a *reaction* to the silence of the parents and grandparents becomes visible through various scenes. It is not a conscious decision of Petya and co. to not concern themselves with the past; rather, they imitate the attitudes of the older characters around them.

In Szabolcs Hajdu's *White Palms* we do not see historical events depicted, or even come across any direct references to them. However, the film's flashback structure keeps returning to the city of Debrecen during the last decade of state socialism, the 1980s. The story revolves around Dongó, a gymnast, who was traumatized during his childhood by a brutal coach in Debrecen. Several years later he moves to Canada, where he reenacts the brutality of his former coach when working with his own pupils.

In this mnemonic world, the connection between the generations is far from the playful ignorance displayed in *Moscow Square*. Humor is entirely missing from the relationship between Dongó and his parents, or his sadistic coach: the adults here are not comic figures who cannot relate at all to the adolescents, but rather desperate aggressors trying to prove something to themselves and the people around them. Dongó's parents regard him and his gymnastic achievements as the last chance to introduce success into their own hopeless lives. They speak to him as animal trainers, and display his well-built, young body as a spectacle to relatives who visit them. The boy's room in their apartment is turned into a self-referential museum, where every possible surface shows off Dongó's medals and cups. These signifiers of Dongó's success remain ineffective, as they rather refer to the futile attempts of the parents to extend themselves into their son's life. Hajdu creates a similar relationship between the teenaged gymnasts and their sadistic trainer, who tries to construct his own authority by subjecting the boys to severe bodily punishment. This attempt remains unsuccessful, since the kids resist his brutality at every occasion. Dongó rebels against his trainer by purposefully blowing the same exercise three times when his mother and father visit the gym: the coach cannot punish him in the presence of his parents. Instead of strengthening his authority, the accident rather breaks it down. *White Palms* illustrates how the succession of generations becomes a symbolic process mirroring the political frustration and contested authority construct of the protagonist's parents, who were born and grew up during the state socialist era.

Moscow Square and *White Palms* illustrate the dissolution of authority in the older generations; while Török's film introduces loveable but impotent characters, Hajdu's characters turn their helplessness into aggression by systematically punishing the younger generation. György Pálfi's *Taxidermia* presents us with a vitriolic parody of the succession of generations and the causal connections between them. In the bizarre family lineage of the film, the three generations represent three different political systems: pre-1945 conservative monarchism, state socialism and finally post-socialist capitalism. Using the classical form of the three-part family novel of the story of grandparent, parents, and their children, Pálfi creates a close analogy between the three generations of the family and their socio-political counterparts. According to the logic of the literary genre, the knowledge, the experiences and the memories of the various generations are "inherited" by the next,

thereby symbolizing the development of successive generations. Pálfi, however, uses the literary form in order to fill it up with radically different content. The grotesque obsession of the family members with sexuality, eating and embalming are so over-the-top, their representation so hyperrealistic, that they start to break down the boundaries of the chosen generic form of the family novel. As grotesque as these activities might seem, they have the capacity to speak about the rigid class boundaries of the conservative monarchist pre-war society through sexuality, about the problem of private ownership in the collectivism of state socialism, and about the emptying or the dissolution of social-political values through taxidermy in the contemporary era.[7]

If we focus on the cinematic cultural memories of state socialism, the second transition of the film between the father and the son's generation becomes important. Kálmán, the father, is a frustrated, obese speed-eater, who participates in pan-socialist eating competitions. His huge body becomes a symbol of his, and by analogy, society's frustration with the lack of private ownership. Since he cannot own things due to the ideology of collective ownership under state socialism, he literally stuffs himself with food in order to rebel against the ideological ban. His authority, his rebellion only makes sense in the restrictions of the Kádár-era. He became a speed-eating champion in those years and won all his medals during the aforementioned decades. With the demise of socialism, eating as a competitive sport achievement loses its meaning. His identity evaporates; his authority becomes ridiculous in the eyes of his own son, thus leading to the breakdown of his authority. In Pálfi's film, this fallen generation literally destroys itself: in one of the film's most grotesque scenes, Kálmán is eaten alive by the speed-eating cats he trains when a cage door is accidentally left open. The director here not only depicts the impossibility of the transmission of historical knowledge between generations, but pessimistically questions the entire logic of linear causality in the historical progression between various political systems.

Of the five chosen films, it is visible that at least three use the theme of the succession of generations to depict a symbolic failure of authority after the end of the state socialist regime. In this capacity, this common mnemonic theme becomes a way of "remembering" the immediate past and of speaking about its contemporary consequences.

2. Migration

The next perspective from which I will investigate the question of contemporary films and cultural memory is that of migration: with the end of state socialism and the opening of the borders, how and where do the characters of the films move? Opportunities for traveling and migration

remained limited or impossible during the Kádár-years. Thus, the theme surfaces systematically in the films depicting the immediate 1989-years, and becomes a motif.

For the high-school students of *Moscow Square*, the West is a strange place that serves the purpose of accentuating their own isolation and lack of experiences. It is very telling that the students leave for the West with forged train tickets on which the destination field has not even been filled in yet. Two montage sequences are worth singling out. The first takes place in the Vienna train station, where Petya arrives with a friend, and the second in Paris after Petya meets his love interest Zsófi. Both sequences consist of series of shaky handheld shots, which are intercut with close-ups of Petya's astonished face. The subjective point-of-view places the viewer of the film in the diegetic characters' position, allowing her to marvel together with Petya at the wonders of the West. The director ironically accentuates this naïve juxtaposition of the highly developed West and the poor ignorant Eastern character. The scenes of a Hungarian family transporting a large refrigerator on top of their small Russian car, or Petya's friend, Kigler, stealing Milka chocolate in the supermarket, both point to the popular perception of the contrast between Eastern and Western characters.[8]

From the perspective of migration, we can discover a pattern in *Moscow Square* that will continue in the other two films analyzed. As soon as the young protagonists reach the West, which they thus far have regarded as the promised land, they almost immediately lose their orientation and travel back home. When *Moscow Square*'s protagonist finds Zsófi in Paris, the two have a brief affair, and Petya finally loses his virginity. Shortly thereafter, he leaves for Budapest after learning that his grandmother has passed away; he chooses family and familiarity instead of his new love affair. His friend Kigler also travels back to Budapest after the Vienna chocolate incident, and in the epilogue of the film, we learn that even Zsófi has returned to Hungary after a marriage and a divorce in Paris. The double movement expresses that Petya is excited about the West, but he is afraid of the unknown at the same time.

This migratory pattern can be discerned in Kornél Mundruczó's *Delta* as well, but the space and time coordinates remain fairly abstract in this film. *Delta* revolves around the story of two siblings, Mihail and Fauna, who reunite after a long time apart in their home village. Mihail has worked somewhere abroad. After his return, he realizes that he is not welcome in the village anymore, and starts to build a house far away in the river delta. In the isolated fisher village, their mother has married another man after their father's death, the circumstances of which remain suspicious. The outcast siblings have a love affair, for which the villagers punish them brutally. The film builds heavily on binaries such as corrupted civilization and innocent nature. Thus, the secluded village can be regarded as an image of an isolated (state socialist) nation characterized by intolerance and segregation. Mihail's emigrant character also

supports this interpretation: before the story begins, he leaves to work in a foreign country and in the film we see him returning with a lot of cash. We do not find out why he has left, but he moves out of the village almost immediately to start working on his new house in the delta, on the same spot where his father's fisher hut once stood. Stylistically, the film depicts the two locations in a distinct way: the scenes in the village have a claustrophobic feel about them. We can see this for example in the pub scenes, which are composed of tight close-ups of the characters' faces, with very little empty space contained in the frame, which are often cut in half by dark shadows. If we contrast these sequences with the external shots of the delta, we can see how much more breathing space the images allow. On the river, Mundruczó's compositions frame Mihail and Fauna's face and the marshland in the lower one-third of the frame, while the upper two-thirds reveal open skies, effectively expressing the freedom the siblings experience when they are far away from the repressive village. Therefore, the double movement of Mihail — first moving abroad, then returning home, only to move out of the village again — reveals that his pursuit for identity remained unsuccessful: neither his moving home to the village, nor his moving out into the delta led to a stable situation of beginning life anew, building a new home etc.

The modernist techniques used by the director also hint at this. Mihail's figure is "doubled" twice in the film, where he becomes both the subject and the object of point-of-view shots. The first example of this takes place in the delta where Mihail stands by the water with his back to the camera, which starts to pan left. After a 180 degree movement, we see him in the same shot facing the camera. In the second example he is buying lumber for the house he wants to build: as he looks at a large pile of lumber, the camera starts to follow his gaze and shows us what he is looking at. A few seconds later, the composition frames him in an impossible position, stepping into the frame from the opposite direction. In both examples we see how the director makes the character the object of his own gaze: this reflexive "doubling" of the protagonist creates the impression of a person in the search for stability. Mihail's character is constantly on the move. His leaving, his return and his voluntary migration out of the village shows a similar pattern as in the previous film, which can be described as a continuous search or quest for identity.

If we look at *White Palms*'s patterns of movement, we see that the main character departs, searches, returns and finally departs again for a foreign place. After leaving Hungary, his sadistic trainer, and his family during the 1980s, he becomes an acrobat in a Western circus. He suffers a serious injury, which prevents him from continuing his gymnastic career. Soon he moves to Canada to become a trainer, where he starts to learn the language, and gets acquainted with the local customs; i.e. he tries to create a new home for himself. Hajdu's characters illustrate how the attempt to find a new identity by changing places remains futile: soon after settling in Canada, Dongó hits one of his trainees, thereby reproducing the aggression of his former trainer from

Hungary. Dongó does not understand why the main coach fires him after the incident. The kid he hit jeopardized the safety of another trainee. His inability to recognize this repetition reveals that he cannot set himself apart from the practices or habits amidst which he grew up, and which caused him to migrate to another country in the first place.

Later in the film Dongó starts to coach an extremely talented but stubborn young Canadian gymnast, Kyle, who in the beginning refuses to even speak with him. Slowly he realizes that he can only motivate Kyle through his competitiveness, so they both start to train as if they were opponents. The two travel to Hungary for an international gymnastic tournament, where Dongó and Kyle compete against each other in the finals. After losing to Kyle, he leaves Hungary again, and in the final scene we see him working for Cirque du Soleil in Las Vegas – arguably among the most rootless cities in the world. The migratory pattern of Dongó took him from 1980s Debrecen to Canada, then back to Hungary and finally to the US without reassuringly settling the questions of belonging and identity.

In the three film discussed, migration reveals a dual pattern: approximately around the time of the regime change, the characters leave Hungary, look for new opportunities, and attempt to articulate their identities. However, most of them return, as they cannot set themselves apart from what they have left behind. In *White Palms* and *Delta*, the characters' return does not solve their rootlessness or disorientation, and they leave again.

3. The Body

Interpersonal habits performed by the members of a community following a given set of rules form an integral part of collective memories. According to Connerton, individuals express through such rites their belonging to a collective. In his description, interpersonal habit memories are formalized, performative, and based on prototypes.[9] In three of the five films under discussion, the body, bodily performances, and activities serve the purpose of remembering and expressing the continuously changing identity of the characters. Their bodies turn into "memory containers," carrying imprints of the socio-historical contexts surrounding them.

These imprints can be discerned easily in *White Palms*: Dongó's career takes him from the Hungarian city of Debrecen to Calgary and Las Vegas, but the wounds and marks follow him throughout the entire story. The wounds inflicted by his coach and the injuries suffered while training are the primary traces that can be regarded as corporeal memories imprinted onto his body. In several locker rooms scenes, he looks at the wounds on his thighs and palms with a childish curiosity. His initial reaction is shame and he tries to hide his wounds

from his parents by locking himself in the bathroom. Soon it becomes apparent that the primary reason for his hiding these traces is something else. He looks at them as integral parts of his story, where he came from, what he went through: the wounds are his private bodily memories. They point to his decade-long training to become a gymnast, his talent, his journeys etc.

When he finally is fed up with his sadistic coach, he leaves the club. As he jumps over the fence next to the locker room, his tormenter aggressively yells at him from inside. According to the coach, running away from the club will not change anything; whatever he does, he belongs here from now on. The interesting element of the coach's angry monologue is that this indelible belonging is expressed through the language of corporeality. As in the case of any real gymnast, his body will now forever carry his identity, the coach yells – but he does not refer to the wounds and marks. Rather, Dongó's muscles are attached to his bones, his joints have hardened in such a way — the coach screams — that his growth will slow down. Thus, the shape of his entire body and his scar inscriptions carry the aforementioned imprints of Dongó's past.

When he suffers an accident in the circus and is unable to continue his career, it is this corporeality that seems to move into the background and cause disorientation. When he starts to work as a coach in Canada, the rootlessness he experiences is also a result of him not being able to physically perform his identity anymore. Soon he realizes that he has to start training again if he wants to find his way back to the self he lost through his injury. Although the film does not specify exactly what this identity contains, it becomes apparent that the distinct phases of Dongó's life revolve around this core that he first learned to perform in his native Hungary. His trips to Canada and the US are attempts to re-articulate this identity in entirely different contexts. In this regard, the film closes with a fairly pessimistic epilogue. Among the fake Eiffel-towers, Sphinx statues and pyramids of Las Vegas, it is at best questionable whether he will find what he is looking for.

A similar search is thematized in *Pál Adrienn*, wherein the subject and the object of the search is the same person: Piroska, who is a nurse in a hospital ward for elderly, terminal patients. Throughout the film, Piroska is looking for her elementary school friend Adrienn Pál. In the nurse's life, this connection has remained the most meaningful friendship up to the present, even though she has a few friends and lives together with a man. Using minimalistic, detached and static compositions, the film's style effectively counterbalances the somewhat banal central idea of the film, according to which true friendship only existed in Piroska's past. Éva Gábor, who plays the main character in the film, is an amateur actor, and her untrained acting style, and entirely expressionless face successfully brings Piroska's introverted character to life. This performance prevents the film from becoming didactic. In the bleak, monotonous present, Piroska compensates for the lack of real relationships with eating, and in this sense her overweight body becomes a performative

signifier of her quest for the past in the contemporary Budapest. Her partner constantly wants to put her on a diet, and forces her to exercise on a stationary bike (we learn that 10km/day is the target). The man's coercive behavior clearly signals his resentment towards the nurse's living in the past. Piroska resists his intimidating efforts to control her, and during the night she visits the kitchen to glut herself on different kinds of food. Eating as a performance becomes an indicator of her stubborn quest to locate herself and her past.

The picaresque-like film consists of a series of episodes, during which the nurse tracks down her former classmates in order to find information on Adrienn. The film repeatedly plays with the possibility that Piroska and Adrienn could be the same person, since some of the people she encounters systematically mix them up. This confusion makes it clear to the viewer that Piroska is not really looking for Adrienn but rather for her former self. She seems to be looking for the person who was able to establish relationships, who was capable of experiencing emotions. This idealized past stands in strong contrast with the present. The former classmates she encounters, their behavior, and their thinking patterns offer a social panorama of contemporary Budapest. We meet the offhanded wife of a rich entrepreneur, an arrogant architect in his luxurious villa in the hills around the city, a lonely waiter in a bar for blind-dates, a vacuum cleaner agent convinced of his own importance, a senile secretary etc. All of them behave in a reserved manner and are unable to help Piroska solve the memory puzzle surrounding Adrienn; each classmate remembers the same event in a different way. After these excursions, Piroska returns to work at the hospital ward and takes care of the frail, old bodies of the dying elderly. It seems that she is only able to avoid the upsetting nature of her job through constant consumption.

This static story takes a turn only when Piroska finally finds someone who remembers Adrienn and her story, and hands over the phone number of the woman who had since emigrated to Australia. Our protagonist has to face the fact that her search, her memory work has been a self-referential process from the very beginning. She refuses to call Adrienn, and in a symbolic gesture puts the piece of paper with the number into a suitcase, which holds various items from her past. The somewhat optimistic final scene signals a change in Piroska's life: she leaves her daily dose of cake at home when leaving for work the next morning. At the end of her search she finds only herself, which leaves open the possibility that her solitude — which through eating became a corporeal routine — might slowly dissolve with time. In *Pál Adrienn*, remembering turns into a gesture performed through the body.

The depiction of bodily performance is one of the main goals of György Pálfi's *Taxidermia* as well, but this film does not foreground the processes of private remembering, but rather those of historical progression. For three generations of the family, bodily performance becomes the main tool in defying the restrictions of the historical era or the given political system (the quasi-

monarchist, the state socialist, and the post-socialist). Morosgoványi, the grandfather of the two successive generations, revolts against the class restrictions of the hierarchically ordered micro-society of a military outpost where he is stationed through his bizarre sexual habits. The orderly creates a fantasy-world around himself, in which he can establish sexual relations with all the women, who in reality he would never be allowed to approach. In the fantasy scenes of the first part of the film, Morosgoványi crosses class boundaries by having sex both with the daughters and the wife of his commanding officer. As the divide between the realms of the real and the imaginary starts to blur, and it becomes increasingly difficult to decide whether we are witnessing his fantasies or real diegetic events, Morosgoványi is shot in the head by his superior. This gesture makes it clear that the revolt of the orderly has been futile, and restrictive class boundaries are singled out as a central mark of the monarchist setting of the military outpost – and by analogy that of pre-socialist Hungarian society.

In the middle part of the film, under state socialism, the body turns into the terrain of resistance against the dissolution of private ownership in the forced collectivism of the state. This time, the revolt is not channeled by sexuality, but eating – or rather, devouring. The protagonist of the episode, Kálmán Balatoni, symbolically stuffs into his body what he cannot possess. He expresses his identity through eating. No one can take away, no one can collectivize what he has stuffed into his body. Kálmán, whose body has grown to unreal proportions, explains in a monologue that he started to train as a competitive eater when he felt that the volume of his stomach was larger than his entire body. His confession reveals how competitive eating turns into a self-expressive bodily performance of Kálmán’s character.

Lastly, the film’s final segment takes the viewer into the post-socialist world of contemporary Hungary, where Kálmán’s son, Lajos, works as a taxidermist. While his grandfather and father used their bodies to resist specific ideologies and the political systems, Lajos performs his contemporary identity by constructing a machine that destroys and stuffs his own body. Pálfi’s film states that the main conflict for contemporary Hungarian society, which has expressed itself for at least two generations through resistance, is that it has lost any external reference points with respect to which it can define itself. These external reference points were embodied by the hierarchical class society for Morosgoványi, and the world of forced collectivism for Kálmán. In the final, contemporary portion of the film, Lajos turns against his own body because these external reference points have vanished. In his final performance, the body is still used to express his ideological resistance, or conversely, the lack thereof.

As these three discussed films demonstrate, the remembrance of the past may assume the form of narratives wherein the flesh-and-blood human body serves as an expressive tool. The characters’ bodies are inscribed with central

features of the historical eras around them. Moreover, *Taxidermia* shows how these imprints serve as connecting points, but also as opportunities for resistance against the restrictions of the successive political systems.

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As I indicated in the introduction, contemporary Hungarian authorial cinema shows no coherent trends when it comes to the cinematic modes of remembering the past. I have tried to show that the films analyzed above – in terms of both narrative and style – are significantly different. However, there exist three themes in the mnemonic strategies that these films share: temporality (the sequentiality of generations), spatial relations (migration), and corporeality (affective remembering through the body).[10]

The size of my sample-pool in this essay might make the following question seem somewhat speculative, but nonetheless worthy of posing: what is the reason for young Hungarian directors' preference for the themes of generation, migration, and the body? As a conclusion, I would suggest the initial and not yet fully elaborated hypothesis, that through the aforementioned themes young filmmakers reflect on the difficulties of memory work in the contemporary, post-socialist world of Hungary. The topics of generation, migration, and the body all perform indirect mnemonic strategies – and thereby reveal the hardships of addressing the past through unmediated discourses.

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For more on this, see Laszlo Strausz. Archaeology of Flesh: History and Body-Memory in Taxidermia. Jump Cut 53 (Summer 2011) http://ejumpcut.org/currentissue/strauszTaxidermia/index.html .

A similar ironic play with the East-West perceptions can be found in the so-called “Trabi comedies” in the 1990s in German cinema.

Connerton, Paul: How Societies Remember? pp. 61-71.

These are not the only topics that contemporary young Hungarian authors use to speak about the past, and there are other questions left unexplored here, such as the connection between remembering and nostalgia (which is worthy of investigation because it cuts across each of the mnemonic themes discussed here).