On the re-emergence of motion and innovations in the Gábor Bády’s intermedia experiments

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Abstract
The article explores the main cases of Hungarian neo-avant-garde cinema in terms of re-emergence of visual material and the introduction of electronic innovations resulting in the transformation of reality. Among the research conducted in Béla Balázs Studio based on reframing the perception limits in the 1960s and the 1970s, the most innovative were Gábor Bády’s intermedia experiments. Along with launching K/3 subgroup within BBS, Bády directed its objectives to reduce the material derived from reality and to visually intervene into media image electronically transforming the landscape of his films. Innovatively adapting the Sándor Weöres’s verse, the film Narcissus and Psyche (1983) aimed at using hyper-real aesthetics to reframe the film reality. Starting from 1980, Bády founded an international magazine Infermental to disseminate the advent of the video and electronics by creating a community drew on sharing news about emerging media image.

Keywords: visual language; neo-avant-garde; Balázs Béla Studio; abject; intermedia

In his essay on the poetics of experimental and documentary cinema in the 1970s, Lóránt Stóhr claims that the specific features of these experiments focused on the transformation of reality from different angles and began a new phase of visual research pioneering in the human sciences.1 These years of Kádár-Era Hungary were marked by the re-emergence of the hybrid forms of Hungarian neo-avant-garde cinema. The entire period framing the “Kádár regime” encompassed 33 years, between 1956 and 1989, although these three decades ceased to form one coherent period, as the boundary context marks the years 1958 as a “Kádárite consolidation” tied with his version of state socialism and 1973 as a suspension of economic reform. As John Cunningham argued, “after 1948 any avant-garde or even mildly experimental work was viewed with suspicion or vilified as bourgeois and decadent, and if any such work was carried out it was kept quiet.”2 Despite political setbacks, during the post-56 era, it started to emerge as an experimental neo-avant-garde, particularly at the Béla Balázs Studio (BBS) devoted to the exploration of image and visual language in multifarious manners. BBS was particularly the source of experimental films in Hungary, providing facilities and discursive space not only to most artists but also for publishing videocassette

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magazines such as Black Box and Infermental. From the outset of 1970s, the artists created their own line of production of independent films reaching for the new solutions of image investigation. In particular, the front line of neo-avant-garde experimentalism was aligned with launching Film Language Series (1972–1975) highly preoccupied with semiotics. Along with the foundation of K/3 Studio at the BBS, notable concepts and works combining theory with practice were created. This combination of theory and practice particularly motivated Dora Maurer’s idea of consistent structuralism in Relative Vibrations (1972) and Triolo (1970); Janos Toth’s inimitable technique, studies, and private wealth in Study I (1974) and Study II (1975); Agnes Hay’s plasticine BBS animation in Gyrurma (1972) and Üldözés (1975); or Gábor Bódy’s wide range of visual works. The complement of this part of the neo-avant-garde was films made by artists usually dealing with other arts. Among them, it is worth mentioning the works prepared in the BBS such as Self Fashion Show (1976) by Tibor Hajas taking the subject of passersby in the streets of Budapest or Dream Reconstruction (1977) by Miklós Erdély’s examining perceptual relations between real-life, dreams, and the cinema. Thereby, BBS from the 1970s seemed to blur the boundaries between the genres of film, media, and art paving the way for new experiments in the area of intersections of media image.

The most innovative and prolific among these prominent figures of these years seemed to be Gábor Bódy, who in 1971 joined the prestigious BBS that was devoted to the formal aspects of visual sphere already established in 1958. Bódy was born in 1946 in Budapest. Initially, he studied philosophy and history from 1964 to 1971 (he gained a diploma in philosophy in 1972) at the University of Budapest; after this, his life became completely overwhelmed by the arts of moving images. He studied from 1971 to 1975 at the Theater and Film Academy and has directed plays—his most famous being Hamlet (1981). During this period, he was an actor, wrote screenplays, and worked as a cameraman with other Hungarian artists such as Tibor Hajas and Miklós Erdély. His theoretical texts have become quite influential in Hungary. In 1981, he started to teach aesthetics at the universities in Budapest and Szeged. He received a DAAD grant in 1982 for teaching as an instructor at the DFFB in Berlin from 1982 to 1983. In 1985, Bódy died under unexplained circumstances, which remains a mystery to this day.

Referring to the origins of the outlined topic, after the main reorganization of the studio in 1960, the program of the studio seemed to be unprecedented in Europe. One of the reasons for the uniqueness of the BBS was the fact that independent filmmakers could accept or reject the subject of the proposed production, whereas the director was not entitled to take remuneration because the budget was at his disposal only for directing the film. Unlike the dominant “engaged” cinema focused on the political and social topics, politically involved cinema identified with the works of Zoltán Fábry, István Gaál, Miklós Jancsó, András Kovács, Károly Makk, and István Szabó had already gained international acclaim. The new generation of experimental artists selected the use of various heterogenic materials as a starting point of their experiments. The experimental filmmakers were focused on the exploration of the image realm of the form itself. Along with the foundation of BBS, composed of members from the world of fine arts, music, and film, a space has been created for students to perform experiments, try out new ideas, and explore innovative techniques and new modes of filmmaking. In particular, BBS has been focused on the preparation of sociological documentaries drawing on shooting practice into the research of reality. Conversely, it has been organized to help develop the young generation and open up new opportunities for them. This experimental institution composed of graduates of the Academy of Theatre and Film and Philosophy and was partly supported by the Ministry of Film. Therefore, in 1972–1975, the studio could have focused on exploring the relation between film language and linguistics within the framework of “Film Language Series.” István Nemskürti argued that this group aimed to produce films that served as a prism through which the filmmakers expressed their views on the world in which they lived and worked. By arguing to abandon the common “topo-chronological system of narrative,” Gábor Bódy’s circle was highly preoccupied with various forms of serialism as a form that could reflect new modes of narrative. Among numerous theoretical concepts drawn from the idea of correspondances des arts, the most
challenging seemed to be the theory of aleatory accident based on the underlying premises of serialism. By working across disciplines such as visual arts and linguistics, Bódy’s research was immersed in the theory of chance based on “the idea of aleatory dodecaphonic language of the film movement.” In other words, the theory of chance was considered to be an indispensable element of every filmic and electronic intervention into narrative modes.

This predilection to the examination of medium reflects some parallels with other European intermedia pioneers from the end of the 1960s and at the beginning of the 1970s. This time of transition characterizes the experimental period of Jean-Luc Godard who was working with Jean-Paul Gorin within the Dziga Vertov Group (1968–1972) and with Anne-Marie Miéville within the Sonimage project (1973–1979). The main aim in both projects was to explore the nature and various interconnections between a moving image and the static photography, raising the issue of the status of the medium itself. In parallel, it has been established in Lodz peculiar in Central Europe and unique in Poland progressive Workshop of Film Form (Warsztat Formy Filmowej, 1970–1977). The main representatives and founders were Wojciech Bruszewski, Paweł Kwiek, Józef Robakowski, Andrzej Różycki, Zbigniew Rybczyński, Ryszard Wasło. The main purpose of this group was to concentrate on the analytical approach to the audiovisual film form investigating it in terms of a wide range of issues such as construction of space, time, and plasticity and the reference to reality. Gábor Bódy was probably the most close to the Polish group, with whom he shared parallel structural—analytical interests and was a friend of Józef Robakowski and Małgorzata Potocka. Likewise, Godard and the Workshop of Film Form, Bódy’s works, took a place between cinema and contemporary art, and shared the similar ideas of independent production and its autonomy, placing cinema as well as the predilection to self-reflexivity of medium to explore the relation between the image and the viewer.

**INNOVATIONS WITHIN K/3**

The result of founding the separate section K/3 group in 1973 within BBS was the creation of the platform for experiments that reshaped the post-war Hungarian avant-garde film’s path. The main purpose of this research was to impose a specific point of view on the reality and to intervene and affectively modify the life of the public. As Miklós Péternak points out, “K/3 was established with the ambition of becoming a Bauhaus-like center for research in the audiovisual area.” From the outset, the K/3 subgroup was established as a Complex of Cultural Research, including Miklós Erdély, Zoltán Jeney, Dória Maurer, László Vidovszky, Endre Tót, Tamás Szentjób, and Ákos Birkás who were focused on the exploration of intersections between cinema language and signification. As Lórád Stohr argues, the proposed reflections on reality sought to recapture the motion and to unveil the essential characteristics of reality, thereby discovering the viewer himself. The second purpose of the cluster was to emphasize the importance of distribution of documentaries to reach out to a wider audience of the public, thereby arousing interest in a particular social problem, stimulating discussion and mutual reflections. In light of the basic assumptions of the group, the ontological purpose of the documentary was not to reflect the reality itself, but to present a moving image as the complex object of transformation relying upon the “reduction of material derived from reality.” This form of “miniaturized film factory” was intended to complete the specific function of public education and to serve as the open space for the freedom of experiment. The reasons for these feelings were manifold. One example of formally exploring the freedom to experiment was the desire to present from different angles of various stages of dance in the documentary *Four Bagatelles* (1975). This movie has applied paradoxical strategy of incrustation of an image based on an increasing alternation of internal frames within the frame exceeding semantic conventions and overlapping narrative sequences. Merging the image from various perspectives brought about blurring of the borderline of filmic reference and questioned the formal aspects of pictorial tradition.

**COMPUTER AND MOTION**

Drawing on the use of formal techniques, the strategy of a re-emergent image evolved progressively from the first use of computer film in Hungary. Previous work experience at the Hungarian television and film school enabled Gábor
Body to create the specific model of intermedia motion in *Psychokosmen* (1976). These ideas were strictly generated by computer algorithm, as the psychotechnical form of the script, which represented documentary stages of motion based on the continuous quoting of one excerpt *Cosmic eyes*. The main reason of this fragmentary quoting was the fact that BBS had submitted a screenplay (1975) for this film that was ultimately filmed but not completed. Therefore, the signals transmitted by the computer simulator produced images harmonizing with certain parameters. The specific idea of screenwriting drew on the assumption that radio, as a device joining continuous signals, has the ability to locate it within one source and place. As Patérnak argued, the experiment has shown that a man is unable to draw random lines in a spontaneous way. Devoting to draw them for a substantial period of time, the “Kostruction” was based on forming and conducting experiments in 15–20 steps. Specifically, the algorithm produced “continuous, irregular lines” dispelling “the construction of many correct versions,” which have become “the error in limiting case of random.” Used in this experiment, a fortuitous movement played the role of a trigger looking “much more real” and enforcing “rules with human effort.” Therefore, an inadvertent movement stimulated the “moving diagram depicting the tensions of a psychic space” in which the quality of elements was variable. What characterized the main strategy of this movement used in the diagrams was emphasizing the “significance of spatial arrangement.”

It should be noted that his approach to recurrent experimentalism was marked by the experimental transition to his first full-length film *Amerikai Anzix* (*American Postcard, 1976*) based on the use of the formal solutions already applied in his short films. In this movie, Bödy used strategies such as “various acoustic and visual postproduction techniques dissecting his images into elements.” By reconstructing historical settings, the film depicted a search for *American Dream*, particularly recapturing the lives of Hungarian 1848 Revolution veterans in the American Civil War based on a method marked as “light editing,” which alluded to the silent film. In a similar manner, Bödy was preoccupied with historical research in the documentary *Private History* (*Priva´tt o¨rte´nelem, 1978*) in which he selected a compilation of sequences collected and derived from home movies from the inter-war period. Drawing on amateur movies derived from the original context of personal recordings, Bödy focused on the specific techniques of blow-ups and inserts using freeze-framing, slow-motion repetitions, and screen splitting. Unlike André Bazin’s theory of mummification of images, these techniques followed the years that have re-emerged on the screen and revealed the desired fiction as the flipside of an image projected for the audience.

**LANDSCAPES OF ABJECT AND TRANSGRESSION**

The crucial characteristics of his most well-known feature film was a theme of migration embedded in the context of poetics of openness drawn on Sándor Wéröes’s verse drama in his largest scale epic fiction of its era *Narcisz és Psyché* (1980). A gigantic production budget embraced a course of a historical period presented in richly designed décors and costumes starring Patricia Adriani, Udo Kier, and György Cserhalmi, whereas the main characters such as Laci Toth and Érszebet Lonyai represented Psyche and Narcissus. This national super-production has been distributed in three different versions: one circulating as an original lasting 210 min, a two-part version devoted to foreign screenings with the first part running 136 min and the second 270 min, and a three-part television version described by the commentators as an “escalating intervention.” By taking the theme of transnational migration, the movie was abounded in the “baroque fireworks of associations,” which oscillated “between a high degree of stylization and the conscious use of ‘kitsch’, uplifted by the use of ironic quotation or electronically transformed music.” The most striking effect of these transformations was the so-called bio-radicalism, a term introduced by Gábor Bachman that spanned various expressive representations of embodiment. Namely, a woman personifying Psyché played the role of a decadent figure that was eager to often play with social taboos. It represented a particular lifestyle and a search for the escape from boredom through the pleasure of sexual relationships. This woman figure could be considered by Julia Kristeva as a symptom of “absurdity, stupidity, violence, sorrow, moral and physical degeneracy,” which are interpreted
by her as the form “formal fashion, in that interspace between abjection and fascination.”

Standing for a symptom of decadency, this particular lifestyle identified with Psyché “tackled with fascination if not with a certain amount of sympathy, that we are presented with a wild, obscene, and threatening […] an image of downfall, abject poverty.” The most frightening among several explicit scenes was one that illustrated the operation of the removal of a polyp from the body of the main figure Psyché. The polyp removal operation can be interpreted as a figure of abject as negation and its three modalities: transgression, denial, and repudiation of the viewer. The red polyp stands for a violent, repulsive object considered by Kristeva as a “symptom of ego that, overtaxed by a ‘bad object’, turns away from it, cleanses itself, and vomits it.”

This repulsive object presented in the form of the polyp can be defined as “one of those violent, obscure revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside.” The rejection of an obscene polyp manifests itself in “corporeal waste, menstrual blood and excrement, or everything that is assimilated to them, […] represent-like metaphor that would have become incarnate—the objective frailty of symbolic order.” Symptomatic fixation of the camera in the long-lasting close-up on the bloody red polyp in the foreground stands for “a sign of ‘jouissance’ unveiling in this new light that what was already repressed.” Setting the camera on one single object in this long-lasting freeze-frame tended to exceed the “symbolic order.” Kristeva particularly argued that this form of transgression is “assured as soon as there are images which secure unfailing belief, for belief is in itself the image: both arise out of the same procedures and through the same terms: memory, sight, and love.” The fixation of the camera resulted in these triple modalities: transgression, denial, and repudiation of the viewer.

Kristeva argued that the long-lasting representation of the polyp seemed to reflect the “pathology that was in danger of being restricted to its aesthetic mode.” In this view, the subject seeks to save this idealization from the tyranny of the symbolic, in which ideals are shaped.” The vision of bloody polyp is characterized by tyranny of symbol, which Kristeva describes as a “celebration of the semiotic to abjection and back to a (now paternal) ideal the instability of fantasy itself.” In Kristevian terms, the dead polyp could be considered as the death of the sign as well as the death of idealization in our culture. The symbolic meaning of this transgressive scene reflects Christopher Lash’s claim, according to which “death precipitates an abolition of psychic space and let the abjection to reign.”

However, the purification of the polyp brought about that Psyché recovered and subsequently decided to leave the country. In the face of the threat of outbreak of World War I, after the return to Silesian, she traveled with nobleman Zedlitz to Brazil and subsequently decided to emigrate to the United States. By traveling in the waves of emigration, Psyché confirmed Kristevian’s claim, according to which “Imaginary such as crossing national boundaries can serve as” antidote to the crisis. As Péter György pointed out, Narcissus and Psyche (1981) was a fruit of “a very forceful reaction to both the legacy of abstract, insensible Conceptualism and the sad moral vacuum of everyday of Hungarian life.” The carnivalesque ambience of ambivalent love stemmed from the conceptual vision designed by István Hildebrad. The scenery was enriched with “filters and screen, lamps and specially polished with colored lenses” advocating the advent of an electronic era. Particularly, Gábor Bachman prepared the pre-stylization of a film in the settings of surrealist scenery. The vibrant colors rendered the “New Sensibility” of the era and represented the break with traditional storytelling in an extremely radical way. Unlike the artistic strategies used within the realistic paradigm, the “engaged” modern representation of socialist life was based on the use of a wide array of such complex embellishments. Specific modification of image reality designed in the scene of a couple having love fixed in stop-motion caused blurring the relation between signifié and significan. A conceptual shift in hybrid deformation of documented phases of motion seems to be...
observable in complex exposure of gathering objects of performances, which occurred in the final scene in the Palace. Namely, the scene of human figures forming together the composition of various geometrical axes was continued by the denudation of the whole public. An eccentric landscape of these acts of “openness” can be considered in Giorgio Agamben’s terms as a “ruthless denudation of the body with all the signs of its sexuality, which become visible for the eyes that had now been ‘opened’ by sin, can only be understood if we presuppose that what was ‘covered’, that what was before veiled and dressed is now unveiled and undressed.”

Unexpected climax of the visual sphere played the role of a dominant moral vacuum in socialist culture representing not an abject, but an object based on the geometric grid of hybrid forms. The human figures were presented as both the elements of settings and the precise element of the study. The use of electronic techniques of hyperstylized reality entailed specific embellishments composed of not only formal aspects of an image but also transforming Martin Jay’s “scopic regimes” of modernism. The final scene showing Narcissus and Psyche embracing can be interpreted as an interstitial zone of abject expressed explicitly in Kristevian’s claim, according to which “‘modernity’ has learned to repress, dodge, and fake.”

RE-EMERGENCE OF THE PHASES IN MOTION

Although the outset of playful random lines extends beyond aesthetic regimes of modernism, at times it relates to the legacy of modernism. This context can be witnessed in motion studies such as Homage to Eadweard Muybridge 1880–1980 that drew on the Muybridgian pre-stylization of live recordings showing various stages of body movement. Electronically deformed effects investigated the gradual phases of the movement of human figures seen in stop-motion. It shows the re-emergence of the “supplementary element” presented in the form of deformation stemmed from the framework of analysis in Psychokosmen.

This homage to Muybridge’s œuvre presented one precise element of body images perceived in the form of continuous sequence of narrative. One of the examples illustrating the effects of hybridization of arts was a scene based on interspersing the narrative with the grid of vertical and horizontal lines. It introduced the human body as an object of the study of the movement stimulating visual effects generated by the computer as the examples of experimental tendencies in the early 1980s. This electronic transition has been emphasized by the advent of artificial intelligence introducing the post-synchronic voice of narrator stylized as the speech of a robot in the foreground. One of the reasons for oncoming new forms of representation of the 1980s was the introduction of an innovative aesthetics of video-clips described by Laurent Jullier. The new aesthetics heralded reframing modern “ways of seeing” characterized by the three shorts enmeshed in the literary and philosophical contexts. In light of this, Bödy shows triple cycle in shorts such as De Occulta Philosophia (1981) and Dance of Eurynome (1983) representing philosophical contexts, and Walzer (1985) drawing certain literary inspirations from mythological themes. In a closer look, De Occulta Philosophia (1981) unravels its focus on the visual translation, which finds its reflection in the Agrippa of Nettesheim’s symbolism and the transformation of numbers into images. It confronts both formal underlying premises of film narrative with philosophical and mythical themes. The latter themes in De Occulta Philosophia (1981) presented the image of visualized knowledge as the reminiscence on Occultism reflecting the nature of man drew on the direct associations with the Renaissance and Leonardo da Vinci, the treatise of Agrippa reworking a disassociating geometry. In this project, Bödy transformed the symbols within the framework of numbers, thus heralding the advent of the database paradigm by Lev Manovitch and Peter Greenaway’s haunting visual obsessions. The next step in the development of the intermedia theory was the production of short entitled Dance of Euronyme composed of six various tapes saturated with the visions of monitors and sound tracks. In accordance with an aesthetic of video-clips characterized by the elaboration of electronic dimensions of visual codes, these shorts paved the way to show the role of the human in electronic space. The last part of the trilogy was Walzer (1985) devoted to the illustration of translation of Novalis’s s literary poetry into visual sphere. Consequently, all three Bödy’s video works examined the symbols for the origins of life, the laws and principles seen in the perspective of anthropocentric
world view, as well as presenting the entire cycle as coming into being and to an end.

Interestingly, Bódy’s final film *Dog’s Night Song* (*Kutya éji dala*, 1984) was based on the recurrent use of the strategy of home footage, previously explored in the experimental film *Private Hungary* (1978). Unlike the previous project, in this film Bódy focused on the idea of persecution fight, casting himself and incorporating such amateur techniques as the use of Super 8 and video footage. The purpose of the project was to reframe a wide range of emerging Hungarian underground concerts of contemporary punk bands, which mirrored the specificity of emergence of new social movements. A wide variety of experimental gestures imbued the narrative structure of *The Dog’s Night Song* imposing visual layers on medieval iconography. Via using such innovative recording techniques as different filters and lighting, *Dog’s Night Song* showed certain image transformation devoted to stylization of reality in documentaries. Specifically, Bódy imitated newsreel stylization as a result of the cutting and fracturing the pre-film facture that appeared previously in the torn postcards of *American Postcard*. The use of the strategy of re-emergence of previously used material contributed to the fact, as Bálint Kovács argued, that the film gave an impression of being “undisciplined and chaotic.”

**FOUNDATION OF INTERNATIONAL NETWORK**

In exploring new directions of circulation of forms, Gábor Bódy directed its objectives to reshape the framework of international community based on organizing a network composed of contemporary video artists. As the starting point, this international cooperation was the foundation of the magazine entitled *Infermental*, launched in 1980, and was devoted to the publishing of videocassettes. The project progressively gained international acclaim and reached wide distribution. According to Gábor and Vera Bódy, the main purpose of the project was to seek “the heterogeneous, process-based and collective currents in the media sector” that presented their “counter hegemonic ambitions.” The first issue of “Infermental” was published in Berlin in 1982 as the first international videocassette magazine co-edited by Astrid Heibach and Gábor Bódy. It presented video artworks partly or entirely composed of trailers and reports lasting from 1 to 20 min from around the world, which were promoted on a massive electronic billboard during the Berlin Film Festival. Each issue was compiled and edited in a different worldwide location and published annually with a total running time between 4 and 6 h. The magazine, composed of 660 works gathered together in the last issue, was published in Skopje and Osnabrück in 1991. Not without a reason Oliver Hirschbiegel called this magazine a “running information memory,” as it joined together excerpts, documents, and events organized in terms of “thematic and intellectual context.”

Until disbanding the project in 1991, this information store was compiled annually from different periodicals made up of visual footage. In particular, the videocassette was perceived as an ideal circulatory medium that could replace deploying the little-used and expensive laser disks, which facilitated access and playback of discs. Innovative laser beams structured the duration of the tape and triggered the collaboration with Llurex led by Egon Bunne at the DFFB in Berlin. Both Infermental and Lured Network complemented with a unique archive of the trends, theories, images, and movements of the 1980s provided, according to Rudolf Frieling, “an insight into the topology of the media directions.” This project was based on the idea of international unity and cooperation faced and decontextualized preexistent conventions, providing innovative transpositions of contexts, which allowed the emergence of new artistic visions in the journal of international scope.

In light of what has been discussed before, it is not at all surprising that with these intersections between techniques of image manipulation and linguistics, the works and projects launched by Gábor Bódy acquired a memorable place in the history of intermedia studies bridging the past with present. This re-emergence of image media was following Jonathan Crary’s statement, according to which “modernization entailed a decoding and modernization of vision.” The initial period of circulation of ideas in the 1970s resulted in the advent of electronic devices that transformed the role of the image itself. Using the strategy alternation, the frame within the frame heralded the advent of “post-photographic” era, as W.J.T Mitchell declared, characterized by emerging postproduction image manipulations that blurred the relations.
between significant and signifié questioning the articulation of modern paradigm. Finally, one might say that this re-modernization of vision based on the re-emergence of flamboyant visual effects proved to be “a condition of possibility” both for the artistic experimentation of modernism and for new forms of domination, for what Foucault calls the “technology of individuals.”

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49. Jonathan Crary, “Modernizing Vision,” in Vision and Visuality, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1988), 42.
50. Ibidem.