The Metapolitics of Reality: Documentary Film, Social Science Research and Cognitive Realism in Twentieth-Century Hungary¹

The article explores how, given the absence of a proper public sphere, twentieth-century Hungarian social research began to use the notion of “reality” in populist socio-reports, the documentary films of the 1970s, and sociological debates. These discussions all shared the assumption that contemporary political elites ignored the “real” conditions of society. Thus it was the duty of social research (socio-reports or sociology proper) to reveal these facts in a manner that was free of ideology. Whereas in North America and Western Europe during the 1960s and 1970s the notion of a directly accessible “reality” had been thrown into question, in Hungary scholarship insisted on this kind of cognitive realism because of social and political reasons. As they argued, “reality” was to be interpreted not as a universal epistemological category, but according to particular terms of the sociology of knowledge. This article explores how the detection of “reality” and “facts” became an ethical vocation within these interrogatory frameworks.

Keywords: social research, sociology, social report, documentary film, Eastern Europe, epistemology, sociology of knowledge, ethical vocation

Introduction

Nullius in verba. The Royal Society of London, established in 1660, adopted this motto (an adaptation of a quote from Horace) to express the learned society’s view that knowledge must be based on empirical research and rational cognition rather than an appeal to authority and a humble trust in someone’s words. Bacon held that science must be based on purely empirical methods, therefore: hypotheses non fingo. Science, in this case natural science, “has condemned for centuries any view expressing merely personal faith. By contrast, science itself is often viewed

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even now as being founded on solid facts.” 2 The social sciences, which emerged, evolved, and became professionalized in the nineteenth century and which do not limit themselves to hard data and facts, may be an awkward fit for the above motto for two reasons. First, the disciplines emerging at the time suffered from an inferiority complex vis-à-vis the natural sciences and their remarkable achievements, which had made substantial contributions to the technological conditions of modernity. Second, the subject of the social sciences seemed for a long time too directly accessible, tangible and therefore subject to influence (by direct or indirect interests). The Royal Society has always been independent of government, and its motto signals an unqualified disregard for and even rejection of dependence and commitment: their only commitment is to the search for objective, scientific truth.

Clearly, the social sciences and humanities have always lacked this type of independence, and this has been of great consequence, not only for the sociology of science, but also for epistemology. In the case of history, most markedly in the countries in which its nineteenth-century professionalization was the most rapid (Germany) or the most expansive (France), this process was thoroughly intertwined with the cultivation of a cohesive idea of the nation state and, in the latter case, the creation of a new elite of the Third Republic, a cohort of intellectuals who supported the republican government. 3 However, what looked like an advantage in the nineteenth century became a serious loss of moral and scientific credibility after the unprecedented devastation caused by World War I. This was particularly the case for history, which had supplied much of the fodder for the cultural logic of nationalism, the ideology under the banner of which so many had marched into battle. War in this case needs to be understood not only in the context of eventual history, but rather in the longue durée of intellectual history, more or less the way Jan Patočka came to view it much later: “a vast event conducted by people, yet growing larger than humanity,” “a cosmic occurrence.” 4 In a famous essay written roughly around the time in question, Paul Valéry makes a point of making the following harsh comment:


History is the most dangerous concoction the chemistry of the mind has produced. Its properties are well known. It sets people dreaming, intoxicates them, engenders false memories, exaggerates their reflexes, keeps old wounds open, torments their leisure, inspires them with megalomania or persecution complex, and makes nations bitter, proud, insufferable and vain.5

Valéry thereby radically redraws the relationship between science and the surrounding world, as he claims that this discipline is inexorably a social practice as well, so the knowledge it creates is related to power through the binding force of identity-shaping memory. The very science that, in the spirit of its scientific function and calling, busied itself throughout the nineteenth century with the establishment of “the” methodology (the identification and critical analysis of written documents, etc.) suddenly became an “accomplice” in the devastation of the World War in the eyes of critical intellectuals on account of the social functions it had played. This moral culpability, of course, raises the question of humble trust in words once again and assigns the sphere of cognition as the sole appropriate domain of the sciences.

Over the course of the past several decades, however, the achievements of the social sciences have not been particularly encouraging with regards to the noble challenge of “nullius in verba.” The trends in intellectual inquiry that took hold in the decades following World War II, particularly structuralism and various other schools in its wake, have posed countless challenges to Western empirical social sciences that they have not been entirely able to surmount: the linguistic turn, cultural turn, epistemology, etc. Of these, the most complex issue was the often vexing yet in many ways productive emphasis on epistemological perspective. In history, the earliest experiments in this respect took place in France led first and foremost by Paul Veyne and Michel de Certeau among others. In contrast with the American Hayden White, these two French historians critiqued the profession from the perspective of the historian’s practice of empirical work and its crisis (Veyne’s period was antiquity, while de Certeau studied seventeenth-century ecclesiastic history and mysticism). Moreover their historical-critical work went far beyond a merely linguistic, narrative critique of

history as a discipline. A Jesuit with a Marxist background, de Certeau was one of the first to probe reality and fiction as irreconcilably distinct qualities for the discipline of history. From the vantage point of the current Western scientific canon, the significance of the interrogation of concepts such as fact, reality, fiction, and narrative may not seem immensely significant, but in the 1970s these propositions were enough to upset the discipline of history, a discipline that, according to Gérard Noirliel, was always in crisis. It was essentially a questioning of the former naïve attitude in history according to which reality could be taken for granted as something “out there,” a given that the historian accesses through the discovery and analysis of original sources and documents. Epistemological critique countered this by the proposition that reality, including the reality of the past, is not given and accessible in any such direct way, for while we are studying it through contemporary documents, we are also extracting, selecting, and editing it. In other words, the shift consisted in the historian’s constructive relationship to the past, which required a distinction between “data” found and identified, and “facts” selected and analyzed. History has thus given up the positivist legacy of the illusory recapturing of past reality as it really happened (wie es eigentlich gewesen ist).

However, the relationship between general public opinion, critical reflection, and the practices of the social sciences obviously cannot be described solely on the basis of Western European and American experiences, especially because these experiences are contingent on the context in which they occur and in which their practice is regulated. The political system, the public sphere, and the conditions of the practices of scientific inquiry are interrelated concepts, and it is no wonder that, given the remarkably tumultuous and discontinuous twentieth-century history of Eastern Europe, the cognitive role of the social sciences and especially history in the region was severely limited. Following the political transition, when new generations attempted to bring the new post-Structuralist, text-centered, interpretive etc. theories to the region, the older generation tended to respond with a blanket rejection. This rejection was motivated not by an exaggerated skepticism regarding the content of “recent” theories, but

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8 See also Gábor Gyáni, “A történetírás fogalmi alapjairól: tény, magyarázat, elbeszélés,” in Bevezetés a társadalomtörténetbe: hagyományok, írányzatok, módszerek, ed. Zsombor Bády and József Ö. Kovács (Budapest: Osiris, 2003), 11–53.
rather by the conviction that after the political transition one could finally “speak one’s mind.” Researchers no longer had to subordinate their ideas to official ideologies, so why would one need these obscurely worded new theories? Reality, in the primary and somewhat naïve sense of the word, is there, waiting to be discovered without any constraint from political goals and administrative or bureaucratic obstacles. The days of tricky metapolitics were over, so why use a critical metalanguage?

It would be incorrect to draw the tempting conclusion that Hungarian social sciences are eo ipso rigid and thus unable to adopt trends from elsewhere. This is merely a symptom, the real causes of which lie in the deep structure of Hungarian political and academic culture, namely the way in which the structure of the concept of the public sphere was shifting in relation to the powers that be. In order for this investigation to be truly productive, it has to engage with the concept of reality in the form of a conceptual history (Begriffsgeschichte). According to Reinhart Koselleck, any study of the social history of cultural forms and practices has to take account of changes in the linguistic-conceptual universe used to refer to a constantly changing social reality. If the world around us is constantly changing, so are the linguistic elements and their corresponding meanings and connotations, and the study of the two in their interrelatedness can open up new avenues of knowledge.  

I propose that by placing the word “reality” (along with the entire system of references to it) into the conceptual plane of the Hungarian history of ideas, one can yield insights into the function of documentary film and its place in the history of ideas. Moreover, this will also yield insights, in the long term, into the recurring efforts and workshops outside the realm of the social sciences that are devoted to discovering reality. This is all the more crucial because, as Wolf Lepenies pointed out in his analysis of British, French, and German examples, literature, film, and journalism (one would do well to update this list with new media today) play as vital a role in a society’s self-representations, as does scientific discourse. Ultimately, one could ask the remarkably simple yet acute question: if there was in fact some social science thinking in Hungary, why were its workshops outside the spheres of the social sciences that had reality, fact-finding, and the discovery of reality (whether on paper or celluloid) as their rallying cries?

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Critical Social Research and the Idea of Reality

This is actually a product of the *relationship* between the political plane and those wielding power on the one hand and a (theoretically) independent field of scientific inquiry subject only to the goal of cognition. Dénes Némedi astutely observed that despite the quick, if sporadic, reception of the social sciences in eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century Hungary, there is no history of Hungarian sociology in any proper sense (not even a history of the social sciences for that matter), because there was no cohesive, continuous social research in Hungary. In this part of Europe, these forms of learning have had an *episodic structure*. Though various experiments provisionally have served this function, they lack cohesion and a continuity of persons, institutions, and content. The thoroughly modern program of social research was not merely belated, but as a result of its belatedness it took a rather peculiar shape from the moment of its inception, as the journal *Huszadik Század* [Twentieth Century] and its social science studies were taking an initially tacit and veiled but then increasingly outspoken political stance.11 “Sociology! This was the word,” wrote Öskár Jászi in 1910, “that synthesized our endeavors: our faith in the glorious power of natural sciences, a social science research built on this power, and a politics for the benefit of the people developed on this foundation,” a credo that signals the Eastern-European specificity of their calling by articulating a commitment to the avowedly political goals of cognition.12

Although it became impossible to pursue serious sociological inquiry after 1918–1919 in the wake of failed revolutions and the subsequent emigration of those involved in radical politics and progressive sciences, sociology did find a new forum in sociography, a path between empirical social research and literature, where it could once again speak of social reality, even if its specific subjects were perhaps different from the interests of *Huszadik Század*. This brought a discovery and new prominence of the “people,” a time of the exploration and empirical study of a populist thematics. Despite representing a heterogeneous assortment of genres, tones, and methodologies, populist sociography emerged

as a sort of master narrative, and it covered a multitude of problems specific to peasants and sharecroppers (the tendency to have a single child, emigration, postwar sects, and life on the Hungarian plain). To sum up, the challenge of discovering reality compensates for the lack of professional sociology and an appropriate public sphere by finding a genre outside institutionalized science. This genre, sociography, attempted to be both “scientific” (methodical, systematic) and something more, namely a representative of the voiceless (the “people”), whose living conditions these sociographers set out to improve therapeutically by giving them voice. Their zeal is once again animated by the watchword of social reality to be discovered and revealed. As Miklós Lackó points out, youths in the 1930s were disenchanted with grand ideas for saving the world. Their attitudes were informed by “a common sense that could be reconciled with conservatism, a demand for realism that could accommodate the diversity of modern thought, and on the basis of the former, a demand for reforms.” According to many, including Imre Kovács, Gyula Szekfű, and István Bibó, it was this demand for and sense of reality that became a key motivating force in the ideas and deeds of this generation.\(^{13}\)

The empirical discovery and study of social conditions was of great interest not only to the interwar generation; the “attraction of reality”\(^ {14}\) (to quote Ernő Gondos) had a hold on those born in the interwar years as well. Their efforts were pooled in the people’s college movement established in 1939 (Bolyai College until 1942, subsequently Györrfy College) and expanded after World War II. This existed under the name Nékosz (National Association of People’s Colleges) until 1949.\(^ {15}\) Granted, youth movements had previously played their part in the empirical study of reality (the Scout movement, Pro Christo Students, etc.), but the people’s colleges were something new in that they gave an organizational framework to this inquiry as a specific program, and in fact made knowledge of the country a cornerstone of their pedagogy. For lack of space, instead of an exposition and evaluation of Nékosz’s collective experience, communality, social responsibility, support for the gifted, and important role in fostering social mobility, I will merely note that the issue of reality was fundamental to its pedagogical theory. Ferenc Pataki has identified the greatest virtue of the people’s colleges as “their ability to transform” postwar social dynamism and actions aimed at changing society into a “pedagogical movement and educational


\(^{15}\) See Ferenc Erdei, A falukutatástól a népi kollégiumokig (Budapest: Múzsák, 1985).
practice: they were able to ride the wave of social changes, and they were also able to translate them into everyday acts of pedagogical practice. This is why the one-time secretary of Nékosz (later an esteemed psychologist) gave his edited book the emphatic title *A valóság pedagógiaja* [The Pedagogy of Reality], noting that “the pedagogy of changing reality” would have been an even more fitting title, as the movement was driven not only by the desire to discover but also to change reality. The National Pedagogical Conference held on 3-6 January, 1947, as part of which both political leaders (László Rajk, József Révai, Ferenc Erdei, József Darvas, and Péter Veres) and professionals (Ferenc Mérei and Ernő Béki) lauded the movement’s role in social politics and its community building and psychological aspirations, was a milestone in the process of the movement’s institutionalization and in the consolidation of its pedagogy.17 Ferenc Mérei, who played an important role in both politics and pedagogy between 1945–1950, expressed the following view of pedagogical realism in a letter he wrote as director of the National Institute of Pedagogy to Árpád Kiss:

What I gather from your words is that you understand it as the need to adapt previously gained experience and knowledge to the given reality. What I mean by this is rather […] the need to mine the given reality. To this you retort by asking why should one rediscover what others have discovered before. My response is that this is not about ignoring knowledge and experience gained by others, but rather that instead of adapting that knowledge to my reality, it has to be measured against my reality. […] You become doubtful when a given experience contradicts old wise men, whereas I deferentially move said wise men into the museum and follow the thread of the given experience. Naturally, all of this gains its meaning from concrete matters. I do believe that, no doubt through many errors and corrections, our people’s colleges will bring about the realization of an educational system and methodology that both you and I can only attempt to imagine today.18

18 Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Országos Levéltára (National Archives of Hungary) XXVI–I–1–b, 1. d., 2. tétel (Ferenc Mérei’s letter to Árpád Kiss, May 24, 1948).
Mérei’s letter is worth quoting at length because it demonstrates an active, formative concept of reality. In this sense, social reality is both an inherited tradition and something that can be shaped by its tension with a present ready for action. Whether intentionally or not, this brings one back to the 1920s avant-garde notion, expressed most succinctly perhaps by Andor Németh, “reality is not a concept: if you want to get closer to it, you need to touch it, you need to act.” This attitude posits social reality not as a final, fossilized moment, but a process that can be shaped.

Why did this active attitude to the concept of reality change, and why did social scientists settle with a more traditional, positivist, nineteenth-century notion in the 1960s and 1970s? The claim to shape reality is not an intellectual pastime in a vacuum, as this claim is surrounded by all the norms of the surrounding political, social world. In brief, Mérei’s notion of “active experience” (which goes back to Andor Németh) or the attempts of the “bright winds” of the people’s college movement to overturn the world can operate if and only if the conditions for action are established. These conditions, however, are not guaranteed unless there is a positive public sphere in which aims, plans, and ambitions can be debated and considered. As I previously noted, the lack of a public sphere is a structural characteristic of modern Hungarian political culture, and the period between 1949 and 1956 shows an exceptionally grave deficit in this respect. Though there was no “democratic” turn after the failed uprising of 1956. Melinda Kalmár has rightly shown that the legitimacy-deficient Kádár regime, which rose to power under the shadow of Soviet weapons, made the establishment of a “simulated public sphere” one of its key strategic goals. This peculiar, characteristically Kádár-style contrivance served both to condemn the prior fundamental ideological repression of public discourse and to enable the controlled normalization of slightly freer speech. Over the course of a few decades, public sphere became clearly segmented, and this segmentation became a phenomenon. It included the first plane, which was the official, the semi-official plane, and the hidden, samizdat plane. This indirectly created a half public, half hidden plane on which certain particularly important problems that were concealed and repressed in the first public sphere could still be debated.

This is why Tibor Kuczi could write in the introduction to *Valóság ’70* (Reality ’70) that the public sphere sprang forth after 1989 “fully armed” and began to operate in a self-evident manner. If this was indeed the case, he speculates, the public sphere must have had not only forums, media, and places, but also a language, even if this type of publicity (as proven by several examples) tended to “overlay” itself on the concept of the private. In his analysis of the content of the journal *Valóság*, Attila Becskeházi shows that sociological interpretation meant *reality* to the users of its language, a reality “distorted,” “concealed,” “falsified,” and “silenced” by ideology. This interpretation was popular because of its emphasis on an alternative understanding and structure of reality. [...] So much so [...] that the sociological literature of the 1970s rarely includes reflections on its constructive nature. The reality created as a result of sociological interpretation gains credibility not simply by opposing the other [that is ideology], but by revealing a completely different Hungary through the language it uses.21

The realities suggested by official ideology and revealed by social science research were therefore incommensurable. The latter had a surplus that was a consequence not only of its scientific nature, but also its moral stance as a commitment to truth undistorted by ideological clichés. It is a wonderful paradox that such a notion of ideology vs. reality tacitly brings one back to the young Marx’s notion that what one must oppose to ideology is reality as a practice. (This changes with the publication of *Capital*, partly under Engels’s influence, and ideology will be opposed by science rather than reality.) To put it differently, the critique of ideology, like the reversed image in a camera obscura, results in a species of cognitive realism, insofar as it attempts to turn the Hegelian system upside down.22

**Documentary Film**

In one of his essays, Ferenc Hammer offers a detailed analysis of the intellectual environment in which, the stylistic and generic diversity of their compositions notwithstanding, the documentary efforts of the Balázs Béla Studio were

connected with social science efforts to discover reality. The Studio, an avant-garde, leftist group of artists with a program of social emancipation, played a crucial role in twentieth-century film in Hungary, often in opposition to official socialism during the 1960s and 1980s. To quote Clifford Geertz, documentary film is a “blurred genre.”23 Its definition is vague and ambivalent even with respect to its relationship to reality, not to mention the fraught issues of fiction, emplotment, and other methodological and stylistic characteristics, not to mention rhetoric and metaphor.24 What documentary films do have in common is the emphatic social energy and usefulness, Geertz’s “being there,” a commitment to a professionally and ethically authentic “being there, being present.”25 Responding to a question about the documentary film’s function, Judit Ember affirms this, saying “we must answer in speech, in writing, and on film too, so as to leave some kind of imprint to our children and grandchildren of how we lived and thought and how we imagined how we were living and thinking.”26 Sociologist Ágnes Losonczi identifies the same attitude in the center of Ember’s oeuvre:

What makes her work so important? You have to see and hear her talk and ask questions. You have to know her exceptional skill in establishing relationships, see how she addresses people, watch how they begin to speak sincerely to her and only to her. Her attention opens up fearfully guarded, ossified memories, loosens the speaker’s tongue, and that exceptional relationship that marks a true documentary filmmaker is being formed.27

Gábor Bódy states in his Filmiskola [Film School] that “film is one mode of thinking, which can emerge in a variety of social functions.”28 These functions can include business, art, journalism, popular science, science (sociology,

24 A detailed analysis of the relationships between documentary film, feature film and documentarism as a style can be found in Gábor Gelencsér, A Titanic zenekara. Stílusok és irányzatok a hetvenes évek magyar filmművészeteiben (Budapest: Osiris, 2002), 199–276.
27 Ágnes Losonczi, “Az igazat, csakis az igazat… s a teljes igazat vallja,” in Az Ember-lépték, 7.
psychology), and they can also be documentation, history, and research. One could say that the documentary film’s relationship to reality (like that of sociology earlier on) is important not so much because of its epistemology or rhetoric as it is because of its functional, pragmatic, and even ethical aspects; its creative relationship within social thought.

One finds all the keywords of the notion of *direct cognition*, on which cognitive realism rests, in a conversation between Gyula Gazdag, Ferenc Grünwalsky, László Mihályfy and György Szomjas entitled *A társadalmi folyamatok láthatóvá tétele* [Making Social Processes Visible]. They assert that the processes of reality are graspable “as they are positioned in the structure.”

What documentary film means to us is not a style, not a method of expression, but the visual cognition of reality. [...] Our aim is to make reality “play,” that is expose itself in the film [...] We have false views of simple facts of reality. The facts themselves are in principle known, but what is unknown is their visual face, which is objective in the manner of data.29

The noble idea of reality playing, i.e. exposing itself, and thereby making itself accessible to the “objective” camera, is probably laughable to the contemporary reader in the wake of the umpteenth epistemological turn of the social sciences. However, if one views the past without the glasses of our present-day omniscience and instead tries to reconstruct the aim of documentarism to discover reality in a more long term context, one can once again reveal the distinctive historical-structural characteristics of cognitive realism.

When directors Ferenc Grünwalsky, Dezső Magyar, László Mihályfy, György Pintér, and István Sipos and writers Árpád Ajtony, Gábor Bódy, Péter Dobai, and Csaba Kardos, the authors of the manifesto *Szociológiai filmcsoport!* [For a Sociological Film Group!] say, if only parenthetically, that “we want to reinvent the wheel,” they seem to be tacitly referring to the sociographic tradition of discovering reality outlined above.30 They identify a “field of research” (a telling phrase!), mention the problem of Hungarian villages and


30 Classic sociography flourished (once again) in the 1970s and 1980s: it suffices to mention the work of György Berkovits, Sándor Tar, Zsolt Csalog, János Kőbányai or Miklós Haraszti. A good overview of sociography’s relationship with sociophotography is offered in the Special Issue *Peremhelyzetek–Szociográfiai* of *Budapesti Negyed* 35–36 (Spring–Summer 2002), ed. György Németh.
small towns, inadequate knowledge of facts, the terms “information aggregator, data collector,” and the method of participatory observation, all of which underscores the primary objective of direct cognition of social reality, to which all formal experiments in the category of “artistic cognition” are secondary. “Collectors provide the studios with the systematically categorized factual material either in raw, unprocessed form or in the form of ‘literary short story’ or sociography,” they say, while emphasizing that processing is collective and requires collaboration with researchers. It appears, therefore, that “sociological” or rather sociographic filmmaking, while never explicitly positioning itself as heir to this particular tradition, fits well into the long-term historical structure of Hungarian social studies. Furthermore, it accomplishes the almost obvious medial shift that replaces pen and paper with “camera-pen” and celluloid in the discovery of reality. Of course, the camera’s supplanting of pen and paper was not without consequence; in fact, this is the theoretical juncture where the paths of documentarism proper and the formal experimentation of feature films begin to diverge. One side involves an ethical commitment, which compels the discovery of an unknown reality concealed by ideology to compensate for the lack of a “positive public sphere.”

Film and documentary film have indeed played an important, if not exclusive, role in debates regarding certain highly significant social issues. Although the documentary filmmaking of the 1960s and 1970s can hardly be equated in terms of their formal language, one can justifiably make the claim that both typically attempted to answer questions neglected by history and sociology that could not be broached in other ways. It was at this time that the notion according to which the camera simply replicates the world began to take hold (a notion that persists to this day, despite its shaky foundations). In the words of Gábor Bódy:

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Many looked to sociology and a new type of documentarism, from which they expected direct social effectiveness. This did not eliminate all doubts: what is the relationship between a “reality” addressed by the camera with untroubled informality and the sequence of images rolling on the big or small screen?³³

Clearly, one of the forces driving the greater demand for documentariness was people’s acute loss of trust in the version of reality depicted in the information-deprived world of the official, first public sphere of socialism.³⁴ Documentary films no doubt had a significant ethical role in revealing particular problems and showing that this concealed reality in fact existed. This, however, seems to have somewhat simplified the epistemological relationship between camera and reality. The latter is amply illustrated by the claim that documentary film allegedly had no raison d’être after the political transition: what was the point of its existence now that “everything could be said”?³⁵ If revealing particular problems of the present or past is no longer a matter of conflict, does the documentary commitment of a filmmaker make any sense? If one’s relationship to reality were indeed so simple, the political transition and a democratic public sphere theoretically would have made the documentary film genre pointless. With the benefit of twenty years of hindsight, one can clearly see this has not been the case.³⁶

As I mentioned in the introduction, this type of realism in the discipline of history has undergone substantial changes in Western Europe since the early 1970s. A (historical) document is no longer regarded as an unproblematic representation of reality, but is seen rather as part of a selective account of it, informed by a particular value structure and power status. Similarly, the frames photographed by the cinematographer and projected onto the big or small screen (after having been edited) represent not reality, but rather a set

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³⁴ The documentary Üzemi baleset (Factory Accident) wittily demonstrates how the withholding of certain news items considered strategic mobilized the imagination of Hungarian society, which was able to imagine a sensational background behind the most banal occurrence (Judit M. Topits, Üzemi baleset. Történetek a Kádár-korszak tájékoztatáspolitikájáról [Budapest: 1956-os Intézet, 2003]).
³⁶ Although 1989/1990 was undoubtedly a watershed in the status of documentary film, the transformation of the conditions cannot be fully explained by the question of the public sphere alone. For more detail, see Balázs Varga, “A magyar dokumentumfilm rendszerváltása – a magyar dokumentumfilm a rendszerváltás után,” Metropolis 8, no. 2 (2004): 8–36.
of moving images of reality selected by the director and cinematographer. This composition includes an imprint of the creators’ political, cultural, ethical and aesthetic attitudes, and the images are often determined by the camera. Its relationship to reality is by no means merely that of a recording. On the contrary, it is highly constitutive. This sheds light on the meaning of Gábor Bódy's statement according to which “documentary film’ is the philosophy of film.” Documentary film illuminates the complex intellectual relationship between the author and external reality, a relationship that the author maintains through his or her work. The epistemological level and ethical commitment are not necessarily tied to each other, something made abundantly clear by the divergent paths of Hungarian documentary and feature films from the early 1980s after their near symbiosis in terms of film language. While the former “increasingly made use of historical interviews,” according to András Bálint Kovács, “new feature films give center stage to the creation of subtle narrative and visual effects.” The most fitting example is the later film theory and feature film oeuvre of Bódy, who earlier had been a signatory of the manifesto For a Sociological Film Group! He became the most effective representative of the deconstructive approach to the former linear, realist relationship between film and reality. 

Up to this point, in this discussion of the conceptual history of reality my emphasis has been on documentary films with sociological and social history ambitions. It is also worth examining “historical” documentaries and their notions of reality and the manners in which it can be revealed and presented. If one tries to establish ideal types in the kinds of relationships with reality fostered by historical documentaries, again a number of significant differences emerge. Though it may seem paradoxical at first glance, methodologically it is Péter Forgács’s experimental documentary series Privát Magyarország [Private Hungary], inspired by Gábor Bódy’s experiment Privát történelem [Private History; 1978], that is the closest to a classic historical method because he uses contemporary documents. Granted, it is a rather significant difference that while historians rely primarily on written records (“traces” in the terminology of Charles-Victor Langlois and Charles Seignobos) in their work, Forgács works with amateur and archival newsreel footage, in other words moving images.

His work, however, is significantly distinct from fundamentally interview-based “historical documentary films” (also based on the notion of direct cognition) that record the perspective of the present through the social relationships of remembrance. Instead of relying on traces, Forgács prefers to learn of the past directly, from the narratives of participants. This is obviously not a qualitative difference, but rather one of cognition, which is nevertheless a highly significant difference in the process of constructing historical reality. Forgács tends to use visual documents as “traces,” even if his visual rhetoric and attribution are exciting precisely because of his constitutive use of the material. His work is always based on accurate research (archives, interviews, etc.), and the phase of execution is naturally governed by artistic goals.

Presented as experimental documentary in 1998 and in 2005 as a multimedia exhibition at the Ludwig Museum, *The Danube Exodus* shows captain Nándor Andrásovits’s amateur film footage taken at the turn of the 1930s and 1940s. On his ship named “Erzsébet Királyné” [Queen Consort Elizabeth], footage from 1939 records the emigration of Jews escaping from Austria after the Anschluss and from Tiso’s Slovakia. The destination is Palestine. The trip will take them down on Danube and through the Black Sea. One year later, the Soviet Union occupies Bessarabia following the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact, as a result of which German settlers of this region have to leave for the territory of the Third Reich. They travel upstream on the Danube until they reach Zimony (today Zemun in Serbia, it is part of the city of Belgrade), and eventually captain Andrásovits’s ship, the “Erzsébet Királyné” delivers them. History is presented on a human scale, while in the background the clashes between the great powers create the context. The footage records the experiences from the perspectives of fugitives escaping downstream and upstream on the Danube, i.e. the everyday lives at the time of Austrian, Slovakian, and Hungarian Jews and German citizens.

As mentioned above, the methodology of Péter Forgács’s documentary film differs from the traditional procedure significantly, in as much as he makes use of contemporary traces, i.e. amateur footage and contemporary photographs, and re-contextualizes them (vis-à-vis the so-called historical documentary that constructs the notion of history retrospectively on the basis of interviews). Forgács’s artistic approach, which is based on pictorial thinking, fundamentally

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differs from the conventional writing of history. It turns the principle of source criticism, which is dear to traditional historiography, up-side-down using the footage as a document on the one hand and as the object of pictorial rhetoric on the other.\(^{40}\) What is decisive about the film as a conventional historical narrative is that it really happened, while as a visual composition it freely uses found footage, sorts it out, repeats various episodes, modulates, i.e. attributes meaning to the document. These two different uses of historical document create the duality of the series. In preparing the film, the director conducts interviews and selects archival documents. In other words, he pursues regular scientific work preceding the fictionalizing phase of the documents. This is why the play with pictures is not a “simple play,” not the result of daring chance, but deliberate pictorial attribution: enhancement and accentuation, and in the case of Forgács, it is often the deceleration of footage.\(^{41}\) Beyond this, the pieces of the series Privát Magyarország communicate on many levels: the meaning is produced by the found footage, the inscription and the voiceover narration, but at the same time the filmic atmosphere is conjured by the musical inter-medium. Generally, captions of the pictures of The Danube Exodus provide the necessary historical background knowledge, while the voice-over narration (mostly the voice of the well-known actor Andor Lukáts) creates an impression of authenticity and the repetitive music by Tibor Szemző conjures the emotional atmosphere. Doubtlessly, Forgács’s use of documents differs from the manner in which traditional historians would treat sources. Nonetheless, his composition remains very historical in the sense of Siegfried Kracauer’s notion of the multiscopic level of historical understanding. The German philosopher recommends the cognitive and reality producing techniques of motion pictures to historians, that is to say the alternate usage of close-ups and long shots.\(^{42}\)

Nowadays, of course, historians also use oral sources (oral history, narrative interviews, etc.), but let us not forget that what appeared self-evident in documentary films (including the “historical” subcategory), namely someone recounting an event, a moment, or his or her own life, was not recognized as

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legitimate scientific practice in Western Europe until as late as the 1970s. The legitimacy of this form of historical narrative was, in fact, undermined by the tacit acceptance of “nullius in verba” in the scientific tradition, which regarded all verbal communications as steeped in ambitions and power interests and therefore as something to be minimized in the interests of scientific objectivity. In Hungary, however, a high-minded ideal of science was far from the sole motivation for documentary filmmakers. They were motivated once again by the conditions of the public sphere outlined above. This is why the Holocaust, the Don catastrophe (the losses of the Second Hungarian Army on the Russian front in World War II), virtually any detail of the 1956 uprising, or the labor camps established in the Rákosi era were all off limits for discussion in front of a wider audience. The beginning of oral history research and the recording of documentary films was thus not merely a means of disclosing reality and representing a past previously repressed in the official public sphere; it became a moral mission to retrieve the memory of the repressed past for the future. “The guarantee for his [the interviewee – editor] sincerity,” says Gyula Kozák of this ambiguous situation, “is that he has promised to tell everything he knows’ (ha ha!) at the beginning of the conversation, and I accepted—what else could I have done? —that everything will be as much as he deems fit.”

Conclusions

In the construction of historical knowledge and reality, these epistemological problems are very real. The same difficulties plagued “talking heads” type documentaries as well, and before the political transition the only way of

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testing the veracity of a statement was to ask several people the same question whenever possible (and this is hardly a reassuring method). There is, however, a major difference between the audiences of the two: the video interview, which constitutes a form of oral history, remains in the status of document (accessible to researchers in the archives), whereas the documentary film is a product made for a prospective broader public sphere (even if the film about the uprising in 1956 could not be screened until 1988). It is something that is usually considered not to be shown in its raw, unedited, dramatically unstructured form. After the political transition, when new social science ideas and trends trickled into Hungary and the deficiencies of the public sphere were corrected, sociologists and historians were quick to criticize unquestioning faith in the credibility of oral history and documentary film. It seems symptomatic of the encounter between documentary film and critical theories that, of all possible works, sociologist András Kovács picked Judit Ember’s *Menedékjog* [Right of Asylum; 1988] as an example to demonstrate how cognitive realism is eroded by the constitutive social process of remembrance. Focusing on the factual inconsistencies between individual interviews and adapting Frederic Bartlett’s theory, Kovács proved that instead of reconstructing the reality of the past, oral narrative constructs it. The reality of the past comes to exist for historical thought through the narrative.

It would not be appropriate, however, to apply retroactively the currently fashionable critical trends as the sole acceptable ones on the basis of which to assess excellent documentary works and oeuvres. This is not my point. What I have tried to show is that sociography and documentary film shared a motivation: a demand for reality and realism in thinking about Hungarian society and history, driven in part by the structural lack of a positive public sphere and in part by the tension of social (and social history) traumas. This problem was not restricted to state socialism, but was present in the long term of Hungarian political culture. “Rebellious” sociography attempted to reveal a set of repressed problems, much like the documentaries of the 1970s, with their sociological and social history ambitions, and the historical documentaries of the 1980s strived to record distorted, concealed fates and events for the future in order to prevent their planned erasure from cultural memory. In this context, Judit Ember’s documentaries, which represent attempts to salvage the silent tradition of the

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crushed 1956 uprising, resonate perfectly with Imre Kovács’s *Néma forradalom* [Silent Revolution], which explores the subject of emigration and the single child phenomenon. In this cross section of conceptual history, one can see that the concept of reality is not constant and absolute; at times the system of references to it and the dynamic relationship with it can tell us more about the period in question than any number of archival documents. Ever since Karl Mannheim introduced his concept of incongruence, we know that individuals relate to social reality not merely through participation, but also through the desire to be separate, to be incompatible. 49 If one is willing to consider cognitive realism as a morally motivated act aimed at counterbalancing and pressuring official ideology, a genre- and medium-blind group language of intellectuals unwilling to fit in, then the changing status of reality is suddenly not an epistemological issue, but one of the sociology of science. In the Hungarian history of thought, the constant, emphatic reference to the direct (i.e. non-ideological) cognition of empirical reality could well be construed as a symbolic act, after Geertz and Kenneth Burke, which however cannot help but be saturated by tropes, like all public discourse. 50 Recognizing this trope-laden rhetoric of reality, one can grasp the morally charged moments of value creation that aimed to counterbalance political distortion and silencing at any given time. In this sense the status of reality is political. The language and methodology of the revelation of reality was emphatically empirical precisely because reality had to be above any suspicion of ideology; this is why it never became a counter-ideology. The aspiration towards an objectivity above political interests made this pursuit of “reality” a metapolitics (to borrow Miklós Lackó’s term) that consciously ignored and rejected ideological distortions.


Archival Sources


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Translated by Katalin Orbán