



Remediating Past Images. The Temporality of “Found Footage” in Gábor Bódy’s *American Torso*

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Abstract. Along Laura U. Marks’s thoughts on the “disappearing image” as embodied experience, the article proposes to bring into discussion particular modes of occurrence of “past images,” whether in form of the use of archival/found footage or of creating visual archaisms in the spirit of archival recordings, within the practice of the Hungarian experimental filmmaking of the 1970s and 1980s, more specifically, in Gábor Bódy’s films. The return to archival/found footage as well as the production of visual archaisms reveal an attempt of *remediation* (Bolter and Grusin) that goes beyond the cultural responsibility of preservation: it confronts the film medium with its materiality, historicity, and temporality, and creates productive tensions between the private and the historical, between the pre-cinematic and the texture of motion pictures, between the documentary value of the image and its rhetorical dimension. The paper argues that the authenticity of the moving image in Gábor Bódy’s *American Torso* (*Amerikai anzix*, 1975) is achieved through a special combination of the *immediacy* and the *hypermediacy* of experience. Bódy’s interest in “past images” goes beyond the intention of experimentation with the medium; it is aimed at a profound, reconsidered archaeology of the image and a distinct sensing of the cinema.¹

Keywords: Gábor Bódy, found/archival footage, remediation, embodied experience, optical and haptic visuality.

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Introduction. The Disappearing Image as Embodied Experience

Whether simply belonging to the ever widening circle of spectators or to those being overwhelmed by the desire to also account for their spectatorial experience, our intimate relationship with the moving image can most probably be traced back to some early cinematic experiences – or to the experience of the early film. Those who once got mesmerised by the magic of film and have remained in its companion ever since, have formed their private history of the cinema, with “early films” occasioned by their first encounters with the medium, which may function as their private “cinema of attractions.”² Without risking a solipsistic discourse, I wish to argue that no matter which films or media fulfil the role of our own “cinema of attractions,” we share the embodied experience of the pure and unconditioned spectacle³ as being part of the set of images that are at the core of our spectatorial identity, of our private visual archives. These early film experiences may live vividly in us or may have lost their contours; in the latter case we may wish to access, to revitalize the vanishing images just like some true-born archivists.

Cinematic experience is in close connection with the sense of disappearance. Cinema history is strongly related to the quick succession of disappearing images, media carriers, and media specificities in the process of discontinuous tastes, advancement in technology, shifts in spectatorial needs and habits as well as attitudes to what has passed, to what is past. The resulting melancholy state of past images is also discernible in everyday spectatorial experiences or in educational situations. As Laura U. Marks confesses in her volume entitled *Touch. Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*: “When I began to teach film studies, I realized that the students will never *really see* a film in class: it’s always a film that’s half-disappeared, or a projected video that just teases us, with its stripes of pastel color, that there might be an image in there somewhere, that there once was an indexical relationship to real things, real bodies” (Marks 2002, 92). On the occasion of such spectatorial experiences the distinct temporality, the transient character of the recorded image is revealed, and in strong correlation with this, the sense of our own transience will get to the fore. As Laura Marks further says in the chapter *Loving*

2 I use here Tom Gunning’s (1992) term referring to early film’s character of displaying a series of images rather than narrating stories, arousing the wonder and astonishment of the spectators through the power of representation.

3 It was the fascination of the unconditioned spectacle that determined the spectatorial experience of the legendary film entitled *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat (l’Arrivée d’un train en gare de La Ciotat*, Auguste Lumière and Louis Lumière, 1895).

a *Disappearing Image*: “To have an aging body, as we all do, raises the question of why we are compelled to identify with images of wholeness, as psychoanalytic film theory would have it; the question of whether this still is, or indeed was ever, the case; and the question of what it would be like to identify with an image that is disintegrating. Following Vivian Sobchack, I suggest that identification is a bodily relationship with the screen, thus when we witness a disappearing image we may respond with a sense of our own disappearance” (Marks 2002, 92).

Along Laura Marks’s line of thoughts, the disappearing image does not only trigger our mourning for it. Paradoxically, its transience reinserts its auratic quality – in Walter Benjamin’s sense of the term – the very aura that is supposed to have been lost together with the act of technical reproduction: “as images decay they become unique again: every unhappy film is unhappy after its own fashion” (2002, 94). Due to their regained aura and uniqueness, they become affective images, simultaneously asserting and celebrating the passage of time, acknowledged as the ultimate truth of our vulnerable existence: “Loving a disappearing image means finding a way to allow the figure to pass while embracing the tracks of its presence, in the physical fragility of the medium” (2002, 96).

The considerations above can lead us to a plethora of ways in which cinema has attempted at facing – resisting or displaying – its transience. However, Laura Marks’s chapter title, “Loving a Disappearing Image,” evokes in my mind a determining film experience, related to a quaint poetic experiment marking the start of career of Hungarian experimentalist filmmaker Gábor Bódy.⁴ The set of images I recall are damaged, deteriorated, grainy from the outset, situated on the boundary between assertion and erasure, transparency and opacity, representation and dissolution [Figs. 1–2]. It is these (*non*-)images, however, that redeem the auratic quality of cinema in the age of technical reproduction as carriers of embodied perception, of an intimate, private connection with cinematic image.

4 Gábor Bódy (1946–1985), charismatic figure of the Hungarian filmmaking of the 1970s and 1980s, created his first films in the BBS (*Balázs Béla Studio*), he was the first Hungarian film director to direct films in the BBS already before graduating the College of Theatre and Film Art, specialization film and television directing. There he founded the Film Language Series, the first experimental film project of the studio, then he created his diploma film, *American Torso*. He presented himself in front of the large public with his first feature film, expanded into a hypernarrative, entitled *Narcissus and Psyche* (*Nárcisz és Psyché*, 1980); on his initiative the first international video magazine was founded; he established the experimental section of the MAFILM. He held lectures on film theory; in his theoretical writings he elaborated his views on seriality and the attribution of meaning in motion picture. He himself acted the main role of his third – and last – feature film entitled *Dog’s Night Song* (*Kutya éji dala*, 1983).

1. Past Images. The Use of Archival/Found Footage as Remediation and Figuration

In an essentialist approach, the film medium was born out of a desire of archiving, that is, the wish to preserve visual material on a long-term basis. As Thomas Ballhausen points out in his essay entitled *On the History and Function of Film Archives*, once this desire is fulfilled, the subsequent need to preserve films themselves was born, implying an ethical responsibility, that of saving the values of the past from cultural amnesia, of preventing them from becoming obsolete. As Ballhausen notes, the Avant-Garde discovered film history by following in the path of archives: it returned to the beginnings of film with the purpose of confronting the medium's origins and its tradition. Already in the early period of film history, in the period of Avant-Garde cinema, the utilization of found material, of prior images, goes beyond the mere effort of preservation: the found footage becomes "an interface which enables the avantgarde director to evoke the subversive potential and quality of early cinema" (Ballhausen).

The use of archival/found⁵ footage has been a general practice of film throughout cinema history, present in the filmmaking practice of Esfir I. Shub (co-worker of Eisenstein and Kuleshov), Joseph Cornell, Bruce Conner, Ken Jacobs, Hollis Frampton, to mention but a few of the most outstanding examples (cf. Yeo 2004). Ever since the Avant-Garde endeavours of utilizing found material in the spirit of Marcel Duchamp's *objet trouvé*, the span of film history from the early Avant-Garde to the post-media age, with the significant contribution of the experimental filmmaking of the 1970s and 1980s, has assigned an emphasized role to the found/archival footage, implying – but going far beyond – the intent of preservation.

5 As for the difference between archival footage and found footage, I resort to Michael Zyrd's distinction: "The found footage film is a specific subgenre of experimental (or avant-garde) cinema that integrates previously shot film material into new productions. The etymology of the phrase suggests its devotion to uncovering 'hidden meanings' in film material. [...] Found footage is different from archival footage: the archive is an official record from the outtake; much of the material used in experimental found footage films is not archived but from private collections, commercial stock shot agencies, junk stores and garbage bins, or has literally been found in the street. Found footage filmmakers play at the margins, whether with the obscurity of the ephemeral footage itself or with the countercultural meanings excavated from culturally iconic footage. Found footage filmmaking is a metahistorical form commenting on the cultural discourses and narrative patterns behind history. Whether picking through the detritus of the mass mediascape or redefining (through image processing and optical printing) the new in the familiar, the found footage artist critically investigates the history behind the image, discursively embedded within its history of production, circulation, and consumption" (Zyrd 2003, 41–42).

Archival/found footage knows a great variety of cultural uses, designated by a great number of terms such as recontextualization, recycling, reuse, repurpose, rewriting, and has become “a, if not the, dominant critical procedure in independent film and videomaking” (McDonald, qtd. in Yeo 2004). Steve F. Anderson highlights the significance of the use of archival/found footage in terms of representation criticism: “The appropriation and reuse of ‘found footage’ inaugurates multiple possibilities for reinscription and critique of previously articulated codes of representation, and invites us to question the manner and extent to which ‘history’ may be constituted through images at the most basic level” (Anderson 2011, 70).

In his volume *Recycled Images: The Art and Politics of Found Footage Films* William C. Wees speaks about three modes of found footage use corresponding to three paradigms/political positions: using archival/found footage for the purpose of documentation (documentary realism), collage (along the aesthetic principles of modernism), and appropriation (in the context of postmodernism) (Wees 1993). These three modes rely on distinct perceptions of archival/found footage, from serving as the evidence of the past, in the case of documentation, to more subtle medial and representational games relying on the tension between authenticity and mediatedness of the embedded archival/found footage that can be encountered in modern and postmodern cinematic productions. As Steve F. Anderson puts it, “The appropriation and use of found footage may be understood as a tactical maneuver within which the simultaneous deployment and subversion of ontological certainty is a crucial factor. The discursive import of found footage thus relies upon its claim to a prior, indexical connection to the world, at the same time it is inscribed in a fully articulated and conventionalized system of filmic signification” (Anderson 2011, 70–71).

Along Steve F. Anderson’s considerations, a shift can be detected in the theoretical discourses of the archival/found footage from recontextualization to rhetorical strategy (2011, 72). This shift provides a distinct standpoint, from where the archival/found footage can be viewed not as a set of images (simply) standing for “the real,” rendering some kind of transparent representation within the body of cinematic discourse, but rather as *figuration* in itself, as an alternative modality of mediation and representation, creating productive tension and opening up the possibility of interaction between two distinct sets of moving images.

Thus, we arrive at the paradox of the archival/found footage: the “less” becomes “more,” the apparently “transparent” turns into the “figural” and becomes the carrier of manifold – cultural, temporal, medial – significations. In

a phenomenological approach, it is this – ontological and temporal – disparity and tension of the distinct visual registers implied by the use of archival/found footage that becomes significant, together with the question what kind of cinematic experience this ontological and temporal rupture provides.

Indexical archival footage embedded into feature film, as an ontological *niché*, creates a dynamic structure, induces fluctuation, inscribes a sense of difference together with a displacement of spectatorial positions. Its presence as *figuration* may serve as the locus of meditation upon time and history, it may as well open up a more profound, existential dimension, as, for instance, in Andrei Tarkovsky's *The Mirror* (*Zerkalo*, 1975), in which the sequences taken over from a war documentary – exhausted soldiers are trailing a cannon in mud and water – deepen the discourse of film and endow it with an additional metaphysical dimension, activating in the spectator the documentary consciousness in the sense Vivian Sobchack discusses the term, that is, “a particular mode of embodied and ethical spectatorship that informs and transforms the space of the unreal into the space of the real” (Sobchack 2004, 261).⁶

The use of archival/found footage can also be discussed in terms of *remediation*, in the sense Jay Bolter and David Grusin rethink the term in their volume entitled *Remediation. Understanding New Media* (2000). Differently from former conceptions of the term (that is, the process by which new media technologies improve upon or remedy prior technologies), Bolter and Grusin suggest by remediation the formal logic by which new media refashion prior media forms. In the case of the use of archival/found footage the gesture of revitalizing earlier forms of moving images is present; this revitalization can take place in the gesture of offering the earlier images as they are, without manipulating them (but also in this case the reuse itself can be considered as a subtle form of touch

6 It has to be noted here that documentary consciousness, as Vivian Sobchack puts it, goes beyond the generic distinction between fiction and documentary; the terms fiction and documentary designate subjective relations rather than cinematic objects. In *Toward a Phenomenology of Nonfictional Film Experience* she defines documentary as “less a *thing* than an *experience* – and the term names not only a cinematic object, but also the experienced ‘difference’ or ‘sufficiency’ of a specific mode of consciousness and identification with the cinematic image” (Sobchack 1999, 241, emphases in the original). In the chapter entitled *The Charge of the Real. Embodied Knowledge and Cinematic Consciousness* of her volume *Carnal Thoughts. Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* she thinks further the phenomenological model of cinematic identification, stating that “fiction and documentary, as supposedly *different* logical types as *genres*, are reducible to the *same* logical types as *cinematic images*” (Sobchack 2004, 260, emphases in the original). Thus what Sobchack calls “the charge of the real” is not particularly related to documentary as a genre, but it is the specificity of the phenomenological experience of the cinema.

and selective/authoritative intervention, activating an altered spectatorial gaze, sensitive to cultural, temporal, and medial differences) or manipulating the archival/found material with various techniques and with various purposes, including the intent of creating a fruitful dialogue with the history and identity of the cinematic medium itself.

The use of archival footage in film art can also be approached by adapting the idea of the anachronism of images to cinema: Hans Belting borrows the term and its meaning from the art historian and philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman, who by the anachronism of the images refers to the fact that the set of inner images that we dispose of have been created in an earlier stage of our life (Belting 2004). Accordingly, the intent of establishing connection with earlier motion pictures betrays the wish to explore the images that form the identity of the medium.

2. Gábor Bódy: Archival Footage and the Authenticity of Cinematic Experience

Archival material has been widely used Hungarian film history ever since the 1960s, however, it becomes a peculiar means of expression in the Béla Balázs Studio by the end of the decade, under the influence of Dezső Magyar's two films, *Agitators* (*Agitátorok*, 1969) and *Punishment Expedition* (*Büntetőexpedíció*, 1970), inspiring Gábor Bódy, Péter Tímár, Miklós Erdély, and Péter Forgács (cf. Murai 2009).

In his study examining the stylistic figurations of archival footage András Murai points out three traditions as regards the use of archival material in Hungarian film history: one is the reflective representation of the relationship between film and reality as the feature of the European modernist cinema (e.g. in Bergman's, Antonioni's, and Godard's cinematic art); the second is the attraction of Hungarian films towards historical themes, which also provides a possibility for them to formulate their critical attitude towards contemporary society; and the third is the use of archival footage or filmmaking in the spirit of/imitating archival footage as film language experiment within the creative workshop of the BBS. As opposed to the practice of films dealing with history which resort to archival material in order to display the recorded reality and irrefutable evidence of the past, in experimental films, especially in Gábor Bódy's works, archival footage does not serve as the place of memory but rather as a means of analysing the signification structure of the moving image (cf. Murai 2009).

For Gábor Bódy's experimentation with archival footage the model was provided by Dezső Magyar's *Agitators*, in which Bódy himself acted the part of one of the

protagonists (László Földes acting the role of the other) and he was also the script-writer of the film. The young agitator whose role is acted by Bódy asks the question in the heat of the party debate: *What kind of reality?* [*Miféle valóság?*] – this question will echo for long in Hungarian film history, significantly determining, together with the double-coded reflections on the dialectics of theory and practice, politics and art, revolution and counter-revolution, the evolution of the trend of experimental documentarism as well as of Bódy's career as a filmmaker.

In the disguise of the historical film dealing with a controversial episode of Hungarian history, namely the 1919 Hungarian Soviet Republic, the *Agitators* provides a profound analysis of the model of revolution at an abstract level, applicable to further examples of revolution in the twentieth century. In line with the historical theme, Dezső Magyar's film includes indexical archival material, but with a subversive stance: the ideological purport of the film is juxtaposed with figures of the "second publicity," artists and intellectuals of the end of the 1960s, and presented in such an excessive, exaggerated way that it becomes the target of its own criticism. The film material is elaborated in the style of the embedded archival material, revealing the intent of offering the film as if it had been recorded in 1919. Thus, a peculiar interaction is created between the actual film recordings and the inserted indexical archival material, undermining the grand narrative and ideological discourse of the historical past; recording the film in the style of the archival material releases a potential of creative freedom that will inseminate films to come, also including Gábor Bódy's experimenting with film language and attribution of meaning.

The remediation of found/archival footage will be central to Gábor Bódy's reflexive-analytical filmmaking and film-theoretical thinking. Moved also by the ethical responsibility of preservation, but more intensely by the film language researcher's curiosity, he turns towards the found footage as a suitable means with the help of which the very nature of the moving image can be analysed, and also as a peculiar material suitable to displace the passive, uneventful spectatorial gaze. In my paper I wish to argue that it is the very usage of found footage and fake found footage that brings Bódy's conceptualisation close to an inherent sensuous theory of the film experience.

On a careful re-reading of Bódy's theoretical writings on film, we can discover references to a hidden, underlying sensuous approach to the cinematic experience. Besides the linguistic and semiotic approaches to film in line with the leading theories of the age, there is a covert phenomenological investigation of the moving image present in Bódy's writings. In several writings of his Bódy reflects on the

return to the primeval, atavistic cinematic experience that is a complex of spectacle and sensuous experience, retaining a dose of intimacy and concrete mystery and providing the spectator with the enchantment of the unconditioned spectacle. In *Anthology and Aspects to a Film Programme* (1972, 1979) Bódy regards the emergence of sound film as directly leading to the cultural and cultic practice of the camera that hindered the self-reflective development of silent cinema and thus considerably obstructed the sensuous revelation that cinema can offer, namely “the mere joy that we feel in connection with the fact that something is simply *there*...” (Zalán 2006, 68).⁷ According to Bódy, it is the return to the pre-cultic use of the cinema that could re-activate the “unconditioned reflex” of film watching. The urge to return to the beginnings of the moving image, to the roots of the medium arises from the fact that the ideological, cultic, and commercial appropriation of the film medium contributed to the loss of the capacity of “unconditioned seeing.” The role of film art is to relieve the spectatorial gaze from the ideological layers, from the artificially created “conditioned reflexes” and to create the conditions for the viewer to perceive the moving image as “unconditioned spectacle.” In the essay entitled *Cosmic Eye* (1975) Bódy writes: “Fiction is brutal enough to ironically put itself in quotation marks. At the same time, even if in a playful manner, it urges the spectator to get rid of the ‘conditioned reflexes’ of cultural interpretation and to enter the simultaneously awakening- and requiem-like state in which the unconditioned spectacle is rooted” (Zalán 2006, 204). In the same piece of writing we can read: “When someone watches the images of the first film reel, he is shaken by the perfect objectuality of the images. These images do not impose their signification upon us, their effect is rather magical. They are impersonal, but intimate. They are the memories of the rendezvous of open spectacle and open interest. They create the impression which is also expressed in the lines of the *Archaic Torso of Apollo* by Rilke. [...] The capacity of unconditioned viewing is no longer given. To achieve it, both the viewer and the director have to proceed a way of destruction, in the course of which he becomes aware of – the exclusion of – the forms of awareness. This is a process of countdown until we reach the boundaries of language and consciousness” (Zalán 2006, 205–206). Thus the film medium, distanced from cultic registers and directed back to a medial and linguistic interest in the spirit of Avant-Garde filmmaking, becomes capable of reviving the mysterious and disquieting images of memory and imagination and of providing the authentic, embodied experience of the cinema.

7 The translations from Bódy’s texts and from Hungarian specialist literature are my own throughout the article.

Bódy's films can be regarded as alternative film-theoretical theses, formulations of film-theoretical issues in the language of film. In an inverted chronological order in the spirit of returning to the origins suggested by Bódy himself,⁸ *Private History*, directed by Gábor Bódy and Péter Tímár in 1978, is a 25-minute sound-image collage, embracing private recordings on the basis that they are less determined by the cultural-ideological conventions of the age. The time span that passed between the archival recordings and the presence of filmmaking endows the embedded images with new signification; even the previously uninteresting motifs can acquire new dimensions. The juxtaposition of the social and the private consciousness results in a productive asynchrony leading to a distinct quality of reception. Private recordings are regarded by Bódy as being exposed to the passage of time more than any other previously recorded film material. Bódy said in his notes on the film that from the point of view of archiving it was the penultimate moment. Bódy's follower, Péter Forgács probably grabbed the ultimate moment in collecting private recordings for his *Private Hungary* series, the first piece of which, interestingly, uses the same private recordings, those of Zoltán Bartos, as Bódy and Tímár's *Private History*, but with different accents and with a different poetics.

The short film entitled *Four Bagatells* (*Négy bagatell*, 1975), created in the Béla Balázs Studio, experiments with the possibilities of reinterpreting the moving image by subsequent masking of the archival material. In the first part the archival ethnographic recording is restructured by motion of the cross-hairs, guiding the spectator's attention.

In his short film entitled *After Jappe and Do Escobar Fought How Did the World Come to Fight* (*Hogyan verekedett meg Jappe és Do Escobar után a világ*, 1974), an adaptation to screen of a short story by Thomas Mann, the text of the short story that is read is juxtaposed with old TV news, film sequences and own material recorded in an archaic style. Thus the film plays upon the relationship between sound and image while the spectator gets confused about which sequence actually constitutes the archival material.

Through the visual archaisms and the deliberate act of creating (the impression of) fake found footage in his first feature film, *American Torso*, Bódy reveals his intentions as an archaeologist of images, searching for the reality of the medium beyond the time frame of cinema history.

8 We can encounter an archaeological orientation and ardent interest in the origins in Bódy's theoretical writings; in his writing entitled *Infinite Image and Reflection* he writes: "It is evident that the farther we advance in time, the closer we get to the origins with our continuously changing intellect" (Zalán 2006, 120).

3. The Fiction of Found Footage in Gábor Bódy’s *American Torso*

The damaged images of Gábor Bódy’s first feature film, *American Torso*, created in 1975, have not undergone the process of deterioration but have been intentionally created in this manner. Daringly, as the accomplishment of a task demanding proof of the creator’s directorial aptitudes, Gábor Bódy came up with a diploma work that might as well have been interpreted as a failure, Bódy offering a distorted image of what a successful cinematic production should be. His model and master, Miklós Erdély wrote about this diploma film entitled *American Torso*: “Under the ruffled surface the presence of a denied adventure film can be felt all through the film. Above the film, separated from it so to say, there floats its artistic essence, which manifests almost never during film watching, but rather in form of a painful memory full of anxiety” (Erdély 1995, 186–187). Erdély’s appreciation of the graduate director’s diploma work draws our attention to the fact that Bódy’s film resists certain generic expectations and simultaneously redirects our gaze to the “ruffled surface” of film, to the texture and materiality of motion picture, which comes to the fore in the process of making the moving images seem “older” than what they actually are. For this is what is effected through “the second gaze,” that is, in the phase of post-production: with the help of techniques of manipulating the – black-and-white – recordings such as light editing, scratching and deteriorating the images, manipulating the soundtrack, slowing down the image and the sound, masking, the use of filters, etc., the impression of erstwhile recordings is created. The method called by Bódy himself light editing or light cutting [*fényvágás*], that is, the change of sequences is carried out by burning the image instead of cutting, significantly contributes to the creation of visual archaisms, to the effect of “film find” [Figs. 3–4].

American Torso is conceived as if arising from a kind of collective subconscious or mythical pre-existence of cinema; the cinematic images it consists of assume the status of some kind of memories of the medium. Gábor Gelencsér highlights the term memory in Miklós Erdély’s appreciation quoted above: “The term ‘memory’ is suitable also as regards the film’s basic structure, as it refers to something that used to be but what no longer exists, what can only be recollected. In the context of cinematic expression this precisely outlines the specific character of the medium: on the screen we can see something past, which in its concreteness evokes exactly what no longer exists in the moment of viewing the film” (Gelencsér 2004). By connecting the acts of mediation present in memory

as well as in the film medium, the fictitious found footage, or in other words, the “fiction of documentary,” gets closest to the spirit of the cinematic medium itself.

The film itself carries out the dating of the found footage back into the pre-cinematic times. The spectator is invited to sign a pact with the director referring to the *fiction of found footage*: accordingly, the film is supposed to have been created in 1865, offering itself as an overtly “impossible documentary,” following the fate of Hungarian revolutionaries emigrating to America after the suppression of the 1848 revolution and taking part in the American Civil War. The film displays liminal situations in which human character and behaviour is tested. The protagonists, János Fiala and Ádám Vereczky embody two types of human conduct: János Fiala does service to the army as a land surveyor by making calculations of distance with the help of the theodolite, he is challenged to compromise by the American Railway Association; Ádám Vereczky becomes the legendary hero of the American Civil War due to his uncompromised behaviour, due to his *action-gratuite*, standing with legs spread and arms crossed in the heat of the battle or jumping off the huge swing. They are drawn into decisions that represent models of possible individual behaviour against the backdrop of history.

The Hungarian revolutionaries experience the drama of becoming futile; thus, Bódy chooses to represent a liminal state thematically (the drama of a historical role becoming anachronistic, in course of dissolution), culturally (Hungarians in American emigration, experiencing the loss of home and cause), linguistically (the mixed use of Hungarian and English in the course of the film), and also medially (through the inventive use of the “pre-cinematic documentary” as well as through the generic/ontological confrontation of fiction and documentary). *American Torso* allows the spectator to view it neither as documentary nor as fiction, since the conventions of feature film sporadically present in the alleged documentary undermine the above mentioned pact of found footage, in this way, both the sense of “the real” and the sense of “the cinematic” will be compromised. Thus the film extends the situation of liminality to the spectatorial position as well.

In *American Torso* Bódy works out the poetics of the non-perfect film, in line with the aesthetic principles of modernism, aiming at a distinct concept of the cinema, of arts in general. In search for the connections between literature and the fine arts in the Hungarian culture of the sixties, seventies, and eighties, Éva Forgács (1994) points at the non-normative, erroneous sign use as the common conceptual basis of these distinct fields of art. Péter Balassa writes about Péter Esterházy’s *Production Novel (Termelési Regény, 1980)* that linguistic norm breaking, the stylized deterioration of language, the consciously erroneous

language use makes the literary work be conceived in terms of texture rather than as construct. Together with other functional linguistic-stylistic inventions, such as repetition, linguistic plurality, or diverse linguistic registers, the deterioration of language creates a sense of openness and incompleteness, leading to a distinct concept of textuality (cf. Balassa quoted in Forgács 1994).

Bódy is especially interested in the damaged, deteriorated image; he adjusts the toolkit of film language to the fiction of found footage. Every erroneous recording or composition, every deteriorated form, unset focus, accidental movement of the camera (the camera, imitating the viewpoint of the theodolite, comes across the figures and events accidentally, through panning the field, or it does not record what should be recorded, it is not where the events and happenings of “grand history” are taking place), together with the burning of the film reel creating the impression of an erroneous copy, derive from the fiction of the one-time amateur filmmaker (cf. Muhi 1999).

American Torso abounds in examples of deframing. Pascal Bonitzer states that the appearance and spreading of compositional and figurative mistakes and spoiled forms in twentieth-century painting, radically altering the experience of the image, took place in fact under the impact of film: “After all, was it not cinema that invented empty shots, strange angles, bodies alluringly fragmented or shot in close-up? The fragmentation of figures is a well-known cinematic device, and there has been much analysis of the monstrosity of the close-up. Deframing is a less widespread effect, in spite of movement of the camera. But if deframing is an exemplary cinematic effect, it is precisely because of movement and the diachronic progress of the film’s images, which allow for its absorption into the film as much as for the deployment of its ‘emptiness effect’” (Bonitzer 2000, 199). Eisenstein’s, Bresson’s, Antonioni’s films prove that deframing [*décagrage*], the shifts of angles, the employment of bizarre viewpoints, the unusual settings and compositions, the mutilation of the bodies by framing are basic stylistic devices of modernist film art, which ironically overwrite the forms of expression of classical Hollywood cinema. Deframing is the deviance of framing, the revolt of form; it “is a perversion, one that adds an ironic touch to the function of cinema, painting, even photography, all of them forms of exercising the right to look” (Bonitzer 2000, 200). Bódy’s film actually displays “torsos,” mutilating the figures by “careless” framing [Figs. 5–6]. The camera use and figural (de-)composition in *American Torso* are aimed at conveying the way human sight actually works (being discontinuous, non-homogeneous, and of varied intensity), as opposed to the underlying concept of human sight (as being continuous, homogeneous, and uniform) in the traditional filmmaking practice.

The fictional found footage displaces the indexical quality of motion picture. The *that-has-been* that Roland Barthes in his *Camera Lucida* (1981 [1980]) calls the essence or *noème* of photography is profoundly challenged once the moving images *perform* the indexical role in form of *simulacra* of old images, imparting the experience of the cinema as a disquieting paradox.

Gábor Bódy's experiment sets up a paradox, not merely in the above mentioned sense that it carries out the impossible project of a film recorded in pre-cinematic times, but also in that, by creating the "unconditioned spectacle" in the course of post-production, it confronts – along Bolter and Grusin's terms – the *immediacy of experience* (the authenticity of representation) and the *hypermediacy of experience* (the mediated character of representation). The film is directly aimed at clashing the two kinds of experience (an expressive film moment in this respect is the non-identical superimposition of the cross-hairs of the theodolite and the image of the cross [Figs. 7–8]), constituting a special case of what Ágnes Pethő calls the paradox of the "hypermediated cinematic experiences of the real" (2009, 47).⁹

The apparently amateur film recording "the real" is in fact a collage of heterogeneous audio-visual material, relying on diverse literary sources such as the short story entitled *George Thurston* by Ambrose Bierce, nineteenth-century memoirs by János Fiala, László Árvay, and Gyula Kuné, a quote by Karl Marx, László Teleki's letters, Walt Whitman's and Sándor Csoóri's poems; the soundtrack also displays similar hybridity and heterogeneity, containing, besides the presence of acousmatic sounds (in its turn a collage of sounds of birds/nature and weapons/war), also a collage of distorted (slowed down) classical music (Franz Liszt) and folk music (Ferenc Sebő). The collage of sound and image as well as the mixed multilingual character of the film (the employment of both Hungarian and English native speaker actors, dialogues both in Hungarian and English) result in the uniquely multilayered, hybrid entity of Bódy's poetic experiment.

"*What do you see?*" – János Fiala's emphatic question, together with the presence of the observing theodolite throughout the film, points at the fact that seeing, observing, the incorporation of the observer into the cinematic medium become central issues of Bódy's work [Figs. 9–10].¹⁰ However, there is a paradox

9 In her study *(Re)Mediating the Real. Paradoxes of an Intermedial Cinema of Immediacy* Ágnes Pethő discusses types and cases when the cinematic image simultaneously triggers both the immediacy and hypermediacy of experience and points at the ways "the most transparent techniques can also end up as remediations" (2009, 47).

10 In my view, the return to the pre-cinematic age through the fiction of found footage connects Bódy's interest in the gaze, in the relationship between the gaze and the medium, to the paradigm shift taking place in the nineteenth century from classical optics to the making of the observer: "The notion of a modernist visual revolution

lying at the heart of Bódy’s cinema: his concept of the cinematic medium strongly relies, on the one hand, on the enchantment of the gaze, on “the pathos of the eye” that can be traced back to the Vertovian legacy; on the other hand, there is a covert metadiscursive thread present in his works aimed at deconstructing the supremacy of the visual, of the eye as the sensory organ privileged in the course of the separation of the senses and the industrial remapping of the body taking place in the nineteenth century (Crary 1992). This paradox manifests in *American Torso* in foregrounding the gaze and techniques of the observer appearing side by side with the display of decayed images, with the touch of the skin of film.

By allowing the perception of the image’s texture and materiality through the (camera imitating the) lens of the theodolite, the spectatorial gaze is simultaneously invited into the depth of the moving image and stopped at its surface; thus, the film ingenuously unifies the domains of optical and haptic visuality. The film rearranges the conditions of spectatorial participation and identification by redirecting the gaze to the “ruffled surface” of the moving image, welcoming haptic visuality: “[...] an image that is grainy, indistinct, or dispersed over the surface of the skin invites a haptic look, or a look that uses the eye like an organ of touch. This is how *love* works into this sort of identification. A tactile look does not rely on a separation between looker and object as a more optical or cognitive look does. [...] This sort of look, then, is not just about death, but about loving a living but noncoherent subject, an image that contains the memory of a more complete self” (Marks 2002, 105).

In the process of redirecting the gaze to the reality of the medium, the moving image becomes a writable surface, welcoming the film director as a land surveyor, a cartographer of the cinematic medium [Figs. 11–12]. Ultimately, Bódy’s “torso” experiment, compromising the idea of the wholeness and integrity of the images, calls forth an embodied perception of the cinema.

Conclusions

By now, the experimental endeavours of the 1970s and 1980s have become themselves archival documents of the cinema preceding the digital era, transmitting a sense of mythical origins for today’s altered media culture. Gábor Bódy’s work, labelled as a “torso,” has become the legendary non-perfect film of Hungarian cinema history. Interestingly, the experimentation with the

depends on the presence of a subject with a detached viewpoint from which modernism – whether as style, as cultural resistance, or as ideological practice – can be isolated against the background of a normative vision” (Crary 1992, 4–5).

cinematic imaginary, the exploration of the non-existent archives of Hungarian historical consciousness, manifests as the confrontation of the medium with its subconscious, while a decade later, overseas experimentations with actual found footages, as present in Ken Jacobs' experimental filmmaking practice, will be labelled as downright the *Perfect Film*, suggesting a distinct approach to the role found footage may fulfil in cinematic experience.¹¹

Through the poetics of fake found footage formulated in *American Torso* Gábor Bódy challenges (film-)historical consciousness, pointing at the unreflected ways in which mainstream historical films create – under the slogan of authentic representations of reality/history – totally inauthentic fictitious narratives. As Klára Muhi writes about the film: “It is evident that behind all destructive gestures and generic denials of the *Torso* there is the fight for the authenticity of the image. This unique experiment in an otherwise not too fruitful moment of film history can be connected to Bódy's ambition to release film from under the rule of genres, of image recording confined into rigid clichés, as well as of the destructive daily practice of ‘faceless, industrial’ filmmaking” (Muhi 1999). Thus the archaeological intent present in Bódy's experiment resists the obligatory representational modes of “official history” and reveals a more intimate relationship with both historical past and the history of the cinematic medium itself. By evoking the virtual images of the past or time-images in the Deleuzian sense of the term, the film reorders our sense of the past by reconfiguring the sense of presence of the medium.

Besides the historical consciousness that *American Torso* appeals to, the film also urges us to rearrange our expectations and perceptual modes, to accept the invitation that Laura U. Marks formulates as “thinking like a carpet,”¹² that is, the activation of a kind of non-figurative consciousness that can be described by giving up searching for figures, narration, and the wholeness of the image and sensing the texture, the fabric of the film, surrendering to lack of perfection, incompleteness, distortion, and disappearance. It is in this way, by activating non-figurative consciousness, that film becomes capable of telling our own story, our own disappearance.

11 See Ken Jacobs's *Perfect Film* (1985), a film actually composed of found film reels, about which Tom Gunning (2009) says: “In uncovering meanings that were never intended to be revealed, Jacobs enters an uncanny dimension of the cinema akin to psychoanalysis.”

12 “Thus our bodies can indeed respond to non-figurative works, like carpets with shock and a feeling of coming undone. We may feel ourselves being rearranged, becoming less molar and more molecular; we may feel ourselves as masses of living points that connect to the entire universe. We may find ourselves thinking like a carpet” (Marks 2013, 19).

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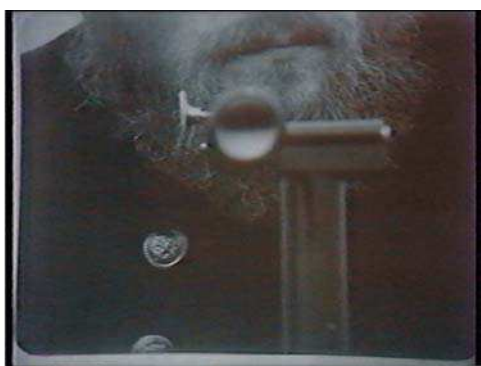
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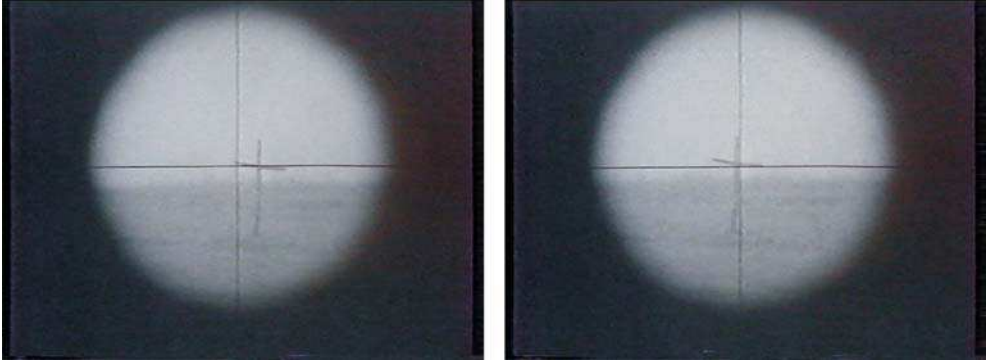
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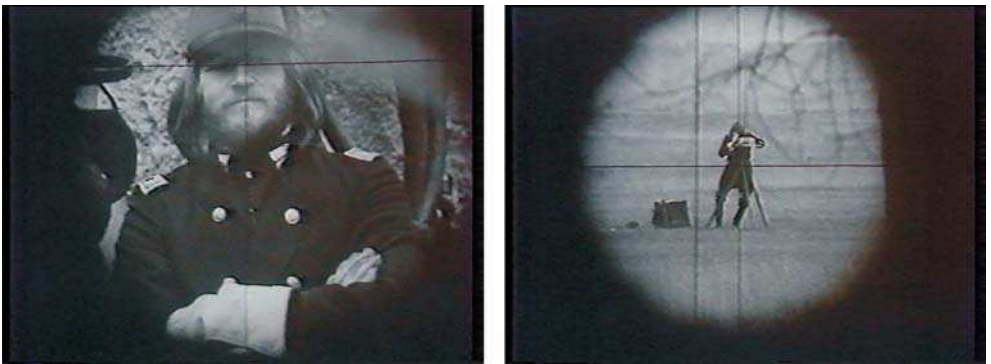
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