



## “Where is Reality?”

### *Photographic Trace and Infinite Image in Gábor Bódy’s Film Theory*

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**Abstract.** The article deals with the question of indexicality and the nature of cinematic signification drawing upon the terms of Gábor Bódy’s film theory. The trace-like character of cinema is investigated through the medium-specific possibilities of the moving image and the gap inscribed between human perception and the inhumanity of the medium. Both the photographic and the cinematic trace are subject to infinite interpretation due to the inaccessibility of the trace as trace and its transformation into a meaningful sign. Instead of minimal units, cinematic language is based on the logic of seriality and can be interpreted on different levels of meaning attribution. Serial meaning is emphasized as a site where images can enter in endless relations to each other. Finally, Bódy’s theoretical work can be interpreted as a proposal to redefine the status of the image in cinematic signification. Bódy’s short or experimental films are used as examples and realizations of his theoretical considerations.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

The concepts or designations “reality” and “fiction” can be easily replaced in different contexts by the words “truth,” “documentarism,” “authenticity,” “referentiality” and “untruth,” “figuration,” “narrativization,” etc. respectively – according to the discourse one is following. As words or terms invoking different language games they are put to different uses, and often epitomized as alternative modalities or attitudes. In what follows, I would like to put forward a conceptualization of these terms not opposing each other but in a

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mutual interrelatedness. I will rely on the writings of Gábor Bódy, a prominent figure of Hungarian filmmaking in the '70s and '80s, involved in experimental filmmaking as well as in theorizing basic questions related to the cinematic language and processes of meaning attribution. According to Bódy, film is *both* "reality" and "fiction," as a result of the nature of cinematic signification.

His "document-analysis", *Private History* (*Privát történelem*, 1978) is a compilation of sequences selected from home movies made between the two world wars in Hungary. On the one hand Bódy is interested in capturing moments seemingly unimportant from the point of view of the film makers, unintended details, uncontrollable fragments like faces, gestures, movements, signifying accidents. On the other hand, these images assembled one after the other, form different patterns and series beyond their original contexts as amateur movies, in opposition to the functions of personal recordings. There are many ways by which archive film sequences enter in multiple sign relations losing their primary referentiality. Bódy uses freeze-frame, slow motion, blow-up, inserts, repetition, and split screen to emphasize, compare and oppose details and images. As documents of a past world, the images are both meaningful in themselves and exposed to new meaning attributions.

From a critical stance, it can be shown how – through the juxtaposition of sequences – the most personal images, the private sphere of life is invaded by public – political, social, cultural – relations, different forms of entertainment, etc. "Characters" mime, through their gestures, the appearance of film stars in front of the camera; they play little scenes from fiction films, especially from slapstick comedies. Dialogues from contemporaneous feature films, mostly romantic comedies, are inserted into the scenes recorded from domestic life. Popular songs of the epoch, portraits, headlines, illustrations, ads from magazines and papers, political speeches, radio announcements, posters punctuate and comment on every manifestation of life. The most explicit example of this is when the silent sequences are dubbed with the voices reconstructed through the mouth movements read off with the help of a teacher for the deaf and dumb. (A woman says in the film: "Nobody can hear us. We can say anything.") The film is both a reconstructed document and an interpretation, the epoch viewed "through private eyeglasses" (1987, 115) *and* through the superposition of different cinematic codes and genres (Lumière-like actuality films, slapstick comedies, protodocumentaries, news programs, etc.).

The main interest of Bódy, however, is not ideology criticism (unmasking the interrelatedness of personal and social, individual and cultural in the rhetoric of the images), but the nature of the image, especially the photographic image. In an article entitled "Where is reality?" Bódy's point of departure is the

aphorism according to which “Cinema is truth twenty-four times a second” (2006, 105).<sup>2</sup> This could be a normative statement regarding the content, and ethics of the film. But Bódy relegates it to mediality – film and photography being the only media in visual arts which have a direct, material bound with the object itself. The aphorism is erroneously (but not surprisingly) attributed to Bazin and followed by a critique of the relationship stated, linking two incommensurable concepts (“cinema” and “truth”; a technical medium and a normative statement) by a subject-predicate relation. Bódy replaces the normativity of “truth” by the concepts of the ‘trace’ and ‘document’: “As the foot of the fox leaves a trace in the snow, every frame is a silhouette, a death-mask of an instant which took place” (2006, 105). The Bazinian metaphors are obvious here, but Bódy takes this stance to a provocative formulation from the point of view of the Bazinian ontology and aesthetics: the documentary, the imprint-character of the film is visible only insofar as it is articulated as a language. “Where there is articulation, there is also meaning;” “The ‘pure document’, although we know that it is projected to the screen, is invisible for us, it appears only *in the ratio* of document to fiction;” and “we are always watching two films projected on the screen: one is the *document*, the other is determined by the already established conventions of perception and expression” (2006, 105).

The question of this “double projection” brings forward the double-facedness of film bringing together two conceptualizations of cinematic signification which are usually held apart. In a seminal essay entitled “The Semiology of the Cinema” (1969) Peter Wollen pointed out how film semioticians were using a narrowed concept of the sign, and hence language. “The great weakness of almost all those who have written about the cinema is that they have taken one of [the] dimensions [of the sign], made it the ground of their aesthetic, the ‘essential’ dimension of the cinematic sign, and discarded the rest” (1998, 97). Taking as a point of departure Pierce’s taxonomy of signs, the “second trichotomy” (which includes icon, index, and symbol) Wollen demonstrates how the main theoretizations of the cinematic representation are based on merely one aspect of the sign. Bazinian aesthetics is found on the indexical sign stressing “the existential bond between sign and object” and also “the primacy of the object over the image” (1998, 97). Christian Metz, on the contrary, was in search of the symbolic character (in Pierce’s terms), the code-aspect of cinema, using Saussure’s concept of sign defined in the dichotomy between

<sup>2</sup>If otherwise not indicated, the English translations of the Hungarian texts are my own.

natural and arbitrary. Bódy redefines both (indexical and symbolic) aspects of signification in cinema.

## The Photographic Trace

It is obvious that Bódy was fascinated by the reproductive power of the filmic medium which he called tracing: “The dependence of the image on reality is so tight, as if an invisible thread would lead from every point of an image to the corresponding light wave” (2006, 308). He used to cite Antonioni’s intuition on this, according to whom it may be possible that the film strip records everything, and it is our inability to process it which prevents us to see everything in the image. It is evident that the notion of documentarism, of indexicality is very far from a direct, unreflective and reassuring relation with reality.

What is the reality of the mediated photographic image then? In the first place we are dealing with a photochemical reality, an imprint of the visible world, a trace marked by the mediatory possibilities of the medium; and second, the inhumanity of the medium inscribes a gap between the recorded image and the received image. According to the narration of the *Film School* (a series dedicated to initiating young students in “filmic thinking”, entitled “Encounter with the medium”, 1976): “We can take endless images of a detail of reality and there is no reason to assert that one is truer than the other. At the very most we can point out which one is nearer to our sensory conditions. One image displays what the other lets undisclosed, and behind every image lies the possibility of every other image”. The photographic imprint of the visible world is accessible only through different representations. The illustrations of the *Film School* demonstrate how differently lighted and developed images generate different information on ‘reality’.<sup>3</sup> [Figs. 1–2.] Lighting, developing, copying are part of the image making technology, but the moment of contingency and subjective choice is inscribed already in the technical procedures, which makes evident that the trace is created by the tracing process. Reproduction is determined by the possibilities of the medium. Cinematography turns out to be a kind of writing in the Derridean sense of the word: the trace has no identity in itself and it is not given in advance, only through constant differentiation. The trace, as it is “defined”

<sup>3</sup>A similar investigation is carried out by Branigan regarding camera position manipulating the access to knowledge in a narrative interpretation (cf. Branigan 1992, 67–68).

in the deconstructive theories of language, denotes the material condition of representation which cannot be signified, but is nevertheless the foundation of the signification: “the trace itself does not exist,” “in presenting itself, it becomes effaced” (Derrida 1976, 167).

The trace appearing on the border of the sign and non-sign is accounted for by Bódy as “trivial meaning.” ‘Trivial’ does not mean obvious or unequivocal or the denotative meaning, since Bódy stresses that trivial meaning is “determined and endless”, limited regarding its source, but inexhaustible regarding the range of its interpretation. The still image, especially the snapshot selects and isolates a singular moment in time through which the image means nothing else but itself, a singular event and an isolated bloc detached from its context. This lack of context delivers the image to infinite interpretations. Unpredictable and uncontrollable by the image maker, trivial meaning is both overdetermined and empty, causing “the pain of not ever being able to complete images” (2006, 59).

## The Cinematic Trace

The trace at work in cinematic signification acquires a new interpretation when considered as a series of still images. It is known that the illusion of reality in cinema is based on another kind of illusion, namely the illusion of *moving* images. It is the reconstruction of movement which, effacing the trace of the stills (the instantaneity of the moment, its eventuality or chance-character), presents us with a continuous ‘physical reality.’ The illusion of movement appears only when the frames are assembled ‘correctly.’ Projected images of a motionless object taken from a fix camera position meet the criteria of moving images in the same manner as changing views from one frame to another. In terms of reconstructing movement there is no difference between the Lumière-brothers’ actuality films and the illusionism of Méliès’s films. In both cases we are dealing with the re-construction of movement, with the difference that one of them bears a stronger resemblance to our experiences in the phenomenal world. According to Bódy, the movement of the film realized through the projections of the frames is an empty one, a blind force, the emptying of the movement: an “empty flow of affirmation” which “passes with the time and records and mediates the meanings of the referent” (2006, 38). This empty form which generates movement cannot dispense with the traces of the stills. Slow motion, fast motion, the projection of the frames in reverse order, these are all pertaining to the possibilities of the medium proving that moving images only imitate the human perception, but in reality they

are based on an imperceptible mechanism which resects moments from time and reassembles them. The filmic medium creates the simulacra of time and movement when it turns the discontinuity of stills into continuity of movement and sense of time.<sup>4</sup> In Bódy's terms, cinematography is a "time interpreter."

*Motion Studies 1880-1980. Homage to Eadweard Muybridge* (1982) is an experimental film study which investigates the border between motion and motionlessness through the means of film, photography, and graphics. The historical snapshots of Muybridge are laid out by Bódy and animated into film. This passage between motion and stillness becomes a new form through which one can investigate the conceptualizations of the human body in motion. In the second part of the film Bódy turns to "proletarian bodies," instead of the athletes' bodies and women's aestheticized bodies, marked not by the Dürerian grid, but by entangled lines – new forms of the regulation and discipline of the body. [Figs. 3–4.]

Documentarism, indexicality, the trivial meaning end up in Bódy's account as "critical terms", because "he reads the trace-like recording conditioned by technology not as a promise of immediacy, but as its impossible challenge" (Török 2008). Trace is revealed through absence, "pure document [...] appears only *in the ratio* of document to fiction", or as he puts it elsewhere: "Trivial meaning – as something which is real for *people* – is posited by *language*" (2006, 59).

## Cinema as Language: Meaning Attributions

The appearance of the trace automatically qualifies it as a meaningful sign, and Bódy was keen on revealing the multiple aspects of this process. The fact that cinematic images can set themselves free from the "here and now" of their primary context, not signifying what their trivial meaning would be, but elevating to an "imaginary thinking", accounts for a cinematic language or a cinematic thinking. Meanings thus generated are hardly, if at all, expressible in the verbal language: cinematic thinking emerges where words are powerless. Even though cinema is penetrated by verbal language through and through (considering, for example, the preparation phase, the script, the use of the speech as a subcode, or the cinematic metalanguage as an interpretative

<sup>4</sup>There is a new preoccupation with the study of film's photographic basis which investigates the relationship between stillness and animation, life and death, continuity and discontinuity. Cf. Mary Ann Doane 2002, Laura Mulvey 2006, Garrett Stewart 1999, Victor Burgin 2004.

device), cinema reaches the status of art when it thinks and speaks her own language, and not only decorates meanings outside the film.

The necessary condition of language is the capability of generalization, of abstraction. Signs refer primarily to each other in a signifying chain; in fact, Saussure defines language as something with no positive entities, or rather as a system of negative differences. The central conception in Bódy’s work is the series or seriality in cinema. The series is the basis of every language: it implies articulation, repetition and difference. It is a question what the series of images adds to the still image. It adds “logic and time”, says Bódy. Seriality means the potential of liberating images from the confinement of the actual or trivial meaning and endowing them with a “linguistic” meaning which derives from sign-relations. There are no pre-given minimal units (like frames or shots or other sequences), the series has its own law which determines the units. Bódy gives a tripartite categorization of the relations images can establish among each other. The simplest one is the topo-chronological, when adjacent images are assembled in a spatio-temporal relationship. Kuleshov’s creative geography is an example of “showing the form which serves to describe reality” (Bódy 2006, 71). A more abstract way of assembling images is one that emphasizes a common trait of images, even by negating them, neglecting all the other traits, and it is accounted for by the theory of montage. Montage-like structures resemble rhetorical figures (let’s just recall Eisenstein’s preoccupation with the metaphor), but cinematic language can do better than that. “The classical montage emphasized one of the attributes of the event, which then was substituted or confronted with its pair, the result was abstraction to a certain point from the spatio-temporal constraint of the event” (Bódy 2006, 73). Contrary to the rhetorical meaning, serial meaning involves every aspect of the image and relates to the entire context.

In opposition to montage, serial meaning is not dual (“there is a *structural difference* between *serial* and *binominal* meanings” [2006, 151]), it is not totalizing or integrating the parts into one meaning, it is not based on a linear juxtaposition, but infers a “memorial background” (1996, 75); serial meaning is not a visual counterpart to an already given (verbal) concept, but generates an “imaginary conceptuality” which is hardly nameable through words; it gives the “possibility for countless combinations” (1996, 75), “directing the flow of affirmation to different directions” (2006, 155). While trivial meaning in Bódy’s film theory accounts for the endless trace *before* language and meaning, perpetually differentiating itself in interpretation, serial meaning gives way to infinite interpretation *beyond* the verbal language.

In André Gaudreault's formulation film is "the series of series" (2002, 33–47). As an essentially serial phenomenon, film is built on the principle of the series on a twofold level: on the level of the frames and on the level of the shots. There is a constant movement – conceptualized by him as a dialectical movement – between the single ("un") and the multiple: the snapshot seizes one moment, one view of a sight in motion, then these single moments are reassembled to a new unity; the frames lose their seriality to give way to shots which become arranged in new series again. The serial determination of the cinematic medium is a main point in Bódy's argument, as it is expounded in *Series, repetition, meaning*. Contrary to Gaudreault, Bódy speaks of a movement which is endless at both ends, never brings totalization. Photography is the sensory representation of "the biggest fiction, that of the time conceived as a point" (1996, 79), while it is constituted itself by "series of photographs or films": "you could make a ten-minute film about the moment appearing in one photo using the methods of a research film. Surprising things, fantastic-looking motions would be displayed in the beginning" (1987, 283). Chronophotography or long exposition photography condenses moments, "captures" duration as film does. Film is constituted by series of photographs, but photos also consist of series of films. There are no fixed minimal units which could define a semiotics of the moving images: behind every unit there is a multiplicity of differences. The grounding principle of the cinematic language is not the existence of detachable units, but the logic of seriality.<sup>5</sup> Insofar as seriality is a never-ending process of decomposing and rearranging based on the possibilities of the medium, is there a way to apply this deconstructive principle in cinematic meaning attribution?

Bódy gives many examples for this and perhaps the way to understand the concept of the serial meaning is through his close reading of film sequences. I will take one example from his analyses, of a short film made by him, entitled *Hunting a Small Fox* (*Vadászat kis rókára*, 1972). Conforming to ready-made aesthetics, the film is assembled from five different sequences, left over footages of a news program: demonstrations or protest meetings, images of excavators at work, a singer singing an aria, a television signal marking the end of a news bloc, and finally a take with a hunter running across a meadow, turning out to be chasing a small fox, when caught up with it, he kicks it, the fox flies in the air and falls to his feet. Bódy stresses the interconnection of images: every image gets (in)filtrated by the others. The sequences can be arranged in pairs: the

<sup>5</sup>Bódy gives the critique of Metz' grand syntagmatique: "The definition of the syntagms are characterizations of linguistic terms by dramaturgical procedures and vice versa; as a matter of fact they are like a centaur: its hoofs stamp on the stage floor and it squeezes *Grammaire générale* under its arms" (2006, 60).



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images of excavators are in conflict with the images showing the demonstrators (the oppressed vs. power), the aria images could be the abstract or emotional expression of the oppressed, they oppose the excavators by expressing sounds, while the excavators grab in. The final sequence with the little fox could then be understood in this context as the oppression of a very “fragile freedom,” and not, say, as the neutralization of a dangerous parasite. It is worth stressing that in serial meaning images are connected to each other through their relation to other images. For example the connection of the aria-image and the little fox is possible because the aria-sequence is already contaminated by images related to oppression and the exercise of power. The manifold interconnections among images are compared by Bódy to the pinball machine game where the winning trajectory is when the ball touches the greatest number of points, connecting them all.

## **Infinite Image**

Serial meaning then means sign-relations and meanings established in the endless possibilities of traces that images record. It also urges us to a re-interpretation of the status of the image in the cinematic signification. In fact, the concept of the image in film is an abstract one in many ways. Not just because it is an abstraction of a flow of images, moving pictures, the parameters of which are usually changing from one second to the other, alterations which are sometimes hardly traceable by the human eye because of extreme speed, or slowness of the change. The image is also an abstraction because it is an image in the series, it is not an entity for and by itself, but it is constituted through the relations established with other images. There is also a third sense in which an image is an abstraction, as Bódy puts it: “behind every image lies the possibility of every other image”. The image is not a monad, but a complex and multi-layered occurrence with a memory of past and future images. “The image is not a sign, nor an object, but a process which is synonymous with ‘meaning’” (Bódy 2006, 120).

The allegory of this theoretical consideration could be another example from Bódy, “the endless reflection”: two mirrors facing each other. The result is easily imaginable, but never verifiable: “For, standing in the axis of the reflection, one blocks out the reflection oneself. But if the position of the controlling eye is not overlapping with that of the axis, the infinite progression fades out from the sphere of our control at a finite arithmetical point. The infinite reflection thus can only be followed by an incorporeal, transparent

observer” (Bódy 1987, 287). It is, then, our own condition of a material observer of images, which prevents us from witnessing the endless reflection of images and which constrains us to delimit specific meanings and relations from the endless possibilities of the cinematic traces. The “incorporeal subject” is the camera turned face to face to its monitor, but here the resolution of the video image puts an end to endless reflection. The endlessness of images is conceivable, but it is not the object of a sensory experience. Images inform us of an infinity which provokes our conditioned reflexes of vision, our “conceptual cells.” This uncontrollable proliferation of images is staged by Bódy in his film plan, entitled *The Cosmic Eye*. “Radio astronomers register signs constantly without being able to detect their place and origin” (Bódy 1987, 277). First they assume that alien creatures collect data from the visual manifestations of the planet. Later these signals turn to be a “Galactic Newsreel” without any human possessor, visual information “accumulates and dissects itself.” This is the Cosmic Eye, a metaphor of the endless power of images.

“Image is not a sign, but a process” – Bódy unties the concept of the image from reality, the only referents of images become images themselves. The flow of images penetrates the visible world, our culture, language, history, genetics and understanding. Projections, symmetries, marks, imprints, analogies, reflections, mirror images permeate our world and our identity. For Bódy the consequence of this all-pervading imagery is that “images open to infinite meanings. The world is an extremely fascinating and menacing, encouraging and cautioning complex of images” (1987, 273).

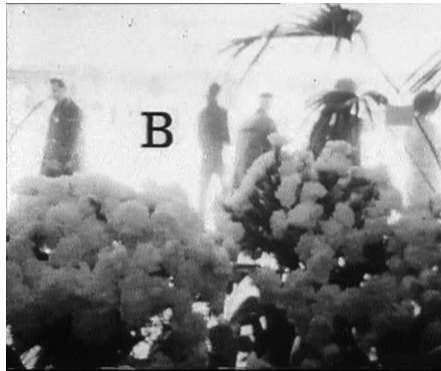
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Figures 1-2: The scale on which information is made available based on variables like lighting, developing, copying (*Film School I*, 1976).



Figures 3-4: Snapshots of Muybridge assembled and animated into film; “proletarian bodies” in motion, “updating” Muybridge (*Motion Studies 1880-1980. Homage to Eadweard Muybridge*, 1982)

