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Archiving on the Screen –
Hungarian Documentary Films During Socialism

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My project at the OSA aimed to explore the creative use of archival materials and found footage in Hungarian documentary films during socialism. Over this research period I was focusing on the start and development of this filmmaking tradition roughly from the 1960s till the late 1980s. Initially, I aimed to study how historical documentary film adopts particular methods to negotiate and reconstitute the past through which contemporary agendas are forged for national narratives. Soon, however, I recognised the methodological limitations and contextual insufficiency of this approach. Instead, I redirected my attention towards considering the dialogues between historical preservation and appropriation in filmmaking, informed and shaped by the politico-economic context.

This research sits at the intersection of documentary studies and cultural history while centralising archives' role. My process at the OSA covered three phases: finding documentary films that reuse archives, identifying the pre-existing materials and footage that they rely on, and learning about the context of their production and reception. Documentary films that interact with pre-existing audio-visual sources from the past are often referred to with various terms that carry specific connotations.¹ As clear-cut categorisations are redundant, I instead rely on Catherine Russell's term "archiveology" that refers to these films not as a genre of filmmaking but as a cultural practice.² According to Russell, the archive is no longer a place of storage and preservation but "a mode of transmission" that influences cultural history's display and perception.³ Nine films, out of which one is fiction, proved to be relevant from the OSA audio-visual catalogue for this project (*Agitators*, *Private History*, *Magyar Stories*, *Atonement*, *Martial Law*, *Private Episodes from the Life of Professor F.M. Portrait film of Ferenc Merei*, *Private Hungary 1*, *2*, *3*). Thanks to the Pál Schiffer's collection (HU OSA 356-

¹ Most commonly, this type of documentary cinema is identified with an umbrella term found footage film. However, other common names include compilation film, collage film, essay film, and appropriation film. These classifications often depend on the type of pre-existing materials used and the filmmakers' methods of interaction with them. Further discussion in: Williams C. Wees, *Recycled Images: The Art and Politics of Found Footage Films* (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1993) 32-45.; Jaimie Baron, *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History* (London; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014).

² Catherine Russell, *Archiveology: Walter Benjamin and Archival Film Practices* (Duke University Press, 2018)

³ *Ibid.*, 2.

2), I was able to detect other retrospective documentaries that I accessed through the Balázs Béla Stúdió (BBS) Archive. After watching numerous films made in his period, I now consider approximately thirty that fit this study's aim and fourteen more that need to be located or watched. In these documentaries the recycled archive becomes a medium for memory, a social practice that preserves, constructs and challenges historical narratives through the filmmakers' interaction with it.⁴

While there has been critical work on individual documentary films from this period, both on their artistic as well as historical value, there is a notable absence of work on the archiving process inherent to this filmmaking tradition.⁵ Thus, instead of analysing the films' aesthetic qualities, I aimed to get a sense of how complex processes of collecting, preserving, and remediating audio-visual heritage happen through these films. My preliminary findings are that three distinct trends can be detected during this period. Firstly, experimentation with diverse visual media not only questioned the boundaries of film and reality but also aspired to find new, non-traditional forms of expression. These films were mainly produced by filmmakers of the "K/3" subgroup operating in the BBS led by Bódy and used pre-existing materials to reveal and analyse the effect of motion picture. They maintained a binary between amateur films as "pure" and other footage as "constructed and deceitful" controlled by ideologies (HU OSA 356-2-2). Secondly, exhumation of "private histories" showcased by Péter Forgács's mammoth oeuvre commenced during this period and was inspired by the above-mentioned group's work. Forgács's *Private Hungary* series, starting at the BBS in the 1980s, however, takes a more

⁴ Scholarship that considers the archive's function beyond its evidentiary authority as mutable and context-dependent in documentary films: Paul Arthur, "The Status of Found Footage." *Spectator* 20.1 (2000): 57–69.; Dagmar Brunow, *Remediating Transcultural Memory: Documentary Filmmaking as Archival Intervention* (Berlin, München, Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2015).; Stella Bruzzi, "The Event: Archive and Imagination," in Alan Rosenthal and John Corner (ed), *New Challenges for Documentary* (Manchester University Press, 2005) 419-431.; Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann, "Three Dimensions of Archive Footage: Researching Archive Films from the Holocaust." *Ghetto Films and their Afterlife* (ed. by Natascha Drubek) *Special Double Issue of Apparatus. Film, Media and Digital Cultures in Central and Eastern Europe* 2-3. Amit Pinchevski, "Archive, Media, Trauma." In: Neiger M., Meyers O., Zandberg E. (eds) *On Media Memory* (Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2011) 253-264.; Linda Williams, "Mirrors without Memories: Truth, History, and the New Documentary," *Film Quarterly* 46.3 (1993): 9-21.

⁵ Anna Kádár, "Körberajzolni a tűz árnyékát". Újrafelhasznált felvételek a Balázs Béla Stúdió 1968–1979 között készült filmjeiben [To draw the shadow of fire. Repurposed footage in the Béla Balázs Studio films from 1968 to 1979] (Budapest: Osiris, 2010).; Klára Muhi, "A talált képek vonzásában. Archivok a magyar filmben," [In the radiance of found footage. Archives in Hungarian Films] *Metropolis* (1999). <http://www.metropolis.org.hu/atalalt-kepek-vonzasaban>. András Murai, Emlék-nyom-követés. Az archív felvételek stílusalakzatai. [Following memory tracks. The archival footage's stylistic features] *BBS 50. A Balázs Béla Stúdió 50 éve*, ed. Gelencsér Gábor (Budapest: Műcsarnok, Balázs Béla Stúdió, 2009), 115–127. Bill Nichols and Michael Renov (ed.), *Cinema's Alchemist The Films of Péter Forgács* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011). Judit Pieldner, "Archival Recordings as Medial Figurations in Gábor Bódy's and András Jeles's Films" *Hungarológiai Közlemények* 16.3 (2015).

didactic approach at first. He uses amateur films to show how the private sphere meets history working as a cultural anthropologist through documentary cinema. Lastly, a third tendency emerged similarly towards the 1980s, which beyond visual materials, used newspaper clippings and official documents to confront the lies of the current system. These investigative documentaries regard the archive conventionally and use it as evidence to support testimonies in the film (HU OSA 356-1-9; HU OSA 356-2-4). These three trends' approach and remediation of the archive defies the notion of "a stable, objective truth about the past," it represents a possibility rather than rigidity and exposes documentary cinema's inherent quality of appropriation.⁶ These films are worthwhile to study further as once they move beyond the indexicality of previously shot films and images, they redefine these materials and put forward new interpretations, circulations, and meanings for the audio-visual heritage that plays a crucial role in remembering and its limitations.

Locating the reused audio-visual materials proved to be the most efficient with the Privát Fotó és Film Alapítvány (HU OSA 320) held at the OSA. Although the vast home movie collection was impossible to go through in its entirety (HU OSA 320-1-2), I focused on a particular pile, that of Zoltán Bartos' amateur films. It allowed me to see the raw footage that Gábor Bódy and Péter Tímár as well as Péter Forgács remixed in their documentaries and get a first-hand experience with an amateur film archive with diverse materials. Though the collection is confusing, what I found most useful was the written aid containing a short description of the home movies, details about the authors and camera used, and keywords (HU OSA 320-1-1). Moreover, the interviews with the amateur filmmakers and their families (HU OSA 320-1-3) have been a revelatory resource for learning about the contextual background overall offering an engaged practice with the collection.⁷ As these archival images are not merely a private record of the past but also part of a system that determines their access and visibility, I was missing further materials explaining such a unique collection – the acquisition, storage, and digitalisation of private reels. I was hoping to find documentation that would enlighten this film collection's origins and working procedure – a research perspective I aim to endeavour in the future.

⁶ Jaimie Baron, *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History* (London; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014) 16.

⁷ Russell, *Archiveology*, 2.

To find out more about individual directors and the extra-textual aspects of these films, I heavily relied on Pál Schiffer's collection (HU OSA 356-2). Schiffer's documentation of his films dealing with happenings of 1956 in Salgótarján revealed to me the research process – the collection of testimonies as well as official documents – crucial for the filmmaker (HU OSA 356-1-9). However, only a few of these materials made it on the screen in the end. This underlined my understandings of the investigative documentaries' emphasis on individual testimonies where archival materials occupy merely a secondary, illustrative role. Files about Schiffer's documentary films produced in the Híradó és Dokumentumfilm Stúdió included a list of archival footage used as well as a budget, which was useful to study, yet it did not reflect on the interaction with history creatively (HU OSA 356-1-1). Thus, I was particularly interested in documents about the BBS, which since 1959 was a creative hub not bound by exhibition obligation yet incredibly influential in experimenting with visual media and revolutionising Hungarian film culture (HU OSA 356-2-2). The various film programs, festival booklets, and internal administrative files gave me detailed insights into the studio's operation, however, they did not discuss the acquisition of archival materials nor the significance of their recycling. About directors who, unlike Forgács, are not only associated with found footage, there is little information available about their creative process of working with pre-existing sources (HU OSA 300). Overall, these documents (in)ability to map out the broader context of these films proved revelatory and gave me new directions to pursue in studying an under-documented issue.

I want to express my deepest gratitude for the Visegrad Scholarship at the OSA thanks to which I got to experience an exceptionally transformative two months helping me refine my PhD research. I especially want to thank Oksana Sarkisova for her thought-provoking suggestions and support. I am also grateful for the insightful discussions with Ioana Macrea-Toma and Zsuzsa Zádori. Overall, this research could not happen without the incredibly helpful OSA staff, who, despite the pandemic situation, were always ready to assist me in finding and accessing the vast collection. While this research is at a preliminary stage, I hope it stresses the continued role of historical materials in creative media, namely how archival remixing illuminates connected and far-reaching issues of history and memory in relation to authoritarian regimes. I plan on returning to OSA in the near future and discover more interlinkages within this diverse holdings.

Archival Material Consulted during Research Stay

Films:

FL Record 0413 *Private History* (Gábor Bódy, 1978)
FL Record 0164 *American Torso* (Gábor Bódy, 1975)
FL Record 1507 *Agitators* (Dezső Magyar, 1969)
FL Record 1551a *The Resolution* (Judit Ember and Gyula Gazdag 1972)
FL Record 1613 *Magyar Stories* (Pál Schiffer, Bálint Magyar, 1987)
FL Record 1615 *Atonement* (Pál Schiffer, 1989)
FL Record 1632 *Martial Law* (András Sipos, 1989)
FL Record 1551b *The Selection* (Gyula Gazdag, 1970)
FL Record 1418 *Montage* (András Jeles, 1974)
FL Record 1100 *Version* (Miklós Erdély, 1979)
FL Record 0802 *Package-Tour* (Gyula Gazdag, 1984)
HU OSA 305-0-2_003-001 *Plot #301* (Márta Elbert, 1988)
HU OSA 305-0-2_005-001 *New Hungarian Lament* (Judit Ember, 1989)
HU_OSA_00010096 *Visit at Ernő Nagy's* (1989)
HU OSA 13-3-1-569 *Bartos Family/ Private Hungary 1* (Péter Forgács, 1988)
HU OSA 320-1-4_002 *Dusi & Jenő/ Private Hungary 2* (Péter Forgács, 1989)
HU OSA 320-1-4_003 *Either-Or/ Private Hungary 3* (Péter Forgács, 1989)
HU OSA 320-1-4_23 *Episodes from the Life of Professor F.M. Portrait film of Ferenc Merei* (Péter Forgács, 1987)

HU OSA 320 Photographs and Home Movie Collection of Privát Fotó és Film Alapítvány

Hungarian Home Movie Collection

HU OSA 320-1-1 Original finding aid to the home movies: Box 1
HU OSA 320-1-2 Hungarian Home Movies
HU OSA 320-1-3 Interviews with Home Movie Makers and Their Families
HU OSA 320-1-4 Art documentaries of Peter Forgacs

HU OSA 356 Pál Schiffer Personal Papers

Saját filmjeinek dokumentációja

HU OSA 356-1-1 A Híradó és Dokumentumfilm Stúdióban készült filmek: Box 1, 2
HU OSA 356-1-2 Televíziós és rádiós rendezések: Box 2
HU OSA 356-1-9 Salgótarján 1956: Box 1, 2

Filmes közéletben betöltött szerepének dokumentációja

HU OSA 356-2-1 Filmforgalmazás: Box 1, 2
HU OSA 356-2-2 Balázs Béla Stúdió: Box 1
HU OSA 356-2-3 Közéleti tevékenység: Box 1-4
HU OSA 356-2-4 Mások forgatókönyvei: Box 1,2
HU OSA 356-2-5 Mások filmtörténeti, filmelméleti írásai: Box 1
HU OSA 356-2-9 Filmklubszövetség: Box 1
HU OSA 356-2-10 Egyéb dokumentumok: Box 1
HU OSA 356-2-11 Kiadványok: Box 1

HU OSA 300 Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute Hungarian Unit

HU OSA 300-40-5 Biographical Files: Box 23, 40, 50, 178, 185, 195

HU OSA 300-40-6 Biographical Card Files: Box 7, 11, 25

HU OSA 300-40-7 Biographical Card Files of Political Convicts: Box 1

HU OSA 335 Mária Heller Research Documentation

Annotations of Intellectual Debates and Datasheets of Researchers

HU OSA 335-0-1: Box 5, 8

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