



Cinematic Image and Alterity in András Jeles's Art

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Abstract. The study starts from the premise that the “own” is always formed in relation to some kind of alterity. In this way, the national specificities also depend upon alterities and respectively, the medial specificities (the medium of the image, of the film) are also formed in confrontation with alterities. Starting from the approach of the concept of alterity in view of image theories, the study follows the experience of foreignness which basically determines the reception of the films of András Jeles, providing the reader with the aesthetic experience generated by the alienating effect of the non-filmlike film, of the distorted/deteriorated image, of the intolerable image (Jacques Rancière). The paper touches on the problem of the representation of the national image, identifying the (Hungarian) national character as being also formed in terms of alterities.

Keywords: alterity, experimentalism, new narrativity, representation of national image

The framework of my study consists in the approach to the concept of the image in the context of twentieth-century phenomenology. I will examine alterity in terms of the aesthetic experience of strangeness generated by visual representation, focusing on issues related to image theory brought into discussion, or rather, “into vision” by András Jeles’s cinematic art.

Lévinas’s as well as Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology opposes the approach of the issue of the *Other* represented by Husserl and his predecessors, according to which the cognition of the Other can be conceived on the analogy of the Self (*alter*

ego) and rather solicit the reinterpretation of the concept of alterity from the viewpoint of radical difference, from that of foreignness resistant to the own.

In my view, it is in the light of this concept of alterity that the Otherness of the visual universe created by András Jeles can be comprehended and interpreted in the most legitimate way. One might as well say that in all his films András Jeles elaborates his own aesthetics of the *non-filmlike film*, of the *distorted/deteriorated image*, resorting to devices which urge or compel the spectator to get detached from a usual, stereotypical way of watching and to *face* a deeper experience of foreignness, affected in his/her entire existence.

The image-event, displaced towards revelative, radical otherness, is accompanied by a thematic representation of alterity/alienation, carried out in ever widening circles: at an individual level, that of an adolescent hero in search for his identity in the framework of social order in *Little Valentino (A kis Valentino)*, (1979), at the level of a social layer, in the story, more precisely, *non-story* of the working class of the past regime in *Dream Brigade (Álombrigád)*, (1983), at the level of an ethnic group in the Holocaust-themed *No Man's Land (Senkiföldje)*, (1993), as well as at the ontological-anthropological level of human existence in *The Annunciation (Angyali üdvözlét)*, (1984). In this ever enlarging horizon the viewer is confronted with the realisation that the basic experience of human existence, at the same time, the ultimate, legitimate scope of representation is foreignness, alienation.

The world view transposed in András Jeles's work into cinematic images, into "adaptation" and into "story" respectively, also integrates reflections upon the representation of the national character, but it is far from the angle of the persona of an artist assuming collective commitment. Here the problematics of Hungarianness, through a system of artistic gestures aiming at national self-interpretation, is also inscribed into the problematics of foreignness in broader sense; the own becomes presented in terms of the Other. For András Jeles, representing the pre-war conditions of the Jews as a parable of alienation can function as the readiest means in this respect, especially as at Miklós Erdély, who had influenced his views to a great extent, this topic and its cinematic references are also present.¹ In this way, in András Jeles' film entitled *No Man's Land* the history of the persecution of the Jews turns into a transposed Hungarian parable of fate (and naturally, beyond this, into a universal parable of being, dissecting the urging problem of infanticide portrayed as a human product).

Furthermore, in his film entitled *Joseph and his Brothers – Scenes from a Peasants' Bible (József és testvérei – Jelenetek egy parasztbibliából)*, (2003) the *mise-en-scène* of stories from the Old Testament, profanised by the iconographic

¹ In 1981, Miklós Erdély shot a film entitled *Verzió (Version)* in Balázs Béla Studio about the trial of Tiszaeszlár subsequent to the disappearance and death of Eszter Solymosi. It is a free transcript of Gyula Krúdy's documentary-novel written in 1931 dealing with the antisemitic show trial from 1882.

set into a Hungarian worldly series of events, is offered as a humorous-ironical overwriting of the Hungarian tradition of national self-interpretation, which throughout its cultural history has frequently projected its own fate into that of the Jewish people.

Firstly, I will discuss some aspects of the topic of visual foreignness, which I will illustrate by the solutions in imagery elaborated by Jeles's experimental film, offered as both an anthropologic and aesthetic construct.

András Jeles's visual and sonic solutions are aimed at conceptually overwriting the kind of aesthetic experience which is the result of the consonance of the impressions perceived by the senses and which can be epitomised by the Augustinian term *voluptas*; instead, the dissonance between the image and the soundtrack, the various layers of the sound played off against the visual and against one another result in the kind of aesthetic experience which can be best described by making use of the Augustinian term *curiositas*. These Augustinian terms, taken over by Hans Robert Jauss in discussing the diachronic changes of aesthetic experience (Jauss 1997), are applied to avant-garde and neo-avant-garde aesthetics by Magdolna Jákfalvi, Hungarian scholar specialised in the avant-garde theatre, in which, she says, *curiositas* prevails, the conventional conditions of *voluptas* are not created, in this way aesthetic experience becomes an event distinguished by moments of alienation, testimony and exposure (Jákfalvi 2006).

If we situate the concept of foreignness in the context of art history, on the one hand, we evidently have to take into account the change of the concept of art itself; being aware of this, according to Gadamer, proves to be a prominent assignment not only for aesthetes or philosophers but for every human being, as it is important for everybody related to art in one way or another or seeking connections with it to consider the change that has taken place in art and in its view (Gadamer 2006). Basically, this change is related to the emergence of the art "no-longer-beautiful," defying our concept of art deeply rooted in the aesthetics of Romanticism.

Jacques Rancière emphasises the importance of distinguishing between the intolerable presented on the image and the intolerable character of the image in an age that seems not to believe in the "means of testimony about reality" and resists the gesture of disclosure (Rancière 2011: 60). Through the Brechtian effect of alienation, András Jeles's "intolerable images" mobilise the intentions of testimony and disclosure. In Jeles's films it is not only the spectators but also the protagonists that have to confront with the limits of comprehension. Thus, absurd-grotesque game spaces are created; in them, the possibility of interpersonal communication, the finality of being, the conditions of a meaningful existence are questioned, in accordance with the concretisations and practices of the avant-garde mode of artistic expression, which interprets artistic creation as an independent discourse, detached even by the norms of reception (cf. Jákfalvi 2006: 212).

The discourse of András Jeles' films, radically differing from the classical mode of narration in the Bordwellian sense, as well as from representational schemes of cinematic fiction, has to be situated, in the first place, within the context of experimentalism, and secondly, in that of cinematic *new narrativity* emerged in the late 1970s.

Abstract film, absolute film, avantgarde film, independent film, experimental film, expanded cinema, environments, project film, concept art, structural film, underground film, or with their common term, experimental film art is, as a matter of fact, tautology. In the wider sense of the term, experiments no longer exist, as we are permanently in the process of experimentation, in other words, art is born on the soil of experimentation; art resists convention – at least until the moment it becomes convention itself. Several experimentalist artistic endeavours are already regarded as canonised forms. Still, in the narrower sense, the term “experimentalism” indicates a multivocal film trend getting shape in the 1970s and 1980s, initiating various forms of dialogue with the film culture of the early avant-garde.

In the period under discussion experimentalism is related to a subversive way of operating with signs. The term *subversion* was put into the use of a semiotics-based art theory by the structuralists of the 1960s, primarily by the authors of the *Tel Quel* journal, who turned their attention towards sign systems and procedures of meaning constitution representing destructive or subversive potential as opposed to structures, ideologies and other symbolic systems supported by the power, by established customs or norms (cf. Kristeva 1971).

In Hungarian film history, experimentalism does not refer to a specific style of film expression, but rather to the artistic endeavours of kindred spirits, such as András Jeles, Gábor Bódy and Miklós Erdély, who wished to relieve Hungarian cinema of the ideological sediments that considerably restricted the possibilities of expression. From among the three, András Jeles has proved to be the survivor; in his published diary notes he confesses his inner attachment to Bódy and to Erdély: “As we all sink deeper and deeper – they in death, as in some kind of honey, whereas I in the mud and chaos of my life –, as we keep drawing away (at least still for some time) – I miss them more and more painfully. Thus, in our *meeting* something worthy and majestic must have taken place, which, of course, we ourselves had not noticed; I could call it the *harmonisation of essences*, rhyme – love” (Jeles 2000: 12).

József Havasréti, researcher of the forms of cultural resistance in the Hungarian culture of the respective period, argues that the subversive power of the neo-avant-garde artistic language proved to be more powerful than in the western world where the underground cultural movements were actually born. “The sophisticated system of taboos and dogmas, the obscure character of the rules of the game, the unforeseeable improvisations of culture control, the paranoid sensitivity of the controlling organs formed together such a norm kit, as compared

to which any avant-garde or experimental endeavour may have been regarded as subversive” (Havasréti 2006: 131).

In the specialist literature of Hungarian film history there exist the terms “the 1970s,” “the 1980s” as categories of periodisation, however, Gábor Gelencsér and András Bálint Kovács treat them with restraint, since the periodisation of Hungarian film history does not necessarily adjust to the succession of decades. In the context of the 1970s Gábor Bódy’s *American Torso* (*Amerikai anizs*, 1975) can be rightfully regarded as the landmark of Hungarian experimental film, as the forerunner of alternative ways of filmmaking, of a kind of *new narrativity* in film (cf. Kovács 2002: 241-242).

The greatest achievements of the 1980s are condensed into the frame of the year 1983: Gábor Bódy’s *Dog’s Night Song* (*Kutya éji dala*) as well as András Jeles’s *Dream Brigade* can be related with the *prose turn* taking place in Hungarian literature.² These films touch on existential experiences and oppose ideological concepts specific of the respective regime, in this way experimental film becomes a possibility of breaking taboos and of creating a field of resistance. However, this resistance primarily manifests itself as a resistance to traditional ways of visual expression. Still, *Dream Brigade* was confiscated even before it was released, as it offered a counter-narrative, at the same time a devastating critique of the “production film,” genre of the 1950s conveying the ideology of the working spirit of the early communist regime. András Bálint Kovács highlights the deadlock character of the search for ways of expression represented by the mentioned films, as they indicate close down the boundary of a period, but it appears that they do not open a new one, standing as “monuments of the end of a twenty-year-long film historical tradition without showing the possibility of continuity” (Kovács 2002: 250).

The primary aim of new narrativity consists exactly in the retraction of medial and generic automatisms. As Zoltán Gregus asserts about the films of new narrativity, “It is by no means a kind of ‘new symbolism’ which gains place in these films; on the contrary: the primary level of meaning does not get dissolved in the general meaning guided by the representation, instead, it appears in its strangeness diverging from the customary” (Gregus 2009: 119). This produced-emerging foreignness is considered attainable by film directors of this period, among others, through the reinterpretation and proliferation of the possibilities of expression of documentary films.

In Gábor Bódy’s use of the term, “documentary” goes beyond the authority of a film genre, acquiring significance at the level of film philosophy. On the grounds of a critical consideration of Bazinian realism, Bódy emphasises the power of film to reproduce the traces of reality, and aligns himself with the view that while the

² One of the landmarks of the Hungarian prose turn is Péter Esterházy’s *Production Novel* (*Termelési regény*, 1979).

various forms of representation preceding the motion picture represent objects as being distant, the film forms an organic, *indexical* relation to the reproduced segment of reality. In his writing entitled *Where is "Reality"?* he argues that the film's photochemical or magnetic recording is conceived as a procedure of recording the imprints of the real: "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" (Bódy 2006: 105). Accordingly, the cinematographic image creating imprints of the objects of reality is basically of documentary character. Thus, every film is, in the last instance, of documentary character. However, this trace-like documentary character of the cinematic image is unavoidably and necessarily overwritten by artistic mediation, by the rhetoric of fiction transforming reality into image series. This dual character of the cinematic image is what his term *double projection* refers to: "The pure document, though we know well that it runs on the screen, is invisible for us, it appears only in the *ratio* of document to fiction. (...) It is no exaggeration to say that the 'documentary' is the philosophy of film" (Bódy 2006: 105).

Whereas Bódy expounds his views upon the dialectical unity of document and fiction, Jeles's *Theory and Action* (1976) regards document and fiction not in terms of reconcilable unity, but as embodying a sharp antagonism; thus, he rejects traces of fictionality in film, for they are unavoidably burdened by the ideological debris of narration. Jeles considers stylisation as the possibility of the escape from the ideological contents of narration and fiction. According to Gábor Gelencsér, "(...) Jeles' work focuses not on theoretical and practical issues of 'documentarism and/or fiction,' but on the issue of the style" (Gelencsér 2002: 395). At Jeles the function of stylisation consists in playing off the particularities of fiction and documentary against each other.

The fiction film entitled *Little Valentino* (1979) may properly exemplify the function of stylisation highlighted above: a filmmaking of documentary-like tonality is mingled with stylised role-plays; the text written over the image signals the influence of the French New Wave cinema, especially that of Godard, at the same time turning a *quasi-trouvée* cinematic image into artefact. Language, present whether in form of interpersonal communication or inscriptions, is distorted, deteriorated, it is deprived of its function of rendering some kind of articulated meaning, and is pushed towards the edge of becoming iterative, and thus, self-effacing, of becoming a noise (cf. Gregus 2007). The revelative value of this found cinematic image, as well as of found meaning is expressed by an *ars poetica*-like "impossible" visual solution: the message of the statue suddenly appearing out of a burnt-up garbage container might be relevant for the entire work of Jeles, referring to the event-like character of art, being revealed in the Heideggerian sense of *Ereignis*.

Therefore, stylisation in *Little Valentino* is present as a dissonant contrapunctual quality to documentarism, as a means resulting in visual and sonic alterity. The adolescent protagonist is seeking for himself among the adverse incommensurability

of familiarity and foreignness, his search for an alternative may be regarded as a parable of the relationship of the individual to the society, to social order, while the film itself as the first stage of the Passion outlined by Jeles' films.

In the *Dream Brigade* (1983) representing the next stage, the parable of alienation appears not as the story of the individual, but rather as the *non*-story of a social group, that of the working class. Here stylisation, the various effects of visual alienation, the destructive apparatus of the film contrasts primarily the schemes of narration, while at a deeper level it penetrates all filmic means of expression, from the *mise-en-scène* through composition and structure, to the relationship of sound and image. The *Dream Brigade* reiterates earlier narration types, firstly the discourse of propaganda movies of the 1950s. It systematically distorts any technique of traditional filmic narration. In a classical Aristotelian sense, there is no narrated story, there is no conclusion, the rehearsal of the worker-actors is not crowned by the performance, the film's closure alienates into a surrealist vision, forming a counter-narrative which Tibor Hirsch terms "the last Hungarian production movie" (cf. Hirsch 2004).

I shall mention some of the elements of the "subverting narration": the narrator's voice outside the image frame seems to boast his full domination over the narration in the shower-scene, when he literally "dresses up" the naked worker. His omniscience however soon turns into its opposite: not only does he not understand the story, but he also renounces his "office," giving over his place to the narrator who reads Gyula Oláh's diary, sometimes stalling, the reading of the diary entries functioning as narrator's comments partly with the bigotry of a party official, partly with the cynicism of an informer. In the course of further scenes, the narrators pass through narrative levels, their voices and the voices of the actors try to reconstruct a lost and disintegrating story, unable to become meaningful.

The grandiose words of "company", "syndicate", "party committee", "housing problem", "working class", "solidarity", "personal cult" are embedded into an incomprehensible, meaningless context, the discourse of the dominant ideology is torn apart in obscure dialogues. The narrator's voice and the actors' voices are superposed on occasions, or the actors speak over each other: both procedures are meant to undermine comprehensibility. Fragmentariness sneaks under the level of elementary units, that is, the level of words in language, and the level of a scene in filmic image (words stripped apart into vowels and consonants, scenes broken by intercalated images and image quotations).

The film also rewrites the function of montage, the juxtaposition of images translates a kind of Dadaist randomness, an arbitrary succession of images, rather than a classic Eisensteinian $1+1=3$ composition, cause-effect relation, and surplus of meaning. The image frame and the voice frame do not overlap, the narrator's comment, the musical soundtrack, noises and various sound effects cross the borders of the individual scenes. At the end of the film, the idea of collectiveness is

ironically deleted in single-sentence-long "monologues" and slowed-down sound recordings of individuals standing with their sides or backs to the camera.

Jeles's film entitled *The Annunciation* (1984), representing a step further from the level of society towards the level of universal human condition, reveals a contradictory attitude to language, manifested, on the one hand, in Jeles's paying tribute to the literary text, to Imre Madách's *The Tragedy of Man*, and on the other hand, in his mistrust in the language bearing on itself the imprints of ages and ideologies. This duality is present as a tense contrast in the four adapted scenes. Just like in *Dream Brigade*, the division of words into vowels and consonants uttered by different child protagonists appears in this film as well, deteriorating the conditions of comprehension. *The Annunciation* contrasts the viewpoints of tragic depths of existence and children's innocent naivety, and this results in a grotesque quality of the images. This contrast becomes strikingly evident in the *danse macabre* of the London scene, in which the children perform the memorable sentence from Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*: mothers "give birth astride of a grave."

Similarly, the child's perspective and the incomprehensible and unprocessable trauma of reality are confronted in Jeles's Holocaust-themed *No Man's Land* (1993), in which the literary, artistic and musical representations of child suffering and child death deepen the horizon of the film. Gábor Schein writes about the film: "Thus, *No Man's Land* is not interested in the final phase of the Holocaust, in the otherwise unrepresentable extermination camp, in the human suffering deprived of everything personal, but rather in the loss of home, in the inward and outward story of becoming a foreigner. It is interested in the way one who used to be somebody the day before becomes a nobody, and in the way a country becomes a no man's land" (Schein 2004: 62). In Jeles's vision the focus on the Jewish fate becomes meaningful in broader terms, namely in those of the hopeless confrontation with the powerful authority striving not for accepting and getting to know the Other in its alterity, but for its extermination.

The last film to be mentioned here is *Joseph and his Brothers – Scenes from a Peasants' Bible* (2003), which parallels two passion stories told in different registers, determined by distinct cultural codes: the story of a prostitute and that of Joseph and his brothers, completed by further figures and episodes from the Peasants' Bible. The parallel stories of defencelessness can be regarded as "leading out" of the realm of familiarity in the film. In their own ways both storylines perform the rite of deteriorating the motion picture: the episodes of the prostitute story recorded with special filters lend an infernal quality to the spectacle, whereas the biblical story is performed in form of a shadow play, which reduces the three-dimensional motion picture into two dimensions, turning the actor's motions into theatrical stylisation.

The representation of the biblical stories by means of iconographical elements alluding to the Hungarian national character is based on the frequent associations,

in Hungarian culture history, of the fates of the Hungarians and the Jews. Miklós Erdély regards this analogy as a complementary relation: “The emotions of Eastern-European people and the painful complaint of the Jews are also in a complementary relationship. Typical complementarity” (Erdély 1995: 250). Jeles explores the humorous side of this fate analogy in the shape of a Hungarian stereotypical figure, that of the gendarme wearing a cock-feather ornamented hat, jumping out of the manure heap. In the burlesque-like shadow play episode God’s angel kicks into the manure heap and a “Hungarian” jumps out of it, he curses and wants to check the identity of God’s angel. The episode is accompanied by the following words uttered by the narrator’s voice: “Where are you for the time being? Then he made such a gesture as if the window were dim, then he wiped it. Thus, the matter of the Hungarian was dropped for the time being” (cf. Varga 2004: 72-73). Evidently, the anachronistic ethnical stereotype is the source of humour, but at the same time it also has an alienating effect, offering an ironical reading of the matter of national character.

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