



## ‘Own Deaths’ – Figures of the Sensable in Péter Nádas’s Book and Péter Forgács’s Film

Katalin Sándor

Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania,

E-mail: sandorkati17@gmail.com

**Abstract.** The paper examines the figures of ‘sensible’ intermediality in Péter Nádas’s book, *Own Death* (2006), an autobiographical account of the author’s heart failure and clinical death and in the screen adaptation of the book by Péter Forgács with the same title (*Own Death*, 2007). The book and the film problematize the cultural, discursive, and medial (un)representability of a liminal corporeal experience (illness, death) in which the very conditions of self-perception, bodily sensation, and conceptual thinking appear as “other.” In the film corporeal liminality and its medial translatability are not only thematized (e.g. through the untranslated German word *umkippen* ‘tip over,’ ‘fall over’), but shape the embodied experience of viewing through the use of photo-filmic imagery, still frames, fragmented close-ups, slow motion, or medially textured images. These do not only foreground the foreign, undomesticable experience of the body and “own death” as other, but also expose the medium, the membrane of the film, and confer the moving image a “haptic visuality” (Marks). The haptic imagery directs the viewer’s attention to the sensuality of the medium, to the filmic “body,” enabling a “sensible” (Oosterling) spectatorship, an embodied reflection on the image, on the “sensual mode” (Pethő) of becoming intermedial.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** sensible intermediality, photo-filmic, stillness, Péter Nádas, Péter Forgács.

### Towards a “Sensible Intermediality”

Not so recent shifts of emphasis in the humanities (cultural studies, anthropology, literary, and art theory, film studies, gender studies etc.) referred to as corporeal turn or as sensuous scholarship directed the attention towards the role of corporeality, sensuality, and embodiment in social, cultural, and artistic practices, in the constitution of the self and intersubjectivity, in the unsettling relationship

---

1 This work was supported by a grant of the Romanian Ministry of National Education, CNCS – UEFISCDI, project number PN-II-ID-PCE-2012-4-0573.

of the self and the Other – from social, anthropological, cultural, political, ethical, or aesthetic perspectives. The cultural hierarchy of the senses and the dominance of the paradigm of vision have been challenged by foregrounding other senses like smell or touch or the synaesthetic aspect of perception. In 1997 Paul Stoller proposes from an anthropological perspective a “sensuous scholarship” that is both analytical and sensible, and can be an alternative to the disembodied perspective and bloodless language of the Eurocentric scholarship that textualizes the body it tries to critically liberate from the Cartesian tradition and the body–mind dualism (1997, xiv–xv).

Laura U. Marks in her phenomenological approach to film speaks about haptic criticism and relying on Deleuze and Guattari, as well as on E. Riegl intends “to restore a flow between the haptic and the optical that our culture is currently lacking” as a consequence of post-Enlightenment rationality (Marks 2002, xiii). Marks aims at approaching vision not only in terms of distance and disembodiment but as a form of contact, as an embodied sense “to maintain a robust flow between sensuous closeness and symbolic distance” (2002, xiii). Haptic vision is interested not primarily (or not only) in conceptual meaning-making and narrativity, but in the sensuality of the medium, and together with optical vision requiring distance and abstraction, it shapes the unsettling experience of perception.

Turning to the corporeal and the sensual does not result in a naïve concept of a direct, culturally, or ideologically neutral, unmediated accessibility of the body, materiality, or corporeality. The perceiving subject “is itself defined dialectically as being *neither* (pure) consciousness *nor* (physical, in itself) body” (Madison, quoted in Sobchack 2004, 4). The lived body never coincides with itself, never achieves a stable identity, being continually shaped by historical and cultural systems (Madison, quoted in Sobchack 2004, 4). This is also what Vivian Sobchack (relying on existentialist phenomenology) underlines by the concept of embodiment in her phenomenological approach to moving image culture (2004).

Approaches to intermediality have also been sensitive to the scientific shifts of emphasis that do not only thematize corporeality, the embodied subject, or the sensual aspect of social and cultural practices, but try to rethink the perspective, the methodology, and the terminology of research. Henk Oosterling (2003) relying on post-structuralist philosophies of difference conceives intermediality as sensational, as the reflectivity of the “sensible,” as an ongoing transition between presence and absence, between the sensual and the discursive. Reflectivity is never merely conceptual or discursive but opens up towards the thinking body (Lyotard), the unrepresentable, the sublime, the non-discursive, the subversively material.

Ágnes Pethő reflecting on theories of intermediality and phenomenological film theory points several times to the structural and the sensual modes of becoming intermedial within cinema. The sensual mode “invites the viewer to literally get in touch with a world portrayed not at a distance but at the proximity of entangled synesthetic sensations, and resulting in a cinema that can be perceived in the terms of music, painting, architectural forms or haptic textures” (2010, 99).

## **The In-Betweenness of Cinematic Stillness**

Sensable cinematic intermediality can be related to figures of stillness and slowness in film: to the (temporary) release of the moving image from narrative functions and its arrest in a still frame (photo-filmic or painterly) that foregrounds the sensuous, tactile, and textured qualities of the image “palpable” through vision. The stillness and the intermediality of the photo-filmic or the painterly triggers the awareness of imageness, of filmic materiality in the spectator, disturbs medial transparency, and questions the idea of self-enclosed medium specificity.

Laura Mulvey considers that stillness in the moving image, as well as “the process of delaying a film inevitably highlights its aesthetics and the illusion of movement, and the hidden presence of the filmstrip on which the illusion depends” (2006, 185). Moreover, “the delay, the association with the frame, may also act as a ‘conduit’ to the film’s uncertain, unstable materiality torn between the stillness of the celluloid strip and the illusion of its movement” (2006, 26). Through the ability to foreground filmic mediality and to expose ‘film time’ within ‘cinema time,’ which – as narrative time – usually conceals the first, Mulvey – following Bellour – links stillness and delay to a different spectatorial experience, that of the pensive spectator who reflects on the halted images of the film, not being hurried by the narrative flow (2006, 181–196).<sup>2</sup>

Withholding or suspending the narrative through still frames, close-ups, photo-filmic inserts makes room for a lingering, sensable, palpating gaze through which the surface, the (inter)sensoriality, the hapticity of the image comes to the fore. Another possibility of exposing the sensuality of the moving image lies

---

2 Streitberger and van Gelder point out that “with the advent of digital technology, the boundaries between the photographic and the filmic image are constantly blurred, both technically – in drawing on the same software and hardware engineering – and perceptively – in leaving the spectator in doubt of the (photographic or filmic) nature of the image” (2010, 48). Therefore they agree with David Green’s view according to which “the distinctions between the filmic and the photographic, between the moving and the still image [...] will wither in the face of these profound shifts in the complex technology of the visual” (Green, quoted in Streitberger – van Gelder 2010, 48).

within slow motion cinematography. Slow motion according to Vivian Sobchack “has a particularly compelling quality in a contemporary »cinema of attractions« that is based primarily on intensely kinetic movement and speed” (2006, 337). Slow motion does not erase or eradicate movement but – as Sobchack points out – paradoxically hyperbolizes it, “forestalling” and “distilling” it to what seems its “essence” (2006, 337).<sup>3</sup>

Slowing down the moving image may denaturalize the transparency of the film and the unreflected naturality of the represented movement by disclosing the movement of the image, of representation itself in a media-reflexive way.

Still frames, photo-filmic imagery, and slow motion in cinema produce a sensation of suspended time within the unfolding temporality of the film. The sensual mode of becoming intermedial, as well as the self-reflexivity of the filmic image can be related to withholding ‘cinematic time’ or narrative time and leaving room for ‘filmic time’ that favors the sensible apprehension of the image both in its haptic and optical qualities, calling for the methodological approach of what Oosterling calls “sensible intermediality.” The sensibility of intermedial or heteromedial relations can be conceived as a dialectic (and a productive tension) between the sensuous and the conceptual, between sensation and embodied reflection in approaching cultural products or practices.

## The Book as Corpus

Sensible intermediality can be a revealing research perspective for the discussion of the book *Own Death* by Péter Nádas published in English in 2006<sup>4</sup> and its screen adaptation, *Own Death* by Péter Forgács released in 2007. Nádas’s book is an essayistic narrative about the writer’s liminal experience of clinical death from the first signs of heart failure to the resuscitation, reflecting with philosophical sensitivity on life, birth, and body from the revealing perspective of death, on the embodiment and disembodiment of the self in its becoming, on the limits of conceptual thinking, on the unperceived, invisible sensations and workings of the carnal body and self-perception that come to the fore due to illness and the

3 Sobchack – following Ryan Bishop’s and John Phillips’s approach – perceives slowness not as qualitatively opposed to speed, but as a relative category: thus slow and fast “should be regarded as relative powers of the single category speed.” (Bishop – Philips quoted in Sobchack 2006, 338.) For Sobchack “slow” and “fast” are not abstractions: “as relative powers, they are always beholden for their specific ascription not only to each other but also to the embodied and situated subjects who sense them as such” (2006, 338).

4 The book was first published in German (2002), and then in Hungarian (2004).

proximity of death. The narrative also exposes the way body, illness, and death are constructed by medical discourses and perceived in the space of social relations in which the body is never a self-enclosed biological entity but is inscribed by cultural, social, ideological, scientific etc. conceptions. A recurrent question of this reflection is the (un)representability of one's "own death" within and beyond culturally familiar and socially established metaphors, clichés, or conceptual language (e.g. how subjectivity or the body and illness are a relational experience even in the ultimate loneliness, how death and the body cannot be possessed and be one's own, only own and other at the same time). The title already points to the conceptual elusiveness of corporeality and death: instead of a clear relation of possession and a grammatical structure of genitive we read a gesture of detachment: "own death" – that is: own and impossible to possess at the same time.

In 2001 the text was published in a Hungarian periodical (*Élet és Irodalom*), then it was published as a book and the text was differently edited and made up. A series of photographs was inserted into the book: a series with its own story, temporality, and concept: Nádas, the author of the text had been taking pictures of the old pear-tree in his courtyard for a year. According to one of the most sensitive readers of the volume the heavy book-format probably did not do any good to the text, but the album-book certainly attracted more readers than the text in the periodical (Borbély 2007, 40). One can certainly agree that the intervention of photography really 'does' something to the text: it does not only become an ambiguous, indeterminate context for reading, but it displaces and opens up the very notion of the text and book itself.

In *Own Death* corporeal liminality and its medial (un)translatability are not only thematized (e.g. through the untranslated German word *umkippen* 'tip over,' 'fall over'), but shape the embodied experience of reading through the use of photographs dislocating the process of reading, through the repetitive interruption and fragmentation of the text traversed by white spaces, through the typographic isolation or "close-up" of certain sentences in the (meaningfully) empty space of the pages.<sup>5</sup> These do not only reflect on the foreign, undomesticable experience of the body, illness, or clinical death, but also disclose the medium, the "body" of the book.

The liminal experience of the body disturbs the conceptual system of language, the concepts of time, narration, and physical space, and confronts the subject

5 Orsolya Milián considers that these white spaces are the visible, typographic "breaths" of the text that relate to the narrator's "breaths" or loss of air, to the interruptions of the fragmented narrative or to the invisible breathing and temporality of reading itself (2007, 92–93).

not only with the unsettling proximity between death and life, but also with a certain loss of language. The elusive experience of being in-between life and death is described as being beyond conceptual thinking, beyond the realm of clear distinctions: as if thinking did not only happen within the body but with the body.<sup>6</sup> The liminal experience that is beyond familiar concepts but within the realm of a strangely abstract physical perception and remembrance makes any retrospective narration appear as an intervention, as a struggle to impose on liminality concepts of space, temporality, or sequence.

The book offers itself as a continuous enfolding, ‘*umkippen*’ – and at the same time interruption – between the conceptual and the sensual, reading and viewing, words and photographs, speech and the unspeakable. The insertion of the photos is unsettling in many respects: the photos appear to mediate temporality and change, the life of a tree throughout a year by still images, by arresting time, by picturing pastness or the “own death” of time. The incorporation of the photographic series into the volume brings up the problem of the representability of the temporal and the liminal. It can be argued that not only the representation of the tree and temporal change becomes a metaphor of ephemerality, rebirth, and death, as Noémi Kiss rightfully proposes, acknowledging that photography is the abstract, conceptual signifier of death (2007, 86), but rather it is the modality of representation and the photographic medium itself<sup>7</sup> that can be related to the question of exit, absence, or passing: through the suspension of the flow of time, its encapsulation within a frame, and the indexical photographic trace whose presence affirms the absence of the referent.

Photographic representation as an image-act intervenes into the continuity of time and temporal change, slices up time and space into still frames. Photos as image-acts (see, for instance, in Belting [2011]) are not documents but ambiguous, unstable traces, records “of a fragment of inscribed reality that may be meaningless or indecipherable” (Mulvey 2006, 31). The photos in *Own Death* are not so much the archive of a recorded reality but rather the archive of the gaze<sup>8</sup> directed towards

6 “The universe as sensual phenomenon is entirely familiar while it remains beyond reach for concepts [...] With a life rich in conceptual thinking behind me, I look back at what, for lack of concepts, I cannot think, since it happens for the first time.” (Nádas 2004, 211.)

7 A vast amount of literature deals with the relationship between photography and death: Roland Barthes, André Bazin, Hans Belting, Susan Sontag etc. – to mention only a few.

8 In Hans Belting’s anthropological approach photographs do not render the world but rather our gaze cast at it. Thus a photograph is actually a medium between two gazes, two looks: the one recorded by the photo and our own way of looking at it (Belting 2011, 145–167).

a visible slice of the world – a pear tree – in an almost ritualistic process of staying near the tree, of being with the tree for one year. The reader also has to stay with the elusive photos during the process of reading: with the polaroid and black and white pictures, with the different angles and the displacement of the photos on the page through which the unreadable, sensual aspects of the book are foregrounded. The book is not only an immaterial sign to look through but also a palpable, visible, corporeal object to look at.

At the same time the photographic and typographic arrangement of the book may divert the readability of the text, the deictic words, and the reference of some pronouns, as it happens in the line “The barking dogs of hell would want me to keep my mouth shut, to remain silent about *this*.” (Nádas 2006, 23, emphasis mine, S. K.) In the mythological allusion the barking dogs of hell recall the myth of Cerberus, the tree-headed monster guarding the gate of hell, marking a point of transition and passage, a space of in-between. In this instance the pronoun might point to the liminal experience of heart failure and death, reminding us that death and the workings of the body are not only cultural taboos whose thematization is a socially regulated practice, but they also might entail a retreat from representation. Due to the arrangement of the text and the photograph, the pronoun may also point to the photographic image or to the white emptiness, the “silence” of the page, which also confronts the reader-viewer with something that cannot be completely translated, a photographic or a visual excess which nevertheless depends on or generates discourse. Another example of the diversion of deixis is the sentence: “It is happening *now*” (Nádas 2006, 143, emphasis mine, S. K.). The word *now* can deictically point to the elusive time of passage between life and death, to the indefinite temporality of the photograph or that of the white page, but also to the temporality of reading. The typographic isolation or “close-up” of the sentences de- and re-contextualizes the fragments, allows for alternative readings, and makes the sentences “palpable” in their verbal materiality. The sentence “Somebody pierced me with a beautiful gaze.” (Nádas 2006, 159) is part of the passage narrating the happenings at the hospital, and it refers to the look of a doctor, presumably. Nevertheless, in its typographic isolation the sentence might confront the reader-viewer with his/her own gaze touching the very surface of the page or the photograph next to the text [Figs. 1–2].

The unnamable in *Own Death* is not only a thematic issue (e. g. related to body, illness, death) but also the unsaid, the unspeakable within language. The book format does not only speak about the loss of concepts, about the narrator's reluctance to reestablish social orientation, about his desire for the ungraspable

such as the memory of a perfume or the experience of some lack and absence, but the large white spaces, the empty pages visualize silence, amplify interruption, and rupture within representation itself. The photographs resist any caption, and their presence cannot be domesticated by adjusting them to the logic of the text. The interrupted sentences of the text, the interruptions themselves, as well as the non-semantic but meaningfully quiet, “airy” white spaces withholding the words (or taking a “breath”), the continual return and the displacement of the photographs can be addressed as an instance of sensible intermediality exposing the book as a corpus working through the otherness of the body, through the unnamable experience of (dis)embodiment and passing.

## The Sensability of the Filmed and the Filmic Body

Forgács Péter’s film *Own Death*,<sup>9</sup> based on the book by Nádas, adapts/adopts the text and the photographic mode of the book by using discrete and still photographic frames, close-ups, blurred, faded images of bodies and textures, images of the pear tree, amateur found footage, slow sequences of movement, all of which confer the film a specific rhythm and expose the moving image as an archive of still frames. The photographs are at times interrupted by live action, and though Forgács uses images from amateur footage, the film consists mainly of material he directed himself. The smooth, even, non-dramatic narratorial voice-over of the film<sup>10</sup> is done by Nádas, the author of the book himself, who reads the text rather than acts it out, exposing the textuality rather than the dramatic aspect of the essayistic narration, performing a detachment from the narrated story and the narrated (that is: constructed and unavoidably fictionalized) self. In the film the role of someone suffering a heart attack is played by István Benkő which is another instance of distancing, overwriting the mediated presence of the authorial voice through the figure of otherness and absence.

## Figures of “Double Vision”

“Double vision” is an explicit metafigure of the book and the film in many respects:<sup>11</sup> the text foregrounds the problem of perception and representation

9 The film won the Grand Prize for Experimental Films at the 2008 Hungarian Film Week.

10 In the English version of the film the text is recited by Peter Meikle Moor.

11 “A double vision that comes almost inevitably with my profession often impaired my sense of reality, and so I had to be on guard against my own perception” (Nádas 2006, 93). “It proved to be an amusing little advantage, useful in interpretation, that in my



through language and through the camera, raising even the question of the autobiographical context: the author-narrator's identity as a writer and photographer entails a professional(ized) predisposition (but also a distrust) towards the multifold perception, interpretation, and representation of the world or the self. Due to the liminal experience of the embodied subject in the proximity of death, there is an ongoing reflection on the elusive otherness of the own corporeality and self,<sup>12</sup> on the altered conditions of perception and self-perception, on the way perception constructs the perceived, as well as on the way the subject faces the limits of conceptual thinking and the incommensurability of sensations – all these emphasizing the act of mediated, retrospective, narrative meaning-making. The linguistic-conceptual and the photographic mode of perception and representation shape each other through the dialectic of approximation and distance in narrating the self and the liminality of experience. Seeing, visual perception is permanently foregrounded in the verbal narration and photographs, text fragments and white spaces are literally folded into each other on the pages of the book. The “meek” and reflexive irony of self-observation and self-detachment in narrating the “own death” dismisses the possibility of pathos and also presupposes a “double” (or rather multiple) vision, a displacement, a shift of perspective within the own as other, within narrating an elusive experience that cannot be possessed, only constructed through the figurations and detours of a retrospective, culturally embedded first person account.

The figure of double vision also shapes the filmic representation, the layering of narratorial voice-over or visual text fragments on the image, revealing the non-transparent, textured aspect of the image and the textual linkage of the film to the book [Figs. 3–4], as well as the intermedial endeavor of the adaptation itself. The act of telling and the act of seeing often overlap as in the sensual photographic close-up of an eye (a recurrent image throughout the film) occupying the whole frame, shown while the “mother” of all narrations” (Nádas 2006, 169), Polymnia is evoked in the text to help the narrator cross the Styx.<sup>13</sup> The film, while exploring figures of proximity and touch through a camera “palpating” the pores or the sweat of the skin, also adopts the perspective of double or multiple vision, of detachment, of gentle irony or reflexivity in dealing with the elusive in-

---

previous life I had been not only a writer dealing with the value and evaluation of words, but also a photographer who deals with the nature of light” (Nádas 2006, 221).

12 “My other self wanted to have firm control over this delicate matter” (Nádas 2006, 93).

13 “Mother of all narrations, Polymnia, hear my plea, let me cross the Styx with common words” (Nádas 2006, 169).

betweenness of birth and death or in reinterpreting certain cultural and literary metaphors, quotes or concepts. The text reflecting on passing, on exit, on the moment of leaving one's life is accompanied by the eroticism of slowness, delay, and partial disclosure in the found footage (?) showing the process of pulling down the zipper on a woman's dress.<sup>14</sup> The filmic images eroticize (rather than feminize) the experience of departure, of dissolution, and cannot be linked to a narrative function or to a definite origin: they only create a sensation, the sensation of slowness, of erotic processuality and fading [Figs. 5–7].

## The Intermediality of the Photo-Filmic

The film adapting and adopting the photographic mode of the book becomes extensively photo-filmic, and it is not surprising that the use of still photographs reminds one of Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1963).<sup>15</sup> Vivian Sobchack discussing the use of photography in Marker's film which is made up of a series of discrete and still photographs emphasizes that the film *projects* phenomenologically as a temporal flow and an existential becoming and organizes the discrete photographs into animated and intentional coherence. This highlights "the difference between the transcendental, posited moment of the photograph and the existential momentum of the cinema, between the scene to be *contemplated* and the scene as it is *lived*" (Sobchack 2004, 145). *La Jetée* in Sobchack's interpretation "allegorizes the transformation of the moment to momentum that constitutes the ontology of the cinematic and the latent background of every film" (Sobchack 2004, 148). Forgács's film, inquiring into the ontology and the "anatomy" of the body and death – and also that of a text, – exposes the ontology and the "anatomy" of the cinematic: the "body" of the film and the memory of the celluloid constituted of stills. However the still photographic frames are "carried away," displaced, contextualized by a temporal and narrative flow in a re-animated media archive, a moving photo-filmic album, conveying stillness in motion or the stillness of motion, performing and not merely thematizing medial acts of transition (the slowing down of the moving image and its inverse: the re-animation of the still photographs of the pear tree).

14 Nádás writes about the ambiguous commensurability of the experience of totality with religious or amorous ecstasy: "You are granted an experience of totality to which, in this vale of tears, only the ecstasy of religion or love can come close. And probably giving birth, for women. The more courageous of them will tell you that in those moments pain and pleasure melt into each other, turning the whole thing into a great cosmic, erotic adventure" (Nádás 2006, 201).

15 According to Scott Macdonald, Forgács's film is formally reminiscent of Marker's *La Jetée* (Macdonald 2011, 8).

Moreover, from the much broader context of artistic and cultural practices – as van Alphen argues – the increasing use of photography, documentary film, home movies, archives, and family albums can be related to memory practices signalling either the celebration of memory and the desire to look back or a memory crisis and a fear of forgetting (2011, 59). In *Own Death* the memory practices through photography do not pertain to a broader cultural-historical recollection, but rather to the embodied – and culturally embedded – private remembrance both in its conceptual and sensual dimensions.

In Forgács's film the ongoing reflection on the altered conditions of bodily perception due to illness entails that the function of the filmic and photographic blur as a trace of media experience is twofold: using Joachim Paech's terms, the blur in *Own Death* has a cinematographic (*kinematographisch*) function that alludes to photography in a media-referential way, but it also has a filmic (*filmisch*) function<sup>16</sup> when it is used thematically: e.g. to suggest, but also to perform the disturbance of perception, of vision through the blurred moving image. The modulation between the blurred and the sharp within the same frame indicates an act of medial transition or medial event of difference within the image [Figs. 8–10]. Thus the blur as a medial figure can be related to the way in which the diegetic world and its medial articulation shape each other: thematically it signals the alteration of sensations and bodily perception through fluid images, and at the same time it disrupts medial transparency, making the medium observable in its opacity.

As illness and pain displace the transparency and the unreflected familiarity of the body, and make it both own and other, the close-ups of the body parts decompose the image and the concept of the body as a self-evident integrity and expose it in its pores, textures, and membranes with either an anatomic precision or on the contrary: as a blurred, ungraspable, evasive phenomenon. The close-ups or the faded, blurred images enable the intimacy and the hapticality of viewing, of seeing as palpation in Merleau-Pontyan terms which is both embodied and

16 Laura Mulvey uses the terms 'film' or 'filmic' in a somewhat different way – with a media-referential meaning – when she discusses 'film time' and 'cinema time': "This affects the opposition between 'film time,' the inscription of an image onto the still frames of celluloid, and 'cinema time,' the structure of significance and flow that constitutes the temporal aesthetic of any movie, fiction or documentary. Usually, the second conceals the first, but when the forward movement is halted the balance changes. The time of the film's original moment of registration can suddenly burst through its narrative time" (2006, 30–31). Cf. "sie funktioniert einmal 'kinematographisch,' also medienreferentiell auf die Fotografie bezogen, und 'filmisch,' indem sie thematisch-sujetthafte Aspekte (mentale Aufmerksamkeitsstörungen z. B.) formuliert" (Paech 2008, 350).

reflective. The still close-ups of the body parts are viscerally intimate images of the body but at the same time are abstracted, disconnected from the unity of a singular, self-same body or identity which they question and decompose, disclosing a camera interested in approaching and touching a surface [Figs. 11–16]. This may resonate with the narrated experience of not-yet-death in which the body experiences itself in its fragments, in its organs exposed by the pain, in its self-sameness and otherness at the same time. (The image of the body traversed by infusion tubes questions any clear-cut boundary between the biological body and the medically-technologically assisted and inhabited body.) Whereas in optical visuality the relationship between the viewer and the image may be one of mastery, in which the image can be isolated and comprehended, haptic visuality “implies making oneself vulnerable to the image, reversing the relation of mastery that characterizes optical viewing” (Marks 2000, 185). In *Own Death* the haptic images and close-ups of the fragmented body mark a withdrawal from the mastery of the image, pointing not only to the trauma of (clinical) death but also to that of representation.

Moreover, the close-ups also affect the temporality and the rhythm of the film, as well as the conditions of spectatorship. As Mulvey puts it, “the close-up has always provided a mechanism of delay, slowing cinema down into contemplation of the human face, allowing for a moment of possession in which the image is extracted, whatever the narrative rationalization may be, from the flow of a story” (2006, 163–164). The slowing down or the suspension of the flow of the story enables a sensible spectatorship through which the sensual and the discursive aspects of the image shape each other. The “own death” of the body is twofold: the carnal body becomes its own image in death and the body as image is arrested in a still frame within the moving image.

It is not only the bodies that are decomposed into visually palpable surfaces of close-ups, the film as a whole, as a transparent “body” is cut up and exposed as suturing together still frames, long segments being made up of a series of still photographs whose unsettling mode of existence is linked phenomenologically to the “qualities of presence and absence, present and past, now and then, a here before us now encompassing a there displaced in time” (Rodowick 2007, 56). The narrative or diegetic integration of certain frames is delayed, withheld for a sensible viewing lingering on the (temporarily) non-referential sensuality of the image. Some frames, for instance, display an abstract, blurred image with a fragile line crossing the surface, and even if we hear the sharp sound of an ambulance counterpointing the visible, and later on we hear the text about the

infusion disambiguating the fragile line, the images still remain suspended for a while in the indeterminateness of sensation [Figs. 17–19].

The experience of breathlessness and suffocation during the heart failure (“There was no air in the air...”<sup>17</sup>) is not thematically but “methodologically” adapted through slowing down the moving image (of a hand opening a window), through cutting it up into still frames arranged into a movement sequence reminiscent of the older technique of chronophotography. In this sequence the viewer experiences a suffocating – or on the contrary: air-giving (?) – sensation through the lack of movement in movement, through the paradox of still motion or stillness in motion [Figs. 20–22].

Along theoretical concepts that link the photographic index to death and pastness, photography in *Own Death* can be related to the uncanny in-betweenness of animate and inanimate, life and death: “the photographic index reaches out towards the uncanny as an effect of confusion between living and dead” (Mulvey 2006, 31). This ambiguity defines the aesthetics of the film that works through a text about the intertwining of being and non-being, birth and death, proximity and detachment: “My mother gave birth to my body, I give birth to its death” (Nádas 2006, 217). The first images of the film show the moments of a birth. The slow motion black and white shots do not document the biological moment of coming into life: the monochromatic quality and the slowness of the images denaturalize and de-mystify the body and the moment of birth (shown as both amazing and violent). The scene is exposed as the image of life and birth to look at in a film in which a body is about to deliver its death, resembling nevertheless a re-birth into the (cosmic) impersonality of being.

In the book the narrator alludes to Andrea Mantegna’s painting, *Dead Christ* (c. 1480–1490), which is well-known not only because of the famous foreshortened perspective but also the “close-up” aspect of the image of the body in which even the hardened, dried skin around the wounds is visible, showing not an ethereal but an embodied, human, physical body of Christ.

In Nádas’s Mantegna-allusion the perspective is inversed, the narrator is looking out on himself in an almost grotesque perspectival foreshortening (Nádas 2006, 231). This visual experience is linked – through the figure of double vision – to the techniques of observation: to photographic seeing and the awareness of an imagined camera-position beyond the conceptual world, higher than his own actual position, a distance that articulates the visual experience of the own body or subjectivity as other. The narratorial position and the modality of self-

17 “There was no air in the air: that was my problem.” (Nádas 2006, 91.)

perception are shaped by a technical apparatus of seeing that requires distance and points to the unavoidably mediated aspect of the liminal experience. In the book the Mantegna-allusion is rethought not only in relation to the technical-photographic mode of observation but also in relation to medical discourses and technologies that ultimately reanimate the body: “They have burned the stamp of reanimation into the very flesh of my chest” (Nádas 2006, 255). Cultural, religious, medical discourses intersect in the almost palpable textual figure of the burnt seal on the body, the imprint of a technically assisted, secular resuscitation.

The film also incorporates the Mantegna-allusion and its inverse: the painting is re-enacted through bodies and through photo-filmic images [Figs. 23–25]. The head is not fully visible whereas in Mantegna’s work the composition, the foreshortening leads to the head of Christ (and according to some also to his genitalia). The partial, distorted, blurred re-enactment of the painting can also be linked to the secularizing re-appropriation of the iconographic and cultural tradition in which the carnal and the filmic body are the media of “re-animation.” Due to the unusual perspective and the significance of foreshortening, the Mantegna-allusion foregrounds the interconnectedness of viewpoint, representation and (self)perception, as well as the medial and cultural embeddedness of memory, of a visceral liminal experience and its retrospective narration. The photographic re-enactment of Mantegna is shown in the film after the professionalized photographic vision is verbally thematized in relation to light. The images accompanying this textual passage are sensual, textured, surface-based, and everything that happens at all, happens to and in the membrane of the film not in the diegetic world: the scratched skin of the film is media-reflexively exposed. The scratched, deteriorating and/but at the same time changing, “living” membrane of the film discloses the material fragility of the medium: it does not mediate images, but becomes the image of its own decomposition reminding the viewer of corporeal vulnerability [Figs. 26–28].

In this sequence and throughout the film there are inserts of Péter Nádas’s and Lenke Szilágyi’s photographs, as well as found photos and footage from the Private Photo and Film Foundation<sup>18</sup> and ECOFilm Association. The photos seem to be random imprints of an indefinite private, personal memory, resisting any unequivocal readability. In the appropriating context of the film about death and liminal corporeality the found photos and footage expose the body, often the young, alive, moving, and lived body of the other, producing a sensation of pastness,

---

18 The foundation is a unique collection of amateur films founded by Forgács himself in 1983.

of temporal detour, of random remembrance. The unsettling relation between the indexicality of the found footage and the photographic images and their ambiguity in the context of the film undermines the ontological certainty of the index and posits these images (and photographs in general) as unstable, indefinite traces. Ernst van Alphen – following Kaja Silverman's line of thought according to which Forgács's films are based on strategies of repersonalization rather than objectification or categorization – considers that in these films the function of the archival footage evoking the phenomenal world, vitality, enjoyment, or activities like dancing and playing differs from that of the archival practices: "Whereas the archival mechanisms of objectification and categorization strip images of their singularity, Forgács's archival footage keeps insisting on the private and affective dimension of the images" (van Alphen 2011, 61). In *Own Death* the found footage is also detached from documenting, objectifying functions, and – folding unto rather than illustrating the text – lingers in the indefiniteness of memory or remembrance related to the diegetic world. Nevertheless, the found footage together with the photo-filmic imprints or with the reminiscent technique of chronophotography also function as traces of media-historical memory: the found material cannot only be linked to the memory practices of an embodied subject but it also constitutes the memory of the film itself as a historical medium.

## **Sensable Reflectivity, Sensable Spectator**

The intermediality and the reflexivity of stillness and slowness in Forgács's film are manifold. The photo-filmic images are linked (among others) to the question of the representability of the body eluding its own medial 'mummification:' the body is fragmented and exposed as a still image, as its own effigy, remaining ungraspable as a self-same totality. Still frames, fragmented close-ups, slow motion, or medially textured images not only expose the unnamable experience of illness or death in which the own (body) appears as other, but also uncover the medium, the membrane of the film.

The photo-filmic disrupts the medial transparency of the film by folding the filmic into the photographic or the pictorial and by arresting the temporality of the moving image through an almost album-like seriality. The insertion of photo-filmic frames, the slowing down of movement to a suffocating (or air-giving?) stillness in motion, the blurring of the images, and the detachment of the sensuous, haptic imagery from narrative functions – all these are part of a media-reflexivity which is not self-enclosed. What we see is rather a fold in which the modality of working through

the phenomenology of birth, illness, death, body, perception, and self-perception, as well as through their conceptual, cultural, or visual representability exposes the cinematic “body” with its constituent cuts, interruptions, inserts, frames, textures – without losing sight of the liminal experience of the carnal body and the embodied self. The experimental photo-filmic anatomy of the body, the close-ups of the pores of the skin stretch in front of the eye as surfaces the viewing of which cannot be but a sensually reflective experience calling not only for a pensive spectator (Bellour, Mulvey),<sup>19</sup> but for an embodied viewer, a sensible spectator, and the research perspective of sensible intermediality.

## References

- Belting, Hans. 2011. *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body*. Transl. by Thomas Dunlap. Princeton University Press.
- Borbély Szilárd. 2007. Átbillenni, átbukni, átfordulni, leválni... (Leírás Nádas Péter *Saját halál* című könyvéről) [To Tilt Over, to Tumble Over, to Turn Over, to Peel Off...]. In *Testre szabott élet. Írások Nádas Péter Saját halál és Párhuzamos történetek című műveiről* [*Customized Life. Writings About Péter Nádas's Own Death and Parallel Stories*], ed. Rác I. Péter, 40–64. Budapest: Kijárat.
- Kiss Noémi. 2007. A fotográfia, az élet negatívja [Photography, the Negative of Life]. In *Testre szabott élet. Írások Nádas Péter Saját halál és Párhuzamos történetek című műveiről* [*Customized Life. Writings About Péter Nádas's Own Death and Parallel Stories*], ed. Rác I. Péter, 79–91. Budapest: Kijárat.
- Macdonald, Scott. 2011. Péter Forgács. An Interview. In *Cinema's Alchemist. The Films of Péter Forgács*, eds. Bill Nichols and Michael Renov, 3–38. Minneapolis – London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Marks, Laura U. 2000. *The Skin of the Film. Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses*. Durham–London: Duke University Press.
- Marks, Laura U. 2002. *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Milián Orsolya. 2007. Saját helyek – fragmentum [Own Places – Fragment]. In *Testre szabott élet. Írások Nádas Péter Saját halál és Párhuzamos történetek című műveiről* [*Customized Life. Writings About Péter Nádas's Own Death and Parallel Stories*], ed. Rác I. Péter, 92–103. Budapest: Kijárat.

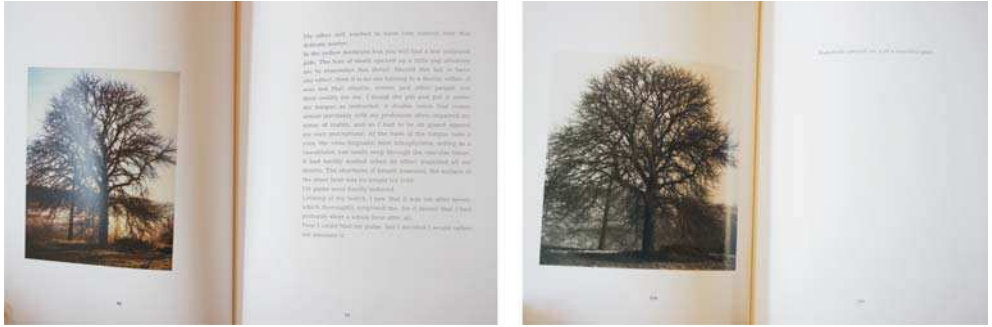
19 Bellour's helpful and inspiring term “pensive spectator” – and the way Mulvey uses it – emphasizes rather the intellectual, cerebral aspect of the spectatorial activity.



- Mulvey, Laura. 2006. *Death Death 24x a Second. Stillness and the Moving Image*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Nádas Péter. 2006. *Own Death*. Trans. by Salamon János. Göttingen: Steidl.
- Oosterling, Henk. 2003. Sens(a)ble Intermediality and Interesse. Towards an Ontology of the In-Between. *Intermédialités [Intermedialities]* no. 1: 29–46.
- Paech, Joachim. 2008. *Le Nouveau Vague* oder Unschärfe als intermediale Figur [La Nouveau Vague or The Blur as an Intermedial Figure]. In *Intermedialität – Analog/Digital. Theorien – Methoden Analysen [Intermediality – Analogue/Digital. Theories – Methods – Analyses]*, eds. Joachim Paech and Jens Schröter, 345–361. München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag.
- Pethő Ágnes. 2010. *The Passion for the In-Between. Cinema and Intermediality*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Rodowick, D. N. 2007. *The Virtual Life of Film*. Massachusetts – London: Harvard University Press, Cambridge.
- Sobchack, Vivian. 2006. “Cutting to the Quick:” Techne, Physis, and Poiesis and the Attractions of Slow Motion. In *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed. Wanda Strauven, 337–351. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Sobchack, Vivian. 2004. *Carnal Thoughts. Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press.
- Stoller, Paul. 1997. *Sensuous Scholarship*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Streitberger, Alexander and van Gelde, Hilde. 2010. Photo-filmic images in contemporary visual culture. *Philosophy of Photography* vol. 1 no. 1: 48–53.
- Van Alphen, Ernst. 2011. Toward a New Historiography. The Aesthetics of Temporality. In *Cinema's Alchemist. The Films of Péter Forgács*, eds. Bill Nichols and Michael Renov, 59–74. Minneapolis – London: University of Minnesota Press.

# List of Figures

**Figures 1–2.** Photographs, white spaces, isolated sentences folding unto each other. (Péter Nádas: *Own Death*)



**Figures 3–4.** Text-layers on the image: suspending the transparency of the film.



**Figures 5–7.** In-between image and text, “pain and pleasure:” the slow sequence of pulling down a zipper accompanying the text about leaving one’s life.



**Figures 8–10.** Blurred images mediating the disturbance of vision and exposing the medium in its opacity.



**Figures 11–16.** The body as image disjointed into close-ups.



**Figures 17–19.** The images of the infusion tube suspended in the indeterminateness of sensation.



**Figures 20–22.** A hand opening a window: the visual paradox of stillness in/ of motion.



**Figures 23–25.** The re-enactment of Mantegna's *Dead Christ* through the medium of the body and film.



**Figures 26–28.** Exposing the membrane of the film.

