The preoccupation with historical memory and its transmission is inscribed throughout post-World War II Hungarian cinema, from experimental avant-garde gallery installations to self-consciously realist examples of documentary and counter-documentary filmmaking. As evidenced in many twentieth-century literary, poetic, and theoretical works, the Hungarian past is never far from the present, and the often conflicting desires to remember, describe, and reconcile the present with the past are expressed with palpable urgency. In this essay, I explore an aspect of this retrospective gesture in terms of what I call a dynamics of intergenerational memory, a kind of memorial mapping that covers selected documentary films, home movie footage, archival materials and fictional narratives that address historical trauma in films from three key moments: World War II, 1956 and the post-communist transition after 1989.

My discussion addresses film esthetics, spaces of public discourse such as film festivals and screenings, and historical sources for each of these epochs. The films considered constitute a limited sample among dozens of screenings in which I took part in national archives, at film festivals throughout Eastern Europe and the Balkans, and at the annual review of Hungarian film releases that takes place each February in Budapest.1 My focus is the representational modes of transmission created by filmmakers who, either themselves or through family and friends, participated in these key historical moments. I suggest further that these experiences are inscribed in ways that seek, consciously or unconsciously, to memorialize Hungarian history by referencing other works by these directors of those of their cinematic predecessors. I contend that these filmmakers engage in an intertextual dialogue intended at once for their own generation, that of their parents, and their successors. A powerful example of this may be re-visited in the small but important genre of Hungarian films that, whether semi-autobiographical or wholly fictional (if indeed there is such an entity) constitute an indispensable history of the intersections of film, historical trauma, and the Holocaust: for these works at once interrogate and articulate the unresolved question of intergenerational transmission of Jewish identity in Hungary.2

It is worth noting that a number of these films focalize narrative structures through the point-of-view of a historically located, specific individual voice, rather than an omniscient camera-narrator, thereby promoting and enhancing the spectator’s identificatory empathy. An overview of some better-known examples from postwar Hungarian cinematic history serves as a reminder of the degree to which filmmaking has been permeated by such representational modes for the benefit of present and future generations. The uprising of 1956, when a revolution was violently suppressed by Soviet troops, made both authorities and filmmakers wary of the dangers of open confrontation, leading to the particular film style of the 1960s when a singular form of political filmmaking emerged, most notably in the work of Miklós Jancsó. Censorship, though never welcome, can nonetheless on occasion call...
forth subtlety. Jancsó's groundbreaking film, *Szegénylegénynek* (*The Round-up*, 1965), for example, concerns the revolt against Austrian rule in 1848, but was widely interpreted as a commentary on the events of 1956. His use of heightened stylization, long takes, elaborate tracking shots and symbolism found ready acceptance on the festival circuit and instantiated a new visual esthetic, while ostensibly serving to disguise the political message. In the early 1970s, Jancsó worked in Italy, making *Vizi privati, pubbliche virtù* (*Private vices, public virtues*, 1975), a film about the Mayerling scandal which developed the filmmaker's interest in the relation between the political and the erotic.

In the early 1970s the institutional structures of the film industry were reformed, loosening the bonds of bureaucracy and creating two new companies, Budapest Studio and Hunnia Studio, which were thenceforth to engage in creative rivalry. In all, some twenty films a year were produced. A generation of younger directors such as Zoltan Huszarik’s (*Szinbad*), dear to Hungarian audiences for its unabashed, indeed lovingly erotic film language; the influential avant-gardist Gábor Bódy (*Dog Night’s Song*), Janos Xantus (*Eskimo Woman Feels Cold*, 1983) and András Jeles (*Annunciation*, 1984; and *The Dream Brigad* (*Álombrigád*, 1986), shelved for its daring critique of workers’ lives under socialism) aroused passionate interest and audience respect for their refusal to conform to still-prevailing censorship rules that suppressed graphic sexuality and considered certain representations of the individual as undermining socialist objectives. Béla Tarr, already widely admired for *cinéma vérité*-inspired works with a strong documentary slant (such as *Family Nest/Családi Fészek*) now turned to adaptations of literary source material (*Autumn Almanac*, 1984; *Damnation*, 1987) filmed with unapologetic emphasis on their substantial literary qualities, which cleverly alluded to contemporary society while grounded in traditional historical period genres. *Light Physical Injuries* (*Konnyú Vér*, 1983) is a key contribution to this pre-1989 period by György Szomjás, a major talent ever since; his frequent collaborator, Ferenc Grunwalsky, known for deconstructing the psyche in its raw form, offered *A Full Day*, 1985; and *Little But Tough* (*Kicsi de Erős*, 1987). Karoly Makk’s *Another Way* (*Egymásra Nézve*, 1982), based on a book by Erzsébet Galgoczi, explores a lesbian affair between two journalists attempting to expose the corruption of Communist bureaucracy, and remains one of the few films of that epoch from Central Europe to focus on homosexual themes.

A Hungarian specialty, feature-length documentaries occupied a privileged position during this pre-transition period, drawing as they did upon the highly trained expertise of filmmakers often deeply opposed to the prevailing politics of Kádár-era “goulash communism,” a unique brand of liberal communism that evolved under the aegis of the Hungarian communist leader, János Kádár, from which Mikhail Gorbachev would later draw inspiration for *perestroika*. Pál Schiffer’s *Love Me Tender*, 1984, ranks with his earlier masterpiece, *Gyuri*, as an exemplar of the genre, while Gyula Gazdag’s influential documentary *Package Tour* (*Tarsasútazás*), a 1984 treatment of Hungarian Jews who revisit the former concentration camps where they had been imprisoned, received little critical attention in Hungary following its release. It indicates the extent of resistance to the
INTERGENERATIONAL MEMORY
director’s uncompromising insistence on recovering the history of Hungarian Jewry more than a decade ago. By the end of the 1980s, a number of formerly taboo subjects—including the 1956 revolution—were embraced by Hungarian audiences, together with such works as Péter Bacsó’s satire of Stalinist terror Oh! Bloody Life! (O Röngyös Élet, 1983), and Ferenc Kósa’s The Match (made in 1980 but not released until 1982), set in the spring of 1956, and the first Hungarian film to address everyday life on the streets of Pest during the uprising.

Works by István Szabó—personal, sensitive, at times remote—constitute important cinematic meditations on the dynamics of intergenerational memory. In the 1980s, Szabó changed gear dramatically: the Oscar-winning Mephisto (1981) is a compelling and convincing depiction of Nazi Germany through the eyes of an ambitious actor, played by the Austrian Klaus Maria Brandauer. A faithful rendition of the allegorical tradition that portrays the artist’s relationship to a seductive but forbidding communist regime, the film’s barely disguised message about the compromised yet tragic situation of the resistant or dissident intellectual is a coded signal to Hungarian viewers, encouraging a private reading of the film to a nation of historically aware viewers. Redl Ezredés (Colonel Redl, 1985) used the same actor in a story of the rise within the army hierarchy of a part-Jewish officer, dissecting the interethnic politics of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It is a film of considerable visual panache, dramatic power and intellectual distinction that illuminates the insidious gradations of class, religion, nationalist and ethnic hostility in the Habsburg era.

Despite the fact that his reputation warranted consistent financing from international co-producers, thereby traversing the boundaries of Hungarian national cinema, Szabó has nonetheless continued to mine the intricacies of a distinctly Hungarian history, perhaps most ambitiously so in A napfény ize (A Taste of Sunshine, 1999), a multi-generational saga shot in English following the fortunes of a Jewish family through the Habsburg Empire, the years of fascism, WWII and Communism, and narrated in ways that engage a variety of spectators while addressing the complexities of collective memory. Here as in his earlier work, Szabó observes the impact of historical and political trauma on the identity of four generations of a single family in a story that reworks themes from an earlier film, Apa (Father, 1966). Iván Sonnenschein, the family’s last descendant, frames the film’s narrative in voiceover, reflecting the story with his own individual perspective without disrupting its historical flow. The triptych structure begins in the mid-19th century when, as a young boy, Iván’s great-grandfather, Emmanuel, leaves home for the capital when his father, the local village innkeeper, dies in an explosion in his own distillery. Emmanuel manages to take with him a black notebook containing his father’s secret recipe for the herbal tonic, “Taste of Sunshine” (source of the film’s Hungarian title, and a reference to the assimilated Zwack family, makers of the digestive tonic called Unicum) that eventually underwrites the Sonnenschein family’s substantial fortune.
It is, I think, useful to read *Sunshine* as a testimonial to other long-repressed stories of Hungarian Jews, including Szabó’s own earlier film, *Apa* (Father, 1966). This now-classic black-and-white film covers a twenty-year period from the early 1940s to the early 1960s, following a complex and affecting flashback structure in which fact and imagination appear to commingle. Iván, the narrator of *Sunshine*, finally has only his name to connect him to his family’s past: for he is the baptized son of Jewish parents who has converted to Catholicism. Ultimately, in a gesture of identity reclamation and identification with the traumatic history of preceding generations of his Jewish forbears, he takes back the family name, Sonnenschein, which had been officially changed to the more Hungarian-sounding Sors (meaning “fate”). The thematics of bearing witness to religious and ethnic oppression and extermination links *Sunshine* to preceding films and opens new spaces for debate on Jewish identity across generations of Hungarian experience.\

Indeed, in what seems to be an uncannily fitting reference to *Sunshine*’s representation of the communist period, *The Power of the Powerless*, Václav Havel’s widely cited *samizdat* text of resistance and dissidence, evokes what he calls the “entropy” of life under communism, the creative, quotidian modes of accommodation deployed by individuals “...subjected to a prolonged and thorough process of violation, enfeeblement and anesthesia...” Hungarian filmmakers countered this atmosphere in creatively courageous ways: despite socialist claims to gender equality, the proportion of women filmmakers was not appreciably greater than its marginalized status in the West. Nonetheless, among the nation’s supremely accomplished women directors, Márga Mészáros, Szabó’s contemporary, has been particularly motivated to portray the generational effects of the communist period and the uprising of 1956, by using a diary format intended, as articulated in the films’ titles, for her children, lovers and friends, a form that she perfected and that has continued to serve her admirably. Mészáros and other talented women directors indisputably made their mark by combining the personal and the political, the fictional and the documentary. Mészáros’ mid-1970s films *Örökbefogadás* (Adoption, 1975), *Kilenc hónap* (Nine Months, 1976), and *Ök ketten* (The Two of Them, 1977) placed female subjectivity and agency undeniably and unforgettably at the center of the narrative. In the 1980s she began a series of ‘diary’ films, semi-autobiographical works, including *Napló szerelmeimnek* (Diary for My Loves, 1987), in which her heroine, Juli, becomes a film director trained at Moscow’s famed film institute (VGIK) immediately prior to the 1956 anti-Soviet uprising. Mészáros’ own father was a victim of Stalin’s purges and her intergenerational articulation of Stalinism embodied an unquestionable authenticity that continues to reverberate today in the films of a younger generation.

Bravely combining documentary and fiction, Mészáros’ resoundingly successful autobiographical trilogy constituted a major film event before the political changes of the 1990s. *Diary for My Children* (Napló Germekeimnek, 1982), *Diary for My Loves* (Napló Szerelmeimnek, 1987) and *Diary for My Father*...
INTERGENERATIONAL MEMORY

and Mother (Napló Apannak, Anyannak, 1990) are passionate yet unfailingly critical studies of the development of a young woman in tandem with that of a community and a nation, at once autobiography, confession, document, and credible historical source material. Her project, delayed by censors, was clear: “I intended to make a trilogy from the very beginning. Ever since I began to see the world around me I had had a desire to do something on the screen that is similar to a saga, a family novel in literature. Where the stories continue, the characters return after certain changes, enriched or burdened with historic and private experiences.” With its repeated scenes of female and male nudity, Mészáros’ Daughters of Luck (Szerencsés Lányok, 1999) offers a controversial combination of her directorial range and vision. In response to questions following the film’s Budapest première in February, 1999, the filmmaker justified her handling of this erotic material, primarily erotic scenes involving a beautiful Russian woman who becomes a prostitute in present-day Warsaw, as “necessary, because that is the protagonist’s work, just as I portray women at their machines in my films with a factory setting.”

Long active in Hungarian cinema, women directors emerged with unusual strength in the pre-1989 period. Judit Ember’s previously banned Pócspetri investigates the memory of survivors of 1948 state terror and its Stalinist show trials, foreshadowing her own and her colleagues’ post-1989 documentaries on related subjects. Lívia Gyarmathy, in collaboration with her screenwriter/partner Géza Bőszörményi, produced a shockingly straightforward investigation of a long-censored and shameful chapter of Hungarian history—Stalinist labor camps within Hungary—with her award-winning documentary, Recsk 1950-1953 (The Hungarian Gulag, 1989).

Two other women directors, among the many talented filmmakers worthy of mention, are particularly important in this framework: Judit Elek, whose Memoirs of a River (Tutájosok, 1990) is the first post-1989 Franco-Hungarian feature co-production to explicitly denounce Hungarian anti-Semitism and the first to be made from an explicitly Jewish viewpoint, focuses on the infamous Tiszahetvar trial for “blood-libel” a century ago. Ildikó Enyedi, a gifted young talent who has since developed into a consistently strong, highly individual artist, produced My Twentieth Century (Az Én Huszadik Századom, 1988), a film that has become a near-classic in translations around the world, initiating as it does, through the device of twin girls separated at birth, at once a pre-millennial retrospective and a beacon of expression for the post-communist 1990s.
According to Havel, the power of totalitarian ideology becomes “...a veil behind which human beings can hide their own fallen existence, their trivialization, and their adaptation to the status quo...It is rather like a collection of traffic signals and directional signs, giving the process shape and structure. This metaphysical order guarantees the inner coherence of the totalitarian power structure. It is the glue holding it together, its binding principle, the instrument of its discipline.”

Havel’s analysis of the connection between the individual’s retreat into what was widely known as “inner emigration” under totalitarian regimes resonates with the later Western contention that “the personal is political.” This dictum of Western feminism in the 1970s is uncannily echoed in Hungarian films in the 1970s and 1980s, including those by male directors, who frequently explored the connection.

Pál Gábor’s Angi Vera (1978), set in the Stalinist era, foregrounds the situation of a young woman sent to the Communist Party headquarters for political education who learns quickly how to accommodate herself to the system, even to the extent of betraying her lover. The film was very successful in the West, which welcomed its political implications while responding to its undoubted cinematic quality: the film’s subtly brilliant dissection of the interplay between ideology and private life remains unparalleled.

A different approach is discernible in Pál Sándor’s filmmaking in works such as the extraordinary Herkulesfürdói emlék (Improperly Dressed, 1976), in which an attractive young man, on the run from the authorities in the wake of the failed revolution of 1919, dresses as a woman in order to take refuge in a sanatorium. Sándor’s dreamy photography of the androgynous boy creates a disturbingly compelling film. But perhaps the most audacious film to signal a profound shift in the relationship between art and politics prior to 1989 was Péter Gothár’s Megáll az id (Time Stands Still, 1981), a national and international success thanks to its provocative fictionalized portrayal of a family’s traumatic experience of the uprising of 1956. The director’s cinematographic use of music and narrative structure, together with a supremely contemporary visual esthetic, exploded on screen with a thoroughly postmodern sensibility. Since then, Gothár, also a renowned theater director has catapulted onto the global stage as one of Hungary’s foremost filmmakers, consistently earning awards bestowed by festivals worldwide. His sensitive handling of an enduringly dramatic and painful moment in Hungarian history—one that continues to focus the attention of post-communist feature and documentary filmmaking—enabled audiences previously denied free public debate on the consequences of 1956 to engage in what was to become a prolonged discourse of collective and personal mourning enacted through the enabling lens of the camera. Two young men grow up in the wake of 1956, both avidly seeking escape from socialist life in the heat of the uprising of October of that year, but only Pierre decides to leave. His friend, Dénes, chooses to remain in Budapest, having apparently found domestic contentment. But in a final flash forward, we see how badly
things have turned out for him. As its title suggests, *Time Stands Still* freezes one moment while conjoining it with yet another, ushering in a period of increasingly greater artistic freedom.

As the 1980s progressed, the waning years of the forty-year regime of János Kádár made growing financial demands on filmmaking structures, as governmental subsidies became increasingly yoked to box office performance, and television and foreign film imports made the position of Hungarian cinema precarious. By 1992, each of the ten most popular films was imported from abroad. Yet excellent films continued to be made, such as Gyula Gazdag’s *Hol volt, hol nem volt* (*A Hungarian Fairy Tale*, 1987), a brilliantly executed fantasy about a young man seeking his lost father, a kind of Hungarian magical realism that recalls the theme of Szabó’s *Apa*.

One of the most uniquely individual visions to emerge among contemporary Hungarian directors is that of Béla Tarr: beginning in the early 1980s, with documentary-style films about socially marginalized and excluded characters, he ran afoul of the authorities and moved to Berlin, returning only after the end of Communism. Since then, he has made films in which the spaces of landscape are at least as important as narrative strategies, as in *Karhuzat* (*Damnation*, 1988). Shot in black- and-white, the film opens with a long sequence of shots of cable cars moving across a grimy industrial wasteland, while its narrative of deception and betrayal is set in dreary bars against a background of melancholy accordion music. Tarr’s *Sátántango* (1994), which at over six hours long has nonetheless acquired cult status among cinema *cognoscenti*, is the tale of a rural community deceived by a charismatic trickster. It is not difficult to make the connection to the political and historical moments in question, despite the hypnotic experimental look and atmosphere of Tarr’s film, based on the work of the writer Krasznahorkai, with whom he also collaborated in 2001 on his *chef d’oeuvre, Werkmeister Harmoniák* (*Werkmeister Harmonies*).

In response to the questions posed by history and the need to translate, transmit and transfer individual and collective experience, Hungarian visual artists have also transformed their history, whether by distancing events to a different epoch, deploying Aesopian allegory, or using contemporary experimental and digital modalities. Some, such as Judit Elek in *Tutájosok* (*Memoirs of a River*, 1989) combine documentary sources, personal experience and archival footage formerly off-limits to researchers but subsequently integrated with a script of their own making; others, such as István Szabó in *Father* and later in *Sunshine*, which revisited many of the same themes and scenes of the earlier work, choose to dramatize source material through primarily fictional and at times semi-autobiographical means. Still others, such as Péter Forgács, restore the lost voices and images of history by re-editing amateur films, while Márta Mészáros and Ibolya Fekete belong to a substantial group of filmmakers who create a fusion of fiction and documentary from the point-of-view of protagonists who serve as witnesses.

Among the numerous evocative examples of films produced in the post-communist period, I want to focus on the works of a
director whose signature style has evolved in what is perhaps the most experimental form to engage with images and stories of the most distant period: World War I and II. Private Hungary is Péter Forgács’ extraordinary intertextual video archaeology, created entirely from found images and amateur film, an investigation akin to seeing in color a past we have only seen in black-and-white, through its seamless interweaving of images and text, letters and diaries, official records and archival documents. His films give us more than history, biography or memoir can ever deliver on their own, thanks to a multilayered documentation designed from many angles, a rich, detailed, and extraordinary narrative in which documents are uncovered and then crafted into a study of society in all its complexities, variations and gaps of memory, perhaps resembling nothing so much as a novel.

Forgács’ most recent works are Danube Exodus (2001, the subject of a multi-part installation at the Getty Centre, Los Angeles, in September 2002); Bíbó Brevarium (2002, a prize-winning Hungarian entry in the 2002 Cannes Film Festival), and The Bishop’s Garde (Püspök Kertje, 2003, awarded the prize for best documentary at the 34th Annual Hungarian Film Week). In each case, footage from family-made home movies are combined with archival material discovered on occasion by chance, the final product being the fruit of titanic labor and innovative juxtapositions. These films oppose the body of the individual against that of History, the joyous poses of beautiful nude women against cruelly flat texts, intoned by an austere speaking voice. This daring juxtaposition is at times arduous, often audacious and always fascinating, reminding one of a recent statement of Jean-Luc Godard, “Let us compare what is not comparable: comparons ce qui n’est pas comparable.” Forgács does so relentlessly, and to brilliant effect indeed. A cinéaste without a camera, so to speak, he works directly on the body of the film stock itself, which becomes in his hands the body of history, the necessary space of memory of his people, his fellow Hungarians. For these bodies imprinted on the screen
continue to challenge and defy the official (nationalist) discourse recited by voices off in an incantatory, repetitive function that makes us aware of conflicting realities, intergenerational experiences and interpretations. That the director has been working successfully and relentlessly on this principle for more than a dozen years is evident in that his work—by its very composition and perseverance—manages to resist the ravages of time in ways that few artists have achieved.

This rich archive of films indicates the layered process of remembrance for those who made filmmaking their duty in order to bear witness and memorialize Hungary’s history. These filmmakers’ sense of urgency to overcome denial and repression, and to resist the dangers of exploitation of their subjects, acknowledges the compromises faced by cinematic representation of traumatic historical events and experiences. Their retrospective gaze keeps the intergenerational work of memory transmission alive, now more than ever, when the desire to forget seems to be the order of the day.

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NOTES

1 I thank Magyar Filminió for generous invitations to consecutive screenings of the Hungarian Film Week (Magyar Filmszemle) from 1988-2003, and for access to archives and film industry professionals throughout this period.

2 In this category I would include István Szabo’s 1966 Apa (Father), Zoltán Fabri’s 1961 Két Félidő a Pokolban (Two Half-Times in Hell); and András Kovács’ Hideg Napok (Cold Days, 1966).

3 I am grateful to the organizers of the Toronto International Film Festival whose invitations have been of major importance in researching this article as well as several others on related topics. The Toronto Festival has consistently programmed Hungarian and East-Central European cinema, allowing this work to come to the attention of international critics and audiences with a commitment unequalled by any other North American film festival.

4 I thank Gyula Gazdag for his communications on this subject and on the evolving state of Hungarian cinema from 1989-99. His film Package Tour is owned by the U.S. Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C.


8 Havel, 147.

9 See Susan Suleiman in Comparative Cultural Studies and Central European Culture Today, ed. Steven Tökösy (Purdue: Purdue University Press, 1999) for a detailed discussion of these inter-textual and inter-personal links.

10 Godard par Godard, 1994.