



Reality and Fiction in Classical Hungarian Documentaries

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Abstract. Closer scrutiny of international classical documentaries (*Nanook*, *Land without Bread*, *Spanish Earth*, etc.) has put big question marks behind the traditional (or naïve?) concepts of documentation and reality, as if any theorist looking for documentary could only find fiction. On the other hand, the ‘non-existing’ documentary is flourishing, both in the commercial media and the art houses. Cinema-goers or TV-viewers (though not all of them) seem to appreciate something special in these offerings. The aim of this essay is to analyze some of the classical Hungarian documentaries from Höllering to Schiffer, Ember and Gulyás: do the artistic methods they used, the documentarists’ discipline and ethics they followed offer us some useful clues to the contemporary discussion about the essence of documentary filmmaking?

The Real and the Truth

There is a Hungarian poem, which has played a crucial role in defining the public thinking in Hungary about the concept of the “real.” Attila József, one of the justly canonized Hungarian poets of the 20th century, wrote in early 1937 a poem of 36 lines: *Welcoming Thomas Mann* (*Thomas Mann üdvözlése*) upon the occasion of the famous German writer’s visit to Budapest.¹ In line no. 14 József asks Mann to “tell (us) the truth, not only the real” (“az igazat mondd, ne csak a valót”). The poem has since become part of the secondary school curriculum, and this line has been quoted great many times. The basic

¹The Hungarian original and an English translation both can be found here: http://visegrad.typotex.hu/index.php?page=work&auth_id=127&work_id=514&tran_id=955. Last downloaded 16. 03. 2009.

situation of József's poem is that of a child, in bed, waiting for a bedtime story – but also longing for the presence of an adult. Both the tale and the presence are needed to fight angst (“his heart throbs with little anxious beats,” “kis szíve nagyon szorongva dobban.”) And here is the crucial part of the text, this time in my own prose translation: “You know this well, the poet never tells a fib: / Tell us the truth, not only the real, / (give us) the illumination which fills the mind with light, / Because, without each other, we all are in darkness. / Like Hans Castorp did see through Madame Chauchat's body, / Let us see through ourselves this evening.” From the context it becomes clear, that to Attila József, telling only the real equals telling a fib, a white lie. To avoid fibbing, the poet has to tell more than the real: has to tell the truth. But what kind of truth? “The illumination which fills the mind with light, Because, without each other, we all are in darkness.” – comes the explanation. (Who are the “we” in this sentence? The poem allows both interpretations: we, the audience or the audience and Thomas Mann.) It seems that for the poet truth had a collective and/or mutual quality, dynamism. We have to be together, to co-operate, in order to shed light into each other's minds. Another quality of truth is obviously its transcendence. Truth is like X-rays, says József's ample association to the persons of Mann's novel *The Magic Mountain*. And the poet takes the situation a step further: while H.C. sees through Mme Chauchat's body (not through her soul!), József expects from Mann's reading that we (the audience) will be able to “see through ourselves.” The ultimate truth, it seems, is for József to see through ourselves. Then, in the poem, the perspective opens from private illness and grief to the “monstrous states” which devour humanity and which form a threat to the guest and his audience alike. (Remember: the time is 1937.) Here, at the peak of the poem, there is the wish that mankind (and womankind...) has to preserve its humanity against all odds. Then the poet offers the floor to the writer-guest: let him “begin the tale” (an expression which brings back to mind the opening image of the child and his bedtime tale).

In the light of this famous poem, it seems strange, that so many theorists of the documentary cinema speak about the real as the most important ingredient of the documentary. As William Rothman observed: “Documentaries are not inherently more direct or truthful than other kinds of films. [...] What particular documentary films reveal about reality, how they achieve their revelations, are questions to be addressed by acts of criticism, not settled a priori by theoretical fiat” (Rothman 1997, xiii). Bearing in mind both Rothman and Attila József, one may conclude, that the truth of a documentary film is what the film reveals about (the otherwise hidden aspects of) reality – and

about ourselves, the director and the audience. The process of revelation is (has to be) the documentary film itself. The child (in the poetical image of Attila József) has to be (during the making of the film) inside the director himself – no documentary without a childish curiosity! Then, with the film ready, the child has to move into each person of the audience – the audience of the documentary has to re-produce the child-like curiosity of the director during filming. “Let us see through ourselves this evening” – says József, and the words “this evening” can be interpreted (in our context) that the revelation ends with the evening, that the work of art (for us: the documentary) has a beginning, a duration, and of course an ending. At day’s end, the child has to stop being curious and has to go to sleep. The work of art is a finite piece of communication.

What, then, is the difference between films of documentary and fiction? Most fiction films have to preserve (or cannot but preserve) documentary qualities (a reference – Branigan), in order to have the audience accept the story’s believability. All documentaries are made with (some degree of) fiction-like intervention into “reality” by the director, by the filming process itself. Still, the distinction between documentary and fiction (as we have implied at the beginning) seems to be working at all levels: production, distribution, exhibition, and of course, consumption.

In the process of recording reality on film, the result is not an imperfect record of reality. The result is a *perfect record* which is at the same time a *partial falsification* of reality, too. It is perfect as a record, due to the physical and/or chemical processes at work. But at the same time it is necessarily imperfect or falsified, when compared to the “God-perspective”: to the knowledge of an omniscient, omnipresent transcendental being, who does not have a point of view or a (defined) place in time, because (s)he is by definition omnipresent and timeless. Because of its universality God’s perspective cannot have a standpoint and cannot become a work of art. These possibilities open up only for us, humans just because our perspective is limited in space, viewpoint and time. The huge gap between the all-encompassing perspective of God and the minuscule perspective of a human being is (seen in a different approach) the field given to us humans for reasoning, observation, for our scientific or artistic formulations.

The main difference between documentary film and fiction film lies (from our present point of view) in the “basic agreement” between the filmmaker and the audience. Any human communication contains markers about some basic agreements between the communicating parties. One of the questions which have to be agreed upon is about the nature of the content communicated:

is it “real” or “fiction”? While the default agreement in human speech communication is “real,” the default of entertainment cinema is “fiction.” If a friend of ours tells us some surprising, astonishing story, we ask him: “Are you kidding?” On the other hand, if a child gets “too” frightened during the bedtime tale, the adult says: “Don’t be afraid, this is only a tale...” In both cases, there was a need to verify, to confirm the basic agreement. While sitting in a cinema, and watching a (fiction) film, the spectator would never ask: “Are they kidding?” – as “they” obviously “are kidding,” that is, the actors are playing the roles of somebody else. Not so in a documentary.²

There the basic agreement states, to quote Branigan, that “the images and sounds of a film documentary [...] have a relationship so close to reality that they become proof of, or at least evidence for, the events that were in front of the camera and microphone at a past time.” And: “the spectator assumes in a documentary that there is a close (casual) connection between the logic of the events depicted and the logic of depicting” (Branigan 1992, 202). With documentary films (and only with documentaries!) the spectator is checking repeatedly “the logic of depicting”, that is the film language employed by the filmmaker that this language does not stray into the directions of fictional filming. With fiction films the spectator exercises his/her “sound scepticism” mostly regarding the content of the film, while the methods of filming are basically uncontested. With documentaries, the scepticism is directed upon the methods of filming, “the logic of depicting,” and if the method of filming is being found impeccable by the spectator, the content of the film is being accepted as “real”³ and can be judged as such. Otherwise, the spectator may reconsider the documentary status of the film, and say: “This film has obviously been written and enacted; this is fiction, not documentary.” With the postmodern, several authors have playfully mixed the documentary and the fiction conventions, exactly to destroy the supposedly petrified perceptions of the audience. But our examples are in the classic tradition, where a mixing of documentary and fiction can happen, but from very different reasons.

To sum up these introductory remarks: following the Hungarian tradition of confronting “the real” with “the truth,” we will examine both aspects of the filmmaking process. How do (the directors of) classical Hungarian documentaries achieve the benchmark of “the real” and how do they transcend this “real” to arrive to “the truth” or to “a truth.”

²See Rothman’s analysis of Griffith’s *True Heart Suzy* vs. Flaherty’s *Nanook* (Rothman 1997, 1–4).

³Branigan quotes a book from 1945: “by avoiding obvious ‘arty’ touches, the director can produce a true documentary feeling on the screen” (Branigan 1992, 206).

Hortobágy (Georg Höllering, 1934–36)

To begin with, *Hortobágy* by Höllering is not a documentary, it is a fiction film played by laymen in real showplaces. The film however contains long documentary sequences. An explanation can be found in the history of the making of the film.⁴ Austrian-born Höllering started shooting documentary sequences at Hortobágy plains, Eastern Hungary in 1934, probably (then yet) without sound. The startling ethnographic and aesthetic quality of the material has led him to the idea of developing it into a feature film. He showed the material to probably the greatest Hungarian writer of the time, Zsigmond Móricz and asked him to write a treatment for a scenario. Móricz, himself of peasant origin, paid a visit to the scene and wrote a short story very quickly: it appeared in the Christmas 1934 issue of the Budapest daily *Pesti Napló*. Höllering continued filming in the summer of 1935, using a sound camera. To the dismay of the writer he transformed Móricz's story at several points. Still, Móricz participated at least for one day at the shooting, and wrote a vivid account of it. Höllering had the roles played by Hortobágy herdsmen, young and old. At the start of the film, Höllering lets Jancsi, the young csikós boy hero of the film tell a few words about themselves, that they are herdsmen, not actors. This introduction has been recorded both in Hungarian and in English (!). (Jancsi knew no English, he studied the text word-by-word.) [Fig. 1.]

Höllering employed the devices of the feature film without any self-imposed limits. As he had changed his mind from documentary to fiction, his aim was not to fit fiction into documentary, but the contrary. The structure of the film got suddenly re-defined by the introduction of the narrative via Móricz's story. Móricz (having seen the documentary material from 1934) obviously did make efforts to keep the story within the framework delimited by the already filmed shots. Höllering in 1935 wanted to make that story into a sellable feature film. His end product is a documentary *malgré-lui*, but also a forerunner of later, narrative-based documentaries.

What is documented in the film *Hortobágy*? Not only in the original material of 1934, but also in the fiction-type material of 1935? Let's make a list: a way of life, the big marketplace *Hídi vásár*, nature, the environment (the *puszta*, horses, cows, sheep), the outside characteristics of the people, their clothes, their tools, and, in a way, the philosophy of Zsigmond Móricz as well, in spite of the poor quality "acting" of the lay actors.

⁴We have several contemporary accounts, see Passuth (1935), Móricz (1935) and Móricz (1934–1936). For a recent analysis (with a slight bias for Móricz and against Höllering) see: Hamar (2009).

This way we can call Höllering's Hortobágy one of the first *docufictions*,⁵ following e.g. Eisenstein's *Old and New* (1929), but preceding by more than ten years *Louisiana Story* (1948) by Robert Flaherty.⁶ *Louisiana Story* has some startling resemblances to Hortobágy.⁷ Both films have a teenage boy as a central hero, who is in some conflict with his family. In both films the boy meets a crew drilling for oil. In both films the world of the machines (oil rig) is being confronted with the animals, with nature. In both films the machine and modernity wins, though the spectators' emotions bend towards the ancient environment and the animals, towards the disappearing old way of life.

Gyuri (Pál Schiffer, 1978)

When Pál Schiffer started to prepare his film about a young Roma, Gyuri Cséplő, [Fig. 2.] he made two very conscious decisions.⁸ First, he wanted to make a narrative film. Beyond aesthetics, this decision had an economic cause: Schiffer wanted the film co-produced by the feature film studio Hunnia, which meant better financing. *Gyuri* was, for a documentary, extraordinarily costly: it was shot in colour 16 mm (a novelty at the time in Hungary), it had to be blown up for 35 mm abroad, to reach the full cinema circuit (at least theoretically), and it had a lengthy shooting time, with long intermissions. Second, he nevertheless wanted his film to be a documentary. For Schiffer this meant that he did everything possible, lots of little and big tricks (though never crossing the line of filmmaking ethics) to keep the filmed events of Gyuri Cséplő's life free from the interference of the camera. Schiffer wanted to avoid interfering with Gyuri Cséplő's integrity, with his control over his life.

In the film three young Roma, Gyuri Cséplő and two relatives, are leaving the third-world-type gypsy settlement in West Hungary for the capital, Budapest. They are looking for a job as unskilled labourers. It had been their decision to go, and Schiffer took pains not to influence the situations with the different companies: these were real job seeking situations, with real positive and

⁵For the term 'docufictions' and Flaherty, see: Bayer 2005, 168.

⁶Let us not forget that at the Mannheim Film Festival 1964 both *Old and New* and *Louisiana Story* have been voted among the (then) 12 best documentaries of all times.

⁷As *Hortobágy* was shown in London first in December 1936, then re-issued in 1945 and shown widely in film societies, we cannot exclude the possibility that Flaherty might have seen it.

⁸Personal communication: the author has spent several months in the team of Pál Schiffer, doing a sociological study of the discussions, following organised film club projections of the film *Gyuri* (cf. Szekfű 1980).

negative outcomes. Also, the three were free at any moment either to continue or to give up. An example: at one of the companies, the clerk examining the three asks whether they can read. Two of the three admit to being illiterates, Gyuri Cséplő says yes, he can. The clerk hands him over a daily paper, and Gyuri slowly but flawlessly reads aloud the paragraph given to him. For the spectator, a further level of artistic effect is being achieved, this time irony. Gyuri has to read aloud the following text: “Premiere of the new series of traditional operas. The Orchestra and Chorus of the Attila József School will perform Absalom by . . . Weber, conducted by József Sas.”

Conclusion: the clerk accepts him, while rejecting the two others. Gyuri Cséplő, without hesitation says that without his relatives he does not accept the job either. Two decisions, which were born in front of the running camera – but still two real decisions, with all the consequences. The clerk decides to accept one, reject two. And Gyuri decides not to accept and stay with his relatives. At the end, the two relatives did give up, while Gyuri Cséplő continued his search. This open-endedness of the situations gives the film *Gyuri* its unique tension.

Never Give Up! (Ne sápadj! Gyula Gulyás, 1982)⁹

This film of the Gulyás brothers (Gyula Gulyás, director and János Gulyás, director of photography) began originally as a multi-part TV-documentary, *Under Domaháza Hills* (*Domaházi hegyek között* . Domaháza is a small village in Northern Hungary, near the Slovak border.) Based on the material of the TV documentary, shot upon several years, *Never Give Up!* is a portrait of a man, Alfonz Medve, a peasant-citizen, as the filmmakers fondly call him. The documentary technique of the film is absolutely traditional: episodes of his daily life, work and leisure, interviews with him, his family and acquaintances. The title of the film comes from the credo of Alfonz: never turn pale, never give up. [Fig. 3.] In the film we have all the ingredients of a quality documentary: the interviews of the film are empathic, the observation is non-obtrusive. Alfonz Medve is an extraordinary character, who suffers prison from the communist authorities because of his efforts to make the village co-operative more competitive on the market. In spite of his imprisonment of sixteen months he is anything but broken, he goes on cultivating his little land, and raising the best cattle in the region. But all these, the good work of

⁹“Ne sápadj!” was translated as “Never give up!” Literally, the translation is “Don’t turn pale!”

the filmmakers, the extraordinary personality and fate of Alfonz Medve would not suffice for a film like *Never Give Up!*.

Looking for the “secret” of *Never Give Up!*, I found in a detailed structural analysis (Szekfű 2004, 295–301) that the episodes of the film follow a multi-layered structure, giving the film a peculiar dynamism. Looking for structural units in *Never Give Up!*, one can find 26 temporary-spatial blocks, or scenes. In the film, these blocks can be positioned on different levels of Alfonz Medve’s life, of human life. Here we can distinguish eight such “levels”: the personal-bodily, including health, the family, the livestock, the ploughland, the meadow, the forest, the village, the co-operative, the country (Hungary), the Carpathian basin with Hungarians living in- and outside Hungary, world history (reference to the Polish events of 1981).

If for analytical purposes we draw eight lines, like on a musical score sheet, we can position the 26 blocks like the notes of a melody. This “melody” of *Never Give Up!* is polyphonic: our “notes” often form “chords,” that is, several scenes have connections to more than one level. These chords resonate in the spectator. It is through this polyphony that the spectator has a living experience of the interconnectedness of Alfonz Medve’s life scenes. This “melody” of *Never Give Up!* is like the line of a tender hill: there is an ascending part, more than two-thirds of the film, there is a 70 seconds peak (more about this below), and there is a descending line with a quiet outstretching tail. During the ascension we witness Alfonz’s work and (political) struggles, his peasant skills, his ways with humans and animals.

The 70 seconds “peak” of the film is a scene, where seemingly almost nothing important happens. Alfonz gets on his coach, and with his horses running, like on a race, drives the coach through the village. There is bright sun, a dog is running along, and geese stretch their wings against the light. This is not a journey with a purpose, the film does not tell us, what his destination is, and there is no arrival at the end of the 70 seconds. This lack of explanation has an inspirational effect on the spectator: one has to find out the missing motivation, and to do this, the spectator is forced to evoke the preceding hour of the film, and to construct a meaning to this incredibly beautiful, unexplained coach journey. Thus, the ride becomes an accumulative symbol of the values in Alfonz’s life, a visual metaphor for his freedom and his ceaseless activity.

Then comes the last quarter of the film, the descent and the calm ending. If in the ascension part we are symbolically in the Empire of the Sun, here we arrive in the Empire of the Moon. The episodes tell us about the price Alfonz had to pay for his integrity (prison, family problems, deteriorating health.) We see him taking a cow to the slaughterhouse, we see the family’s visit to the

cemetery at All Souls' Day, and we see Alfonz at a spa, curing his rheumatism. The scenes suggest in a very calm and tender way that men and animals all have to pass some day, and with age our bodies slowly give up functioning. *Never Give Up!* ends with winter scenes, we even see hunters returning from the hunt, like in Brueghel's famous painting.

Everything in *Never Give Up!* is strictly documental. There is no enacting or re-enacting, things happen naturally, the camera is a witness only. There are interviews but these are like everyday conversations. The secret of *Never Give Up!* is the subtle oscillation between "real" and "truth". This oscillation has been made possible both through the complex ("musical") structure of the film and through the human quality embedded in each scene. The general tone of the film is of the understatement, which after a time leads to a deep, lasting viewer experience. A cosmic, spiritual experience emerges from down-to-earth observations.

Pócspetri (Judit Ember, 1982)

Pócspetri is the name of a poor village in Eastern-Hungary. In 1947 the villagers protested against the taking over of their Catholic school by the state, already led by the Communists. During a protest rally, a dog-fight broke out, and the gun of a policeman present killed the policeman himself. Nobody knew exactly who pulled the trigger, but during a show-trial, two persons, the priest and a well-to-do peasant have been sentenced to death. The priest has been pardoned by the President of the Republic, the peasant was executed. Many peasants were sentenced to imprisonment. Due to well-organised Communist propaganda, Pócspetri became the symbol of the so-called "clerical reaction," it was declared a sinful village, was deprived of investment and development during most of the Communist era.

Judit Ember has in many films sided with the oppressed, the underdogs. A Holocaust survivor herself, she often spoke about turning the memory of Jewish suffering into solidarity with the current oppressed, like the innocent villagers of Pócspetri. Making the film was anything but easy. The shooting was financed by the (state-owned) Béla Balázs Studio of young filmmakers, practically as an historical record, without the hope of a public showing. Though more than thirty years have passed, the people of Pócspetri were still full of fears. (The Communists were still in power in Hungary, and nobody could foresee the collapse of the system in a few years.) The shooting of the film was also a fight against fear.

For the purposes of the present study, let us pick only two aspects of *Pócspetri*: first, the strategies of the director and of the interviewee during filming, and second, the biblical/mythological dimensions.

Uncle Peter is a beautifully aged, frail old man. [Fig. 4.] He is sitting during the interview, accompanied by a younger, but still elderly relative. He is telling the story of his interrogation – he was tortured, his teeth broken. Several times the torturers asked him to sing a church song – and then beat him even more. Then the director (off screen) asks him: how was it, when the policemen instructed his brother Miklós (the man who was to be executed) how he “shot” the policeman. Uncle Péter answers: “I don’t know.” He does not know about “instructions”. But he can tell what he did see. And he tells the story of the instructions in a graphic way. But without interpretation. He can tell what he saw, but he cannot name it. The spectator in the cinema senses the fight of fear and speaking up in Uncle Peter’s soul. Uncle Peter’s strategy is to tell about the sight, but decline the explanation. Who knows, the filming might cause trouble...

The interview continues, and the director (still in off) asks Uncle Peter to sing his role. It turns out that in the village there used to be a passion play, and Uncle Peter was singing Apostle Peter, who rejects the Saviour three times. An incredible moment of the film *Pócspetri* is as we hear this very old man singing the part of the apostle: “Even if all the others reject you, I never will!” And later: “I don’t even know that man!” Why is this documentary moment so forceful? First, because of its impeccable authenticity. But also because of the parallels to the happenings of 1947: the torture, the faith, the betrayals. And, on the third level, Uncle Peter is singing here, just like he had to sing in front of his torturers. And this singing, before the camera, becomes a withdrawal of the humiliations of 1947, a spiritual atonement and compensation for the suffering. Here Uncle Peter is recovering his dignity the torturers stole him in 1947.

There is a less direct, but still very forceful mythological reference in *Pócspetri*: to the Greek mythology, namely to the Electra myth. The story of the last day of the executed brother, his execution, his burial, and the family’s efforts to find him, to identify the body – all these are told in the film by a middle-aged woman in black. The key moment here is that the woman is standing during the whole interview, standing behind a table, like a black exclamation mark. Two patterns mingle here in the minds of the audience: the elements of the Electra myth (standing up for the dignity of the dead) and the elements of the *Pócspetri* story (looking for the body of the executed brother). As Electra could not be persuaded to lay down the mourning-dress, Mrs. Bardi

of Pócspetri is in black, 34 years after the crime, standing rather than sitting. Again, here we have absolutely authentic documentary material, where the connections to mythological structures enhance the effect of the contemporary narrative.

Starting from a 1937 poem of Attila József, which (by pointing to the difference between the real and truth) had enormous influence on Hungarian public thinking, we took a look at four classical Hungarian documentaries. As it could be expected, each filmmaker applied a different strategy to get to the real and then to transcend this real and to get to the/some truth. We had two docufictions (*Hortobágy, Gyuri*) and two documentaries in the traditional sense. (*Never Give Up!*, *Pócspetri*). All four films succeeded in catching the real, and then transcending it.

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