

Multi-subjectivity in Péter Forgács's adaptation of Péter Nádas's *Own Death*

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*Own Death*², an autobiographical narrative by one of Hungary's most acclaimed prose writers, tells the story of the author's heart attack and resuscitation with a focus on the episode that is popularly referred to as a « near-death experience ». In his adaptation,³ the experimental film-maker Péter Forgács turned Nádas's narrative into a melancholic-poetic-ironic complex of text and images that can be seen as both an adaptation of or homage to Nádas's literary work and Forgács's own self-reflexive autobiography in film. In my paper I discuss Forgács's adaptation as an essayistic answer to Nádas's philosophical autobiography and try to describe its texture of voice, text, and image as a reflection on the inevitably multi-subjective nature of adaptations of autobiographies.

1. Multiple subjectivity in mainstream memoir adaptations

In an era of 'transmedia storytelling', as Henry Jenkins describes the « new aesthetic that has emerged in response to media convergence »⁴, stories tend to continuously re-emerge in a number of different genres and media. Adaptation seems to have become the paradigmatic mode of life for self-narratives as much as for other modes of storytelling. Personal blogs are turned into novels, movies and stage plays, traumas are confessed on Facebook then retold in television in-

¹ Institute for Art Theory and Media Studies, ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest. An earlier Hungarian version of this article was published in an anthology (Anna GÁCS : « Hasonló a hasonlónak. A 'saját' problémája Nádas Péter *Saját halál* című önéletrajzi szövegében és Forgács Péter filmadaptációjában », in Bálint SOMLYÓ and Katalin TELLER eds.: *Filozófus a műteremben – Tanulmányok Radnóti Sándor 70. születésnapjára*, Budapest, ELTE, 2016.) Whereas that version focused more on the Hungarian reception of the two works discussed, this article is oriented towards their international reception, as well as generic questions, adaptation studies, and experimental film history.

² Péter NÁDAS, *Own Death*, translated by János Salamon, Göttingen, Steidl, 2006.

³ Péter FORGÁCS, *Own Death*, narrated by Péter NÁDAS (Hungarian version) and Peter Mickle MOOR (English version), 2007.

⁴ Henry JENKINS, *Convergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York and London, New York University Press, 2006. p. 20.

interviews. Traditional adaptations of autobiographic works (memoirs, diaries) – traditional in the sense that a text first published as a book serves as the source for the script of a movie – might seem rare compared to the proportion of the genre among bestsellers. Yet we have seen several major artistic and/or popular successes in recent Western filmmaking that picked autobiographic works, mostly memoirs, to be retold on screen⁵.

Adaptations of first-person narratives always show characteristic signs of multiple authorship or multiple subjectivity in their « multitextuality »⁶ as the subjectivities of others, the screenwriter, the director, and, of course, the actor, enter the screened narrative of the autobiographer.

In mainstream cinema, however, these signs are mostly banished to the paratextual realm appearing only in credits, promotional materials, interviews, or on posters, and serve as no more than the « based on a true story » stamp. Beyond trying to secure the authenticity associated with documents as sources of stories most of these adaptations do not encourage the comparative viewing attitude that Linda Hutcheon calls treating adaptations *as adaptations*: « To deal with adaptations *as adaptations* is to think of them as, to use Scottish poet and scholar Michael Alexander's great term [...], inherently 'palimpsestuous' works, haunted at all times by their adapted texts. If we know that prior text, we always feel its presence shadowing the one we are experiencing directly »⁷.

Most autobiographies or memoirs considered to be fit for adaptation for the big screen share some characteristics. Besides telling a significant, extreme or exemplary, life story, they give a description of some era or area rich in colourful historic, cultural and political detail. Both Nádás's and Forgács's works differ from this established model of adaptation. First, because Nádás's radically reductive text is everything but rich in the circumstantial detail; second, because however strictly it follows Nádás's original narrative, Forgács's experimental film is very self-conscious of the inevitable multi-textuality and multi-subjectivity of adaptation.

⁵ Famous examples from the last two decades include *Girl, Interrupted*, 1999 (book: Susanna KAYSER, dir.: James MANGOLD), *The Pianist*, 2002 (Wladyslaw SZPILMAN, Roman POLANSKI), *The Motorcycle Diaries*, 2004 (Ernesto CHE GUEVARA, Walter SALLES); *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, 2007 (Jean-Dominique BAUBY, Julian SCHABEL), *127 Hours*, 2010 (Aron RALSTON, Danny BOYLE), *The Wolf of Wall Street*, 2013 (Jordan BELFORT, Martin SCORSESE).

⁶ Sarah J. HEIDT « “Ça, c'est moi”. *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* as Autobiographical Multitext », *Adaptation* 2009/2, pp. 125-148.

⁷ Linda HUTCHEON, *A Theory of Adaptation*, New York and London, Routledge, 2006, p.6.

2. Nádás's philosophical autobiography

Own Death is about nine thousand words long, as a manuscript it would not exceed twenty pages. It was first published as an essay in the literary and political weekly *Élet és Irodalom* (2002) and came out in book format only two years later on loosely printed pages (sometimes only one sentence per page) illustrated with Nádás's own full-page photos of a pear tree in his garden. The short text featured in a photo-album-like format amplifies the meditative character of Nádás's text. Nádás has gained international fame for his grandiose, cathedral-like thick novels, such as *Book of Memories*, which was called by Susan Sontag « the greatest novel written in our time, and one of the great books of the [20th] century »⁸, and *Parallel Stories*⁹, which was received with less warmth but was also admired for its rich historical, material, erotic and emotional tactility. His latest book¹⁰, an over one-thousand-page-long, painstakingly elaborate and complex memoir of his childhood also differs from *Own Death* in this respect.

Own Death tells the story of a single day, more precisely, a few hours that lead to the heart attack and hospitalization of the protagonist. The outside world is made almost invisible in this introspective narrative that confines itself to the factual listing of events and the physical and mental responses of the narrator. About one-third of the text reports on the experience of clinical death which, in everyday terms, could not have lasted more than a few minutes. The slow, ascetic narration of the events of a few hours followed by a jubilant description of a few minutes that provide the experience of no time and no place contribute to a self-narrative of philosophical character that addresses key issues of autobiographic discourse. Beyond raising the existential question of how much control one has over his/her own life and death, Nádás's work also tackles the problem whether we can arrive at universal truths through individual experience and if there is a language to convey such experience.

This ostensibly simple and reductive narrative evolves into a rather complex texture of competing discourses. Vernacular autobiographic discourse reports on the daily routine of meeting the editor, an appointment at the dentist, etc., and the more and more intrusive signs of illness :

⁸ Quoted in Michael KIMMELMAN, « A Writer Who Always Sees History in the Present Tense », *The New York Times*, 1 November 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/01/books/01nadas.html>.

⁹ P. NÁDAS, *Parallel Stories*, translated by Imre GOLDSTEIN, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2011 [1st Hungarian edition 2005].

¹⁰ P. NÁDAS, *Világló részletek I-II*, Budapest, Jelenkor, 2017.

« Upon waking I noticed that everything was amiss, but I had lots of things to do in town, so I went anyway »¹¹. Medical language provides a posterior explanation of the hero's first-hand corporeal experience: « What happened in fact was that because of the blockages in several branches of the coronary arteries, vascular spasms impeded circulation »¹². However complex, this texture of different languages seems to be woven rather loosely at certain points: every now and then the narrative is disrupted by gnomic sentences difficult to make sense of at first reading. For example, early in the story, we are told: « In the absence of a remembering soul the body cannot be understood »¹³. A third thread consists of a series of mythic references that signal the effort to describe something beyond the boundaries of everyday routine and beyond the significance of a particular individual's own story. We find the following sentence, for instance, inserted into the narrative of an episode at the dentist: « The barking dogs of hell would want me to keep my mouth shut to remain silent about this »¹⁴. And when the narrator is about to embark on the description of the experience of clinical death, he pleads to Polymnia, the muse of sacred poetry in ancient Greek mythology: « Mother of all narrations, Polymnia, hear my plea, let me cross the Styx with common words »¹⁵. Because soon we are to find out that what is at stake in this polyphonic narrative is the possibility of finding a language to describe what is popularly called near-death experience, a passage to no time, no space, no society, no culture, no duality of body and mind, a passage leading back in time as much as forward :

It couldn't in good faith be called a space. I saw my past life through a medium that, with its temporal order, took its place in the immeasurable void of timelessness. Where, lo and behold, I had now found my way home. All previous sensory and intellectual experiences were still with me, with all their flavors and smells, although I sensed nothing. Touching, smelling, tasting, the whole sensual game was at an end. Which didn't mean that my feelings were no longer saturated. I saw. I remembered¹⁶.

In sharp contrast to all the other threads of the narrative texture, these hymnic paragraphs completely lack irony, as if to indicate the chasm that separates the worlds within and beyond

¹¹ P. NÁDAS, *Own Death*, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 23.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 127.

the barriers of culture. Irony in Nádas's text is aimed at everything we are socialised to do, think, say, or imagine, yet, in its Jungian philosophy, the narrative is driven by the belief that there is a realm of archetypical truths, a pre-cultural storage of common knowledge human beings can only access through episodes of extraordinary experience.

Own Death, as a testimony of the spiritual experience of clinical death, is closely related to other reports on similar episodes. The authority of near-death experience narratives is rooted in the fact that regardless of social, geographic, historic, religious circumstances they all carry similar elements, thus they seem to attest to universal – psychological, neurological, anthropological, mystic, or other – truths, truths we all share, though only a few « chosen ones » can testify to. At the same time, Nádas's work can be read as a modernist criticism of the contemporary lust for first-person narratives as practical guides, or of the utilisation of autobiography in general. In an interview about his memoir then still being written, he explained his concept of self-narrative opposing it to everyday curiosity:

I do not care about my own story because I know it and because I do not want to transfer it to anyone [...] All the women next door are right for they want to know how other people experience and make sense of the same things they go through. That is, how others turn the same experience into something good, useful, fruitful, like money [...], but I am not interested in all this – what I am interested in is how a child's conscience develops¹⁷.

Utilisation in his concept seems contrary to autobiography as a vehicle to discover and convey universal experience and truths we might call philosophical in this sense.

3. Increments from experimental film in Forgács's adaptation

As I turn my attention to Péter Forgács's film, first I would like to point out a few aspects of how the medium of experimental film with its own complex history and media-conscious language contributes to the complexity of Forgács's adaptation of *Own Death*. Considering experimental filmic tradition's increment to Forgács's adaptation, it might be an all too obvious insight that archive footage always has the air of *memento mori*, it invokes decay and death, a feature that comes handy when making a film about one's own death. To be more specific, one tradition worth considering here is autobiographic experimental film, or, even more precisely, the tradi-

¹⁷ P. NÁDAS, interviewed by Csaba KÁROLYI for Klub Rádió, 5 June 2015.

tion of ‘new autobiography’ as Michael Renov calls the artistic discourse stemming from the 1970s that breaks off with more traditional representations of subjectivity and personal stories. Renov refers to Jonas Mekas’ *Lost, lost, lost* (1976) – a filmic diary of the artist’s arrival and first years in Brooklyn as a Lithuanian immigrant – as one of the most significant examples of the genre. He explains how these films and videos, conceived at the crossroads of essay, documentary, and avant-garde heritage, are connected to modern autobiographic discourse: « If what I am calling ‘the new autobiography’ has any claim to theoretic precision, it is due to this work’s construction of subjectivity as a site of instability – flux, drift, perpetual revision – rather than coherence »¹⁸.

Experimental film in general can be characterised by a high-level media-consciousness, a tendency to reflect on mediality, to focus on materiality as much as on representation. The attribute of experimental autobiographic film and video is a profound interest in self-documentation – using found footage, video recordings, sound recordings, textual documents as anchors in the real world, in one’s (or one’s community’s) own past – as a means to construct narrative identity.

Another aspect of experimental filmmaking that richly contributes to Forgács’s work is its association with non-narrative, non-logical, non-verbal, hallucinatory, multi-temporal, multi-sensational effects that render it akin to reports on the experience of trance, or for that matter, near-death experience¹⁹. Forgács himself accentuates the structural analogue between his primary raw material, home movies, and dreams²⁰. In an essay commenting on his own works and the use of home movies in them, he discusses the significance of the illogical narrative turns and associations, characteristic of the unconscious, in found private footage : « In home movies we observe a rite of visual narration, which can also be called a kind of ‘vernacular narrative imagery’. Like everyday expression and/or language, these movies are full of ‘mistakes’ and even Freudian slips »²¹.

¹⁸ Michael RENOV, *The Subject of Documentary*. Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 2004, p. 110.

¹⁹ Catherina PASQUALINO, « Experimental Film, Trance and Near-Death Experiences », in A. SCHNEIDER and C. PASQUALINO, eds., *Experimental Film and Anthropology*, London, Bloomsbury, 2014, pp. 45-61.

²⁰ Quoted by Ernst VAN ALPHEN, « Toward a New Historiography. The Aesthetics of Temporality », in Bill NICHOLS and Michael RENOV eds., *Cinema’s Alchemist. The Films of Péter Forgács*, Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 2011, p. 59.

²¹ P. FORGÁCS, « Wittgenstein Tractatus : Personal reflections on Home Movies », in K. L. ISHIZUKA and P. R. ZIMMERMANN eds., *Mining the home movie : excavations in histories and memories*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, University of California Press, 2008, p. 49.

Finally, one should consider Forgács's own previous work as a context for his adaptation of Nádas's text, an oeuvre that recombines found private footage from different periods in Hungarian and European history to create a « visual archaeology »²² of the past and offer subjective, «grassroots» narratives of history. Beyond their capacity to tell alternative narratives of history, as most experimental films, his works are often interpreted as reflections on or criticism of a visually overloaded culture. This is how, for example, Hungarian critic Klára Muhi interprets the significance of using private footage in Forgács's films. She comments that :

The moving effect of the series [*Privát Magyarország – Private Hungary*] is due to the fact that – in an era that, by the end of the millennium, has become completely transformed and overloaded visually, and is full of manipulated pictures – these often almost indiscernible, 'rainy', scratched, fragmented pieces lead us back to a more innocent age of filmmaking, as if to the cave drawing stage of the history of the moving image²³.

Forgács's adaptation of *Own Death* owes a lot to his previous works, yet there are striking differences too.

4. Adaptation: homage and dialogue

The visual texture of Forgács's adaptation is woven from a set of archive footage, photos and time-lapse or slow-motion moving images of nature – Nádas's pear tree, the changing moon, a levitating feather, etc. –, and mock-archives. The latter are scenes shot in black and white showing parts of a male body. They obviously illustrate the protagonist's narrative though offer an unsteady, restricted perspective. Time and again typed text appears on the screen, arbitrary excerpts, fragments of what we can hear. The most striking difference from Forgács's previous work is that here found footage (and mock-archive) is upstaged by the intimacy of voice, the voice of Nádas himself in the Hungarian version and that of the English narrator in the English version of the film. Unlike in his earlier experimental works enlivening private films and their long-dead characters, in *Own Death*, Forgács features the voice as the main vehicle of subjectivity. It could be said that he uses the narrating voice as if it was found footage and handles it

²² Péter BALASSA: « Forgács Péter: *Privát Magyarország* », *Kritika*, 1992/2, p. 37.

²³ Klára MUHI, « A talált képek vonzásában. Archivók a magyar filmben », *Metropolis*, 1999/2, <http://www.c3.hu/scripta/metropolis/9902/muhi.htm>.

very much like the private films he uses as raw material in his other works. With the rather significant difference that he does not edit Nádas's narrative, rather leaves it immaculately untouched in its entirety.

This prompts the question: in what sense and to what extent can we call the treatment of Nádas's story in Forgács's version an adaptation? Instead of enacting the series of events recounted in the original text, as it would happen in most mainstream film adaptations, it is the verbal narration that creates continuity. In strictly literal terms, Forgács did not *adapt* Nádas's story, he rather *incorporated* the two main media of literature – the human voice and the written text – into his film. Illustrative and associative visual and musical fragments accompany the narrating voice and the written text, but the literary material never gets effaced. This enshrinement of the original, that pushes the concept of the faithfulness of adaptation to the limits, might give the impression of a great amount of humility towards Nádas's text and has led critics to interpret the film as an homage to Nádas's genius. Yet a closer look at Forgács's film might discover a constantly fluctuating distance, an unsteady relationship between text and picture. The visuals sometimes act as illustrations of the text. At certain points, they transcribe the literary text in such a down-to-earth verbatim manner that could invoke amateurism. However, other visual elements counterpoint the text or have no clear relation to it and do not function as illustrations at all. We may decipher some of these discrepancies as the mental images of the narrator, yet as a whole, they are not strictly connected to the subjectivity of the narrator and his textual realm. They rather hint to the presence of (an)other unbodied subjectivity or subjectivities and a more complex and dialogic construction of meanings, and thus restore *Own Death's* ties with Forgács's other works whose palimpsestic structure is more obvious²⁴.

5. Discrepancy and extra-temporality

The incongruity of elements is extended to the physical world the film constructs. Forgács is faithful to Nádas's narrative also in the sense that the outside world is depicted in a rather economic or even sketchy manner in his adaptation. The short scenes, subjective angles and fragmentary pictures do not contribute to the construction of a complete diegetic world full of colours, smells, emotions and personal stories, a feature Forgács's other works owe to the inclusion

²⁴ See e.g. László STRAUSZ, « On the River: History as a Palimpsestic Narrative in *The Danube Exodus* », *Film-Philosophy* 2001/1, pp. 100-117.

of historical private footage. The reduction of the diegetic world to a rather abstract sense of space and time in *Own Death* cannot ignite the same sweet and painful nostalgia in the viewer that the screening of the documents of past times and people can in his other works. A painful nostalgia for the richness of the long-disappeared past and long-dead persons is here replaced by a more abstract nostalgia for one's own past, one's own life. Unlike in most of Forgács's works, the fact that images are mostly black and white in *Own Death* is not a necessary corollary of transplanting documents of the pre-colour film era into our present, rather a more abstract reference to past tense, that is, to passing away.

Writing about Forgács's montage aesthetics, Ernst Van Alphen notes, « [w]hereas home movies are almost exclusively concerned with personal time, Forgács's montage edits the key moments of history into this personal temporality »²⁵. Yet the temporality of *Own Death* is neither personal nor historic, I would rather call it a liquidation of temporality or a historical and personal *atemporality*. This atemporality is conveyed not only by the non-narrative structure of the experimental film, as opposed to the disciplined narrative sequence of the story read out, but often also by the intricate relationship between text and picture. I will illustrate this with a short sequence. At 41:40, when the narrator says, « Looking at my watch, I saw that it was ten past seven [...] », we can see the wrist of the protagonist, his watch showing the same time. (This is an example of the verbatim translation of the text into pictures I mentioned before.) However, the close-up also reveals the text written on the dial, MADE IN USSR, a detail that would be simply taken as a goof in a mainstream adaptation, as it is most unlikely that anyone of Nádás's social status would have worn a USSR watch (even with English inscription) at the beginning of the 21st century when Nádás autobiographic story takes place. However, in Forgács's adaptation the unlikely inscription is part of an intricate system of signs that contradict each other, refer to different, loosely defined historical periods and notions of time. Discontinuous images, heterogeneous props and settings, the mock-archives together with the archive footage and the time-lapse or slow motion pictures create a period in the past that has never existed. What appears in *Own Death* is not a historical period, rather the realm of no-time. And similarly, unlike in Forgács's previous works, the material surroundings of the story are dissolved into a realm of no-space or the abstract space of everywhere. In this sense, Forgács's experimental filmic rhetoric projects the out-of-time and out-of-space character of the near-death experience described in Nádás's story to the whole of the narrative.

²⁵ E. VAN ALPHEN, « Toward a New Historiography. The Aesthetics of Temporality », *op. cit.*, p. 60.

6. Whose own death and whose own work ? An essayistic approach to adaptation

This sense of abstraction is present in the depiction of the protagonist too, as long as the continuity of the voice is counteracted by a fragmented visualisation of the body. In the *par excellence* autobiographic moment, when the hero faces himself in the mirror while the narration reflects on the lost sense of identity, however, we are faced with a rather ironic picture that contradicts the everyman character of the protagonist. What we can see in the mirror is a fragment of a face whose only discernible feature is a pair of round frame spectacles, a prop associated with Nádas's public appearance as much as with Forgács's. The face in the mirror is the face of Nádas as much as of Forgács. Thus, the *par excellence* autobiographic scene in the film is turned into an ironic statement of similarity, a literal showing up of the resemblance of the literary and the filmic authors. Moreover, the statement of physical similarity can be understood as a metaphor of the adaption of autobiography. This self-reflexive moment in the film, with its manifold significance, points to the self-conscious and ironic treatment of the problem of the adaptation of self-narratives. Forgács's film raises a series of questions about the relationship created by or reflected in autobiography adaptations. Did the similarities of the subjects precede the birth of the adaptation or are they created by it ? Or, in other words, are they based on mental, moral, cultural similarities of the involved authors, artists ? (In the case of this adaptation, on Nádas's aversions to the mass utilisation of autobiography and on Forgács's tacit criticism of an overloaded visual culture ?) Are they based on parallel life-stories, parallel fates ? (For example, on Forgács's own near-death experience ?)²⁶ Or are they rather created by empathy, the universal human capacity to identify with the fates and emotions of others ? (In which case Forgács's other works would not differ from *Own Death* in this respect, as they also take someone's self-documentation and turn it into Forgács's own story.) And what if these connections are created by neither kindred spirits, neither parallel life stories, nor empathy, but appropriation? Does the adaptation of someone else's autobiography always involve parasitism ? (In this case, Forgács's adaptation would seem to use Nádas's autobiographic narrative as a means to meditate on Forgács's own artistic method as much as to pay tribute to Nádas).

²⁶ In the introduction to his interview with Forgács, Scott Macdonald refers to this episode in Forgács's life. « Péter Forgács: An Interview », in B. NICHOLS and M. RENOV eds.: *Cinema's Alchemist. The Films of Péter Forgács. op. cit.*, p. 8.

I have described Nádas's text as a philosophical autobiography focusing on how individual experience can provide us with universal truths, and tackling the problem of how to use a language, a mode of self-narrative to report on those experiences and truths. In a similar way, Forgács's adaptation of *Own Death*, besides letting Nádas tell his own story, explores the mediality of self-narratives and the appropriative or empathic process of retelling someone else's story as our own. I would call this approach essayistic, partly to connect it to the new autobiographic tradition in experimental film, described by Michael Renov, I mentioned above. But it is also essayistic in a slightly different sense, and more akin to the way Timothy Corrigan uses the term « essayism » he borrows from literary criticism to describe a non-narrative filmic discourse in contemporary film that reflects on mainstream visual narratives and « the preconditions of watching and seeing »²⁷. In his essayistic adaptation of *Own Death*, Forgács draws our attention to the inevitable and often complicated multi-subjective nature of the transmedia voyage of autobiographic texts.

Experimental filmmaking often uses literary texts as raw material and it is saturated with attempts on the complex visualization of subjectivity. Yet, the combination of the two, the adaptation or recreation of literary autobiography, is relatively rare in this tradition. This in itself makes Forgács's adaptation noteworthy in the history of experimental filmmaking. And through its ironic and essayistic character, it also offers significant observations for the research of mainstream adaptations. First, because it creates a filmic universe that does not efface the materiality of the literary text, rather enshrines it. In mainstream adaptation, the literary original *as written text* is allowed to appear only in the opening and/or closing scenes, if at all. It is mostly obliterated as an obstacle to creating diegetic wholeness. *Own Death* encourages us to investigate the reasons and consequences of this obliteration. It is also inspiring for the study of autobiography adaptation because it stages the relationship of the literary and the adaptor authors' subjectivities in an unusually complex manner that sharpens our sensibility to watch adaptations as adaptations and try to look for patterns of effacement, oversimplification, appropriation, or parasitism adaptations often tend to conceal.

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