



A Common Image Loss, A Common Memory Image

Attempt for an Anthropology of Art

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Abstract. Teilhard de Chardin writes: “Man, ever since he has existed, offers himself as a spectacle for himself. In fact, he has been regarding nothing else for millennia than himself”.¹ In search for the meanings of regard, spectacle, and vision, we have chosen the syncretic field of art since works of art initiate mechanisms of cognition the duration of which goes beyond perception. This is what we have experienced in the case of Federico Fellini’s (1920-1993) film *Rome* (1972), and János Gécz A.’s (1953-2005) short story *Mint szénagyűjtéskor az árnyékban* [*Like at Hay Gathering, in the Shade*]. Fellini is a legendary figure in the history of film, while János Gécz A., the outstanding Transylvanian writer, editor of *Kriterion* and *Polis* Publishing Houses, founder and head of *Kalota* Publishing House, who passed away tragically early, is only known by few. His individual volumes are: *Holdfényben* (*In Moonlight*, 1987), and *Patthelyzetek* (*Deadlocks*, 1992).

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Writing changes in time even within a given sign system, it is simplified, its logic becomes different. An image however has the same elementary and immediate effect on its onlooker even after thousands of years. Cave paintings, to the best of our present knowledge, primarily had a role in community building, with mystical

¹ Quoted by Péter Nádas as a motto to his lecture *Az égi és földi szerelemről* (*On Heavenly and Worldly Love*).

powers attributed to them (for instance, power over the beings they represented); the image living underground entered in a dialogue with its onlooker. Both the film and the short story mentioned are stories of such an underground encounter: there the image, disturbed in its (sacred) intimate concealment, takes effect and is ruined at the same time. They wish to develop the eternal city – let this be the centre. On the periphery, in the town of Torockó (Rimetea) between the “Birgej” and the Székelykő (Szekler’s rock), the human presence slowly fades away, while the built heritage increasingly becomes a mere stage set: Adam and Eve may look at each other only as a couple alive and dead. (The short story mentions the hillside (Bergej) famed because of the burial places hollowed into the rocks by the name of “Bergi”. The name of the town Torockó does not appear in the text.)

The shaping of society is the history of civilisation, the human-guided process of interference. The selected episodes of both the short story and the film are motivated by a (good or evil) thirst for knowledge. This is what Dante calls “natural thirst”.² Beyond curiosity, however, economic factors are also observed when man wishes to surface, or at least see or understand, the (material) sources of the past. Our thematic comparison parallels the entire short story with a fragment from the film.

The short story presents a mysterious attempt of a father and son to overturn a grave; the son thinks he saw a female shape in the rock grave which resembles his mother, but which turns to dust instantly because of the light and air that penetrates inside, drawing the son into an eternal internal sway of obsessions.

The mosaic-structured film presents Rome through Fellini’s eyes, with the help of past and present episodes.

The journey to knowledge

The look is drifting with the swirl of the city, amongst the always-noisy inhabitants of Rome. This is how the director characterises his creative state: “I was like an archaeologist, who joins the bits and pieces of ancient vases, while trying to guess how the missing parts could have looked like. Rome itself is just like a broken ancient vase; they always patch it up so that it wouldn’t fall apart, but it still preserves its original secrets here and there. I get excited thinking about the different levels of my city, and wonder what lies there hidden in the depths, under my feet.”³ (Chandler 1998: 195) The eye penetrates these levels. Imagination, memory, dreams, the figures of the past are just as alive in Fellini’s panopticon as those of the experienced present. *Rome*, as several of his other films, was inspired

² XXI. 1. (Purgatory). Translated by H.F. Cary.

³ Later Fellini says, “While I was shooting *Satyricon*, I was under the influence of frescoes. The people who once lived their lives in reality, have become shapes on weathered frescoes by the end of the film”. And indeed: Encolpius’s image is absorbed in the wind.

by a dream: “I saw before my mind’s eyes how in the first century after Christ I stepped into an intactly preserved house in Rome, as if I had lived there myself.” (ibid.: 200) Of all the dimensions of the past, it directs the imagination towards the spaces of life, and not the locations of funeral culture. He seeks and finds in the past that what is alive, the figures which bear the colours of life.

In the short story, the father and son arrive from a village, but not in order to present their last honours, according to the local custom, to a newly deceased person, but to rebury an old one; following this taboo-breaking act, they return in the same way they came, although the younger of the two in a confused state of mind.

Hypogeum

Dante’s *Divine Comedy* emerges as a useful ground in the series of alternatives for comparison, as a *poema universale* containing interpretive principles which mingle narration and image use, popular beliefs and erudite creation. In addition to the motif of the journey of knowledge, the emphatic position of social knowledge may lend a stylish status to this double-authored interpretive attempt.

In the two stories the glance explores the underground dimension of secrets. *Underground* means at the same time an “underground” vehicle (a metro), as well as everything else that lies beneath the ground: secretive, hidden, self-regulating, forbidden, or mystical organisation, as opposed to things happening on the surface. The pioneer, becoming aware of his violation of the boundaries, recoils, as he perceives the defence mechanism of that undecipherable territory, back to his own used-up world, up below the sun (because as a reflected Icarus he approached the secret too closely). The profound knowledge of the earth lies underground, and its disturbance implies serious consequences.

These depths must not be discovered alone: in both works the anxiety caused by the events going against the bans is dissolved by collective experiences. The burden of the secret is not physical, yet it can be shared. The earth is a reflecting surface – like a bottomless lake which does not reflect the features of the person who looks into it, but an inner, invisible self, in a formation outside his body, yet connected to it. Finding ourselves is the search itself. Engineers who built metro tunnels spoke about a place called *Cessati spiriti*, where the underground river springs (maybe the Styx itself?). In Dante’s *Inferno* we meet a similar tendency to revive and modernise the traditions of Antiquity, where the association of Virgil and Dante represents the dialogue of various ages, and the heterogeneous elements of the setting fuse into a complex space in the course of their journey.

Image vision

Words are not superfluous in Fellini's film. The cries of surprise echo concrete and abstract meanings, and cause a Babel-like chaos:

"Michael, look at their faces."

"Keep your mask on."

"It is as if they were looking at us! Look! Direct the light down there!"

"The frescoes are starting to fade."

"Because of the air streaming in from outside. The fresh air ruins the frescoes."

In this episode taking place in the present, the crew visits the building site of the Roman metro. The drilling machine exposes the ruins of an ancient villa in front of their eyes, but because of the polluted 20th century air the frescoes that have been untouched for centuries now start to fade out.

János Géczi's hasty old man shares a similar experience with his son, who moved to the city and lost connection with popular beliefs: "the grave is moving... It got air and now everything is falling apart... Coffins and everything degrade now more than as if it had remained untouched for ten more years."⁴ (Géczi 2009: 42)

The curiosity about the past creates imaginary visions, which carry within themselves the transience of living beings; we know, it is true, the work of art must gain its independence from its creator, yet it is interesting, nevertheless, to see how Fellini explains his dream, the pre-existence of the film: "as I opened the previously hermetically closed doors of the rooms, the degradation that had been delayed for centuries now began in front of my eyes. Statues and frescoes turn to dust in one single instance, encompassing two thousand years" (idem. 200). Rome's distant past (the pomp of ancient Rome: as a school subject, as impressive architecture preserved in ruins, as the theme of feature films), near past (the chaos of the world during and after the war), and present (traffic jams, organic city atmosphere, Rome of the hippies, which Fellini himself – similarly to Dante who appears as well in his own work – records with a film crew) are all present.

In Fellini's film one faces a reverse process of developing, in which images are not revealed, but disappear, become latent by the effect of light. The figures on the painting withdraw to an invisible dimension, away from the obtrusive eye. The drilling machine breaks the way for the regard in the tunnels of the unknown, just like the digger in the short story. Géczi's *hypogeum* is also a delusion, resembling the cave of Plato's ideas, it shows a world of shadows instead of a real one. No mortal can live with an experience or knowledge of the otherworld and not long for that otherworld. Dante expresses this psychological question with the rivers of

⁴ The translation of the Géczi-fragments belong to the authors.

oblivion, by the juxtaposition in part 28 of the *Purgatory* of the two rivers (Lethe, the river of forgetting, and Eynoe, the river of good remembering, both of an existential importance). However, the grave diggers of János Géczí A. did not drink from the water of good remembering.

Paradiso, song XVII

“Però ti son mostrate in queste rote,
nel monte e ne la valle dolorosa
pur l'anime che son di fama note,
che l'animo di quel ch'ode, non posa
né ferma fede per essempro ch'aia
la sua radice incognita e ascosa,
né per altro argomento che non paia.”⁵

Women figures form the object of contemplation in film and short story alike. The sitting female figure, blurred in the burial vault, and the monumental white statue of a woman, ruling over the two thousand-year-old house, raise in the onlooker the simultaneous feelings of being lost and finding home at the same time. An enrapturing attractiveness emanates from them, just like from the ancient representations of the *Magna Mater*. In Fellini's *Rome* the city's femininity is emphasised everywhere, starting from the she-wolf in the Capitolium, through the girls in the brothel and the huge mother-image lying in her bed, to the appearance of the greatest Italian actress of the time, Anna Magnani, playing herself. Therefore all the concrete or symbolic instances of the motif of entrance in the film can be interpreted as an act of penetration, as the possession of all new mediums, the transgression of boundaries, wanted or unwanted initiations: the Rubicon, the forbidden images of childhood, cinema and the Variété, the brothel, the lengthy entrance to Rome (the tent of the rain seems to turn the motorway into a tunnel), the drilling of the underground channels of the metro. The deep hollow in the ground may also be a metaphor of the absence of the mother in Géczí's short story.

(In Marsala, on the 2B fresco of the *Crispia Salvia hypogeum*, a group of men holding each other march towards a female figure seated on a throne. The formation is very similar, except that the group on the wall shown in the film is made up of women.)

⁵ <http://www.centocanti.it/Template/detailCanti.asp?LN=IT&IDFolder=198&ID Oggetto=2037>; English translation: “Therefore are shown to thee within these wheels, / Upon the mount and in the dolorous valley, / Only the souls that unto fame are known; / Because the spirit of the hearer rests not, / Nor doth confirm its faith by an example / Which has the root of it unknown and hidden, / Or other reason that is not apparent.” Translated by H. W. Longfellow.

http://www.everypoet.com/archive/poetry/dante/dante_x_17.htm

Cognition

Digging – in both works – actually fulfils the role of suspense. There are two given points between which a connection, a tunnel must be made. A channel. (Let us think of Jakobson's communication pattern, the connection made between the transmitter and the receiver.) The creation of the contact between the searcher and the searched, the feeler and the felt takes time. Because this is about nothing else but touching the *spectacle*. In *Rome* the spectator finds out sooner about the house behind the wall than the group of drillers. In the short story, the father knows about the existence of the grave sooner than his son. It is as if the secret were prior to any kind of viewpoint.

In his *Confessions*, Saint Augustine connects the meanings of perception, thinking, and remembering to metaphorical places. "And I enter the fields and spacious halls of memory, where are stored as treasures the countless images that have been brought into them from all manner of things by the senses. There, in the memory, is likewise stored what we cogitate, either by enlarging or reducing our perceptions, or by altering one way or another those things which the senses have made contact with; and everything else that has been entrusted to it and stored up in it, which oblivion has not yet swallowed up and buried. (...) The vast cave of memory, with its numerous and mysterious recesses, receives all these things and stores them up, to be recalled and brought forth when required. Each experience enters by its own door, and is stored in the memory. And yet the things themselves do not enter it, but only the images of the things perceived are there for thought to remember."

Remembering is thus similar to light, which suddenly or gradually gains ground in the cave inhabited by memories. Aristotle's *eikons* linger in the mind deep down, unseen, passively hidden.

The sin of iconoclasm

"At least I don't have to watch inside" (Géczi: 44) – Bandi tells himself in the short story, as he irresistibly strives to see something absolutely clear.

The quick degradation and disappearance of the images can seemingly be explained by scientific reasons: the opening of the closed spaces with constant temperature, the penetration and guidance of the light initiates the process of destruction. In the symbol system of Fellini's films, the wind always stresses an emphatic episode in the film, its presence indicates transgressible boundaries of dimensions and time levels, it accompanies on the way of mental wanderings (memory, insanity), creating all over the same kind of cosmic monumentality on the level of sound effects which is there also in the spectacle. The wuthering wind does not only penetrate the tunnel thus as a natural element, mingling within itself

the cries of the “colonisers” of the space, but it also stirs up everything that has layered in the course of time, it conjures ghosts, it overthrows the state of balance, it degrades the uniformity of the surface (of earth, of consciousness).

The short story draws the reader into the unutterable spaces of consciousness: “Deeper inside the peg-shaped corner, a strange heap... not a heap, a shape... A formation – he realised. When someone sits leaning against a tree. Women sit like this on the meadow at hay gathering, in the shade.” (ibid.)

The boy sees in the darkness, he explains the perception:

“Look, there, in the corner, somebody leaning against the tree ... I mean to the rock... Under the influence of shock, he grabbed the lamp from the Old Man’s hand. And he lit the corner with wild curiosity. For the fragment of a second they still saw the web-like golden streams of the headpiece tilted forth, the untouched ribbons which filled the space which opened between the headpiece and the skirt, round even in its transparency, no longer as ornaments but as necessary clams. Then the beam of light reached its target. Under its live weight, the formation succumbed, freeing billions of whirling-quivering dustmotes.” (Géczi 2009: 46) (Or was it just a spider’s web that was shining, an inner image which was reflected on the wall of the stone grave? The writer knows how to conceal, suggest, and leave us alone in this vision). The image – the seated woman – displays the special body position of a sacrifice rite, as a family *ex voto* for the salvation of the deceased, the final rest of the possibly haunting figure. Untying, searching, apology, sending-off.

Punishment

The profane curiosity is followed in the short story by a sort of psychological punishment. The contrapasso⁶ (the punishment) appears in several parts of the *Divine Comedy*. Several inhabitants of the Inferno and the Purgatory are inflicted with punishments, which may be equal in degree to the sin they committed in their lifetime. In the case of the fourth *bolge* (bolgia) (Inferno, song XX), the heads of sorcerers and witches stand reversed on their necks. They wanted to see the future that is why their eternal punishment is to always see the past, both in a literal and figurative sense. They freely chose themselves this fate, by the decisions they had made in their lives (Brand and Pertile 1999: 63-64). What is the punishment of he who watches?

“Why haven’t you told me before it was here?” the son asks his father.

“We would have been peeping all the time”, the father confesses his obsessions identical with his son’s (Géczi 2009: 44). Whoever sins with his eyes, loses his sight

⁶ Counterpoise in English.

(or rather his rational judgment), “My mother used to sit like that all the time” (Géczi 2009: 45) – argues the boy while pushed to the surface, and the simile equally reveals recollection and the Icarus-like destruction of the strength of mind.

The concluding images of the film *Rome* contain no human speech. The rumbling swarm of motorbike riders rushes through the stations of the city at night, which are tourist sites during the day. Bíró Yvette writes about this scene: “The deafening siege of sounds, the experience of movement in a wild tempo in the midst of the innocent beauties and precious art treasures of the world’s most museum-like city, in a forced symbiosis with them: this becomes the summary of the whole film’s subject. A poem, about the madness of our culture to be communicated, constrained into one single symbol, by the uniquely genuine connection of the extremities of our existence, its distance end-points.” (Bíró 1991: 205) Modern horse-riders of the apocalypse.

A double-authored interpretive attempt

In both works, man (the character, the audience, the reader, etc., versions of the same role, in fact) becomes the prisoner of his own desire of knowledge. We recognise Thomas, whose faith strengthens by empirical perception.

Man created the image in his own image and likeness. And since he is made of perishable material, his image is equally perishable. The sight of perdition is painful or unbearable because it represents our own ephemeral nature rolling in front of us as a film, as a sand-glass. According to Dante, whoever “searched for a body at a shadow” (Dante XXI. 113) will be disappointed: the imago of imagination is image and self-image – it is not merely a matter of perception. Dante leaves off Virgil in the middle of the journey, the ultimate explanations address human reason. Following the vision in the cemetery, the two boldly curious men gain different experiences in János Géczi A.’s so-called story of a shock (compunctio).

The two words deriving from a common root, *idea* and *eidos* refer to the object seen – the shape, the form – since the *idon* designates the seer. The *eidos* designates the person who knows, that is, the person who achieved knowledge not merely in a bodily, but also in a spiritual form. Károly Kerényi wrote in 1941, in connection to Platonism, about the soul freeing itself from the chains of time, and reversing into pre-existence.

The *self* belongs to the world in which it lives, which it perceives with body and consciousness, with which it is permanently in interaction. However, the analysed works stand as evidence for the fact that this interaction does not presume a physical embodiment of both sides, although beyond doubt the entities which possess spectacle also possess this characteristic. But in order to show their effect, they need the regard, or its inner variant: imagination. Perhaps these initiation

journeys need two persons in order for one to always see, while the other to sacrifice himself for the syrene song of imagination.

Translated by Emese Czintos

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