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“If two people say you are drunk, you better go to bed”: Interview with Gyula Gyulyás

Abstract

This article explores bio documentary cinema, an often overlooked biographic genre that, unlike its “big brother,” the biopic focusing on the lives, achievements, and legacy of people from the past, prefers to investigate living people through interviews and other forms of interaction. In order to understand the challenges, methods and human dynamic shaping talking heads documentaries, the article prioritizes the first-hand experience of the filmmaker, more specifically, that of Gyula Gulyás, a Hungarian director of documentaries for over five decades. After a general introduction to his career path, preferred topics and shared interests with local and regional documentary filmmakers, the interview covers areas relevant to the biographic documentary such as generic labels, professional standards and the usefulness of cinematic portraits for academic research, choice of subject, methods of interviewing and structuring recorded material, moral responsibility and intimacy as a well as general and specific questions about financing and distributing biographic documentaries, their reception, and the struggle with political and non-political censorship.

Keywords

Gyula Gulyás, biographic documentary, interview film, cinematic portrait, Hungarian cinema,

Gyula Gulyás (b. 1944) started making films in the early-1960s with his brother János Gulyás (as cinematographer) and over four decades completed over 20 documentaries. He played a seminal role in the popularization in Hungary of the feature-length documentary format that merged cinematic sociography, oral history, anthropology and biographic documentary. Due to his dissident political views and officially unwelcomed films about communist political terror and other controversial aspects of the era - such as rural poverty, the failed reforms in the agricultural and the education sectors, the unfair treatment of war veterans - , Gulyás existed on the periphery of the state socialist film industry and faced constant lack of funding. As an active member of innovative semi-independent studios such as Balázs Béla Studio and Társulás Studio, he was an outspoken advocate of amateur and documentary cinema, an activity he continued to pursue after the post socialist transition in his capacity of associate fellow at the Foundation for Hungarian Historical Cinema. Also in the late 1990s, he parted ways with his brother concluding their long-time professional association and began to pursue individual film projects. Between 1993 and 2007, he taught visual anthropology at the University of Miskolc. Apart from being the recipient of prestigious industry and national awards, Gulyás is the regular member of the Hungarian Academy of Arts. This January, the Gulyás brothers received the Budapest International Documentary Festival Lifetime Achievement Award.

Official acknowledgement hardly translated into more funding opportunities for Gulyás. In fact, he still exists on the cinematic periphery and is little known director internationally, one reason for which is the insufficient visibility of documentary film in both the national and Eastern European canons of cinema. While Gulyás was awarded four times at the prestigious Hungarian Film Week in different categories and received several excellence awards of television, on the international festival circuit, the only success came at the Chicago International Film Festival in 1989, where *Without Breaking the Law (Törvényt sértés nélkül, 1988)* received the Silver Plaque Award. Outside competition, selected titles by the brothers was screened at the Cinéma du Réel Festival in Paris and the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival. Also, special screening were held at the Hungarian Institute in Warsaw, in Los Angeles, Cairo, Calcutta, Bucharest and various Transylvanian cities.

The Gulyás' most prominent films include oral history documentary-series *Hungarians and WWI (A magyarok és az I. világháború, 1987-1997)* and feature-length documentaries, like the three-hour long *Without Breaking the Law*

(*Törvénytértés nélkül*, 1988) about survivors of forced labour camps operational in the early-1950s and *Málenkij Robot* (1987–1989) featuring elderly members of a small village community who were deported to the USSR after World War II and spent years in various Gulag camps. Talking head historical documentaries about the victims of communism were in great demand from the 1980s to the mid-1990s mobilizing other Hungarian filmmakers, such as Sándor Sára, Judit Ember, Tamás Almási, Gyula Gazdag, Pál Schiffer, Géza Böszörményi, and Lívía Gyarmathy to make similar films. Gulyás continued to tackle historical topics and his epic 12-episode long documentary, *Confrontation* (1996–2016), about the pogrom against Hungarians in the Transylvanian town of Târgu Mureş in March 1990, is an essential source for historians and other researchers.

The Hungarian diaspora of Transylvania, especially its rich folklore served as enduring inspiration for Gulyás whose *Slow Dance from Szék* (*Széki lassú*, 1969–1992) documented the transformation of peasant traditions through three generations. Made over two decades in this rich cultural milieu, *Man Grows Out of Tales* (*Kinő az ember a meséből*, 1969–1993) stands as a unique portrait of female storyteller Klára Györi while *Film of Ballads* (*Balladák filmje*, 1983–1989) features folklorist Kallós Zoltán who guides the filmmakers through the complexities of traditional Transylvanian life-styles, cultural customs and rituals.

Another area Gulyás largely contributed to was sociographic documentary cinema. With like-minded contemporaries, like Judit Elek, Márta Mészáros, István Dárday, Gyöngyi Szalay above already mentioned documentary filmmakers, the brothers happily exercised social critique beyond the confines of official ideology. This is evinced by *There are Changes* (*Vannak változások*, 1968–1978), a film about rural poverty and *Ne sápadj!* (*Don't Pale*, 1981), a character-study of a farmer with a turbulent life behind him.

Even such a brief introduction to this burgeoning oeuvre brings to light certain factors that may explain why Gulyás remained peripheral and less accessible for general audiences. Unlike fellow Hungarian and in Eastern European filmmakers, he did not move between documentary and narrative cinema or adopt a mixture of the two - docufiction, documentary drama - as did representatives of the so-called Budapest School: Tarr, Ember, Dárday-Szalay, Schiffer, and Elek. Apart from two fictional films, Gulyás' preferred choice remained the feature-length sociographic and anthropological film favouring lengthy interviews some viewers might find too slow, traditional, and unappealing. The issue of length is particularly striking when his films are compared with those of

notable documentary filmmakers from the Soviet Block like the Polish Marcel Łoziński, Tomasz Zygadło, Marek Piwowski, and the early Krzysztof Kiesłowski (all between 10 and 20 minutes), the Slovakian Dušan Hanák, or the Czech Helena Treštková. With reference to the longitudinal shooting method, Gulyás can be set aside both Treštková whose *modus operandi* was following ordinary people's lives for years and GDR filmmaker Volker Koepp who, for the past five decades, has kept returning to the town of Wittstock to film the lives of women he first met in 1974.

Gulyás also shares a common experience with many of the previously mentioned Eastern European filmmakers, whose work was censored either for portraying the disillusionment of common people in the communist regime, or for presenting parts of history sentenced for obscurity. One of these suppressed documentarists was the Serbian Želimir Žilnik, a prolific member of the Yugoslav Black Wave and a creator of many documentaries and docudramas that approach both ordinary people and those on the fringes of society to tell their unique stories. Similar to Žilnik, Gyulyás also found television as a suitable medium for distributing completed films even though strict limitations regarding to length results in a form of commercial censorship as damaging to artistic autonomy as political expurgation.

Portraying historical injustices, politically stigmatized communities, Hungarian ethnic minorities living in Transylvania, and interethnic conflicts in the same region, Gulyás' films have put much emphasis on biographic detail and the exercise of verbalizing narratives of the self. For this filmmaker, national history and personal history are interwoven, one does not exist without the other. By the same token, his biographic films are cross-fertilized by cinematic sociography and visual anthropology. Not that genres are especially important for Gulyás whose method of long interviewing periods, extended observation, filming in the spirit of mutual trust, impartiality, and an emphasis on self-reflection has become his signature throughout the decades. The following interview draws up certain elements of this method with special attention to finance, choice of subjects, structuring material, distribution, reception and struggle with censorship.

Q: There are a number of concepts to think about, like the long biographic documentary, the documentary portrait film, the interview film. Do you prefer one over the other?

A: I am not sure what you mean by the long biographic documentary, if it refers to the chronological documentation of one's life, then it is a life-documentation and will not work well as a film. The documentary portrait is more relevant in my case. Here, the ultimate goal is to generate interest by selecting between key events of one's life. But unless these peaks and praises of character are not balanced by a certain degree of criticism or references to missteps, the portrait will be one sided, an idealized image. As opposed to many of my colleagues who treat their subject with velveteen gloves, I do not believe in rosy retrospection or that you live your life like hot knife running through butter, without ever stumbling. I think such an assumption is absurd.

Biographies can be regarded both an artistic and an academic exercise. In the latter case, there is little room for commemoration and the declared aim is to produce a critical biography of strict scientific standards. Can cinema achieve that?

I tend to think that "a critical biography of strict scientific standards" and cinema are largely incompatible. Cinema has little to do with scientific standards! Popular science documentaries where standards are not so strict is a different case. Cinema can be an illustration or tool of scholarly argumentation at best. I do not think people should expect rigorous academic standards from documentaries, however, credibility is a different thing in that it requires both the filmmaker and the interviewed subject to exercise certain level of self-criticism when constructing a life-story.

What do you regard as the greatest challenges and shortcomings while making a biographic portrait?

What attracts me in cinematic portraits is the opportunity to listen to a person on consecutive occasions at different locations and synthesize an image that might carry novelties even for someone familiar with the subject's life. My films require of audiences active associative and reflective skills and, hopefully, offer more than a brief moment of enlightenment. I hope people remember and revisit my films to explore them from different perspectives. To my mind, there is more depth to this approach than in the classical and prevalent version of biographic documentaries where all you need is two talking heads filmed with two cameras and illustrated with old photos or archival film footage. This is still the prevailing form

because in the short term it easily satisfies the administrative requirements set down by funding bodies who do not really care if a film is self-reflective, whether it develops an inner dialogue, or regards memories as something open to revision. They are fine with life-narratives that keep repeating impeccable statements that have already appeared in the press, in radio and television interviews dozens of times. Films of this kind are painfully didactic, you feel like a punch bag as they keep hitting you with banalities and already halfway through you know exactly how the story will conclude. This is the death of any cinema.

In your experience, does biographic documentary cinema enjoy a solid status in Hungary today?

In the past decade, the Hungarian Academy of Arts solicited dozens of artist portraits and interview films each year about members of the organization. I also made a handful of films under this initiative. We now have a remarkable number of portraits and yet they fly under the critical radar, no one ever evaluated them. If I were the Academy, I would set up an independent “jury” composed of five external members representing different fields (art history, film aesthetics, film history, film criticism, sociology or other branch of social science) to evaluate the films at a debate session open to the public every year. I also believe that it is extremely unfortunate to make these films freely available for television broadcast as part of a barter deal. This means that the Academy provides the films free of charge to compensate for the unrealistically high price of stock footage, the rights of which are held by television. I regard this practice disadvantageous because while films get distribution, there is not much critical feedback, since they are being aired either at night or Sunday lunchtime. Also, in this system, documentaries get shorter, at present, length is maximized in 50 minutes. I wonder if this is a way of making room for the endless stream of idiotic ads.

So to answer your question, the status of bio-documentaries is unstable. This is part of a wider problem. There is limited room to hold discussion forums about documentary cinema, sociological and anthropological film. Each of the artist documentaries I made for the Academy has a self-financed “director’s cut” version that reflects better my own personal taste, and also incorporates the insights of others. This follows from the tradition we established in the heydays of Béla Balázs Studio, when dozens of people came together at the compulsory screening of a film’s working

copy to share their sentiments, voice critical or supportive opinion. I learnt a very important lesson there. Based on the feedback and often with an aching heart, sometimes a director needs to get back to the drawing table and rethink the structure of a film. I think there is a lot of truth to the advice a character in one of our films once said: if two people say you are drunk, you better go to bed. During the exhausting editing stage there is much room to make mistakes and lose sight of the bigger picture.

Is there, do you think, a documentary subgenre we might term as biographic period portrait, a form of documentary that explores both a life story and the reality of the age when this person lived. Your film *The Valley of Blows* about László Papp, three times Olympic champion boxer, seems to be the portrait of a man who is struggling to create his own image and defy the image the communist system created for him.

I regard documentary cinema and its subcategories, the sociographic and the anthropological documentary a method rather than a genre. After all, it is method and not genre that determines the quality of a work, isn't it? Values are born through creation and not categorisation. *The Valley of Blows and Don't Pale* tend towards sociographic cinema and, thus, are predecessors of anthropological film. It is hard to recall what these films meant to us back then. In previous years we had a lot of setbacks. When my brother and I started working with Papp, we just wanted to make a film that would finally not be censored. Already as amateur filmmakers, we were desperate to make longer, more thoughtful, multifaceted and reflective films. Based on a sociographic account written by Antal Végh we shot a short documentary in the poverty-stricken village of Penészlek and a decade later returned there to make the film called *There are Changes* (Vannak változások, 1976-78). Our next film was *The Valley of Blows*, a portrait of an Olympic champion and the political dimension of sport in communist Eastern-Europe. It was important for us to explore the issue from multiple perspectives so we contacted and interviewed the boxers who had defeated Papp in the Eastern Block before his winning streak of almost 30 matches before he retired. We travelled from Berlin to Moscow and also to Bielsko-Białá, the home of the legendary Tadeusz Pietrzykowski. Thanks to our Polish translator and local members of the crew, we also learnt a lot about the Solidarity Movement that was spreading its wings exactly in that period.

While in Poland we could film whatever we deemed important and found interesting, things were quite different in the Soviet Union where we visited Boris Tishin. He lived in an apartment block and as our hosts were preparing a real feast including fish, crab, caviar and exotic fruit, the aging master invited us to his favourite pub. It was there that our assistant filming with an 8mm camera was apprehended by two undercover agents and thrown into a Pobeda you see in cold-war spy films.

Don't Pale opens a window onto the life and times of Alfonz Medve, a peasant living in a backward developed village on the border with Czechoslovakia. What attracted you to this person?

Alfonz Medve was featured in a previous sociological documentary with six feature-lengths episodes by the title *Among the Hills of Domaháza* (*Domaházi hegyek között*). His personality, temperament, verbal excellence, excessive vitality and love of culture stood out from his environment. Due to instincts and dexterity, he was able to reorganize the decrepit cooperative of the village where he lived, for which, instead of acknowledgements, he was stigmatized and condemned in a humiliating show trial. As we later learnt, vilifying people with good business skills and autonomous incentives was a general practice at the time and took many victims all over the country. The larger than life personality of our protagonist repeatedly denied the Marxist dogma, according to which there is no room for epic figures in history. Our film wanted to document the indestructible personal integrity that helped this man to rebuild a successful private farm after his name was cleared of past accusations. Our films proved him to be the bearer of the best elements of peasant culture, like the way he managed the land and handled animals humanely even as he was taking them to the slaughterhouse.

Addressing the human misery brought about by contradictory agricultural policies and a suppressive political system, did the film suffer in production and distribution?

Symptomatic of the contemporary state of affairs, the local mini-Stalins managed to ban public screenings of the film in the county it was made. We even took an executive from the national censorship office but that didn't matter either. We also had our differences with our co-production partners, the Hungarian Television. In its original form, the film ended

with the scene of the protagonist visiting relatives in Upper Hungary, now a part of Czechoslovakia, where he got into a heated debate about individual courage and growth. Vigilant censors, who always know better what is best for the audience, had us cut this approximately 15 minute-long scene. In response, we had our names removed from the credits.

Censorship did not end there. Members of the folk music ensemble of Domaháza visited Auschwitz. For some reason we were not allowed to join them on the trip. Anyway, during our next visit to the village people shared their experience including a visit to the prison cell of Maximilian Kolbe (whom they did not know by name), the Polish priest who died as a martyr in the death camp. This part of the interview was also cut out, I guess some narrow-minded censor safeguarding the internal security of the regime though that we were attempting to spread clerical propaganda.

Your chosen documentary method is observational cinema that follows characters and events through an extended period of time in order to capture life as being lived. Your bio-documentary about the elderly lady Mámo took a decade to be completed in the 1990s, more recently your portrait of the recently deceased philosopher Mihály Vajda, likewise. Did you find these two people similar in any way?

The observational method that aspires to preserve the continuity of events was widespread in Hungarian documentary cinema. We advanced this practice of filmmaking by screening working copies to interviewed subjects and recorded their reactions. This allowed them to revisit former testimonies, to reflect upon or question these. It also made viewers aware of the fact that the film's final structure is not preconceived but is a shared creation. We used this strategy in films made well before the one featuring Mámo from the Transylvanian village of Parajd, and the film about Vajda. As a result of their dissimilar socialization, these people had very different outlooks on the world and yet they share a lot in terms of integrity and a strong spiritual community with their past choices, some of which prove their vulnerability. What made both life-narratives extremely captivating for me was these admirable people who never shied away from openly addressing past missteps and blunders. Actually, neither of them wanted to change anything in the films or modify their structures.

The method of observational and cinema direct filmmaking allows for a more intimate, less constrained relationship between filmmaker and filmed. How does intimacy come to be formed in the case of biographic documentaries?

Intimacy requires two people and must be mutual. Empathy is a good start and I always urge my subjects to ask question and loosen up which is never easy given the many inconveniences and stress-factors presented by the technical-logistical aspects of filming. I prefer neither to use studios with lots of lighting equipment and alienating props, nor ask questions that have been discussed and approved beforehand. Shooting in environments interviewees are familiar with, in their homes or at their workplaces, in intimate and varied locations helps viewers to better imagine how subjects live their ordinary lives. Apart from the spaces that form a part of one's identity and life-story, intimacy is created by nonverbal elements of communication which, I cannot emphasize enough, is a precious secondary language of documentary cinema.

Many of your films are portraits of artists. Do you think that these films need to pay attention to the wider art and literary contexts?

Only to the degree the interviewees find such contexts important. I don't think the filmmaker should take the role of the scholar-investigator and force an external perspective onto their subjects. What filmmakers can do is to stay patient, conduct as many interviews as possible and hope for the subject to open up about the broader dimensions of their work. I do not like when, for instance, a photographer makes reference to the critical reception of her their work as authentic biographic detail. On the other hand, when someone, as in the case of photographer Török László, uses his camera inspired by poetry, that is totally acceptable. The same is true for cases when a subject presents authentic documents, correspondence, official documents, drawings, photos, etc. and builds these into the self-narration, but I want secondary materials to offer more than simple illustration or self-justification, and serve as a spring-board to delve into murky memories.

Some have suggested that portrait artists often seek out in their model the unique aura they also believe to possess. Is this the situation in your case?

I always sought out qualities in interviewed subjects I myself lacked but wished to have. What really interests me is, for instance, visual skills that

fail me. If I only pursued to show what is already part of me, the compassion of understanding and the desire to present something unique, would altogether be lost, I guess.

Many of your cinematic portraits have poetic titles, like *Little Angry Old Man* (*Kicsi mérges öregúr*) about sculptor Rezső Berczeller, *Man Grows Out of Tales* (*Kinő az ember a meséből*) about story-teller Klára Györi, *Man Sometimes Turns into Image* (*Az ember néha képpé válik*) about anthropologist Ernő Kunt, *He is a Stone-Lover* (*Ő ilyen köszerelemes*) about stone-carver artist István Török, *Unwinding* (*Kifutás*) about poet Árpád Galgóczy. How did you come up with these titles?

These poetic titles, as you call them, are the subjects' own verbal creations or lapsus linguae. I decided to use them as titles because they carry additional meanings in Hungarian and often contain polysemantic words. As such, they voice a messages on different levels, in multiple contexts.

The same pattern prevails in your films about members of the photography department of the Hungarian Academy of Arts. *Change of Scale* (*Léptékváltás*) about László Haris and András Bán, *I regard Myself a Documentarist* (*Dokumentaristának vallom magam*) about Edit Molnár, *I Don't like when they Strike an Attitude: A Portrait of Török László* (*Nem szeretem, ha bepózolnak - Török László portré*), *Living Man - Normantas Paulius* (*Élő ember - Normantas Paulius*). Were these institutional assignments?

The photography and the cinema departments are closely aligned within the Academy. As you might know, I am a member of the cinema department and have known many of these people for a long time. I would not call these "institutional assignments", but my own projects founded by the Academy. The film about Normantas Paulius, a Lithuanian photographer who lived in Hungary, could only be completed because I started working with him years before funding was approved. If I am not mistaken, there had been no recorded interviews featuring him.

In the early 1980s, György Spiró, Hungarian novelist and essayist, described the method of the Gulyás brothers as follows: "If anything new comes up during shooting that does not fit the concept outlined by previously recorded material, these filmmakers drop the concept and not the truth. An honest method and human honesty serve as the aesthetic foundation of their film." Is this your preferred method when making cinematic portraits?

This quote from Spiró reflects on our practice and not something we set in stone right at the beginning of our career. In those days there were so many, so called creative documentaries that were pathetic and relied heavily on the visual style and devices of feature films. With my brother I choose the alternative path and still tread this unconventional path in my solo biographic documentaries.

Is the moral responsibility of the filmmaker relevant in the case of bio-documentaries?

Moral responsibility is the sine qua non of any filmmaker's integrity. I never push the verbal or visual situation beyond a certain level that may lead us to the terrain of jovial gossiping, which makes me sick. I follow a simple rule and always ask myself during the process of interviewing: would I feel comfortable had we switched roles? Likewise, I do not want to pose in the role of an all-knowing, wise-cracking director-interviewer boasting with self-confidence. I always cut my questions during editing, whenever the answer makes sense on its own. I like to wait - with watchful eyes in ambush - for the answer, preferably a confession to be heard. Often this is followed by a nonverbal signal, as precious as gold that reinterprets and reframes what has been said.

Are you working on any bio-documentaries at the moment?

Up until now we have been discussing documentaries about living people and said nothing about creating the portrait of historical figures living in a period when photography did not yet exist. To be more specific, recently I managed to make my teenager dream partially come true and finish a film about János Bolyai, the famous Hungarian mathematician and his father. This is a popular science documentary about their professional achievements intertwined with little known details of the many hardships and tragedies that befell on them. We have received funding from various sources but were offered disadvantageous and non-negotiable terms by the television broadcasters, who were only interested in a documentary with less than an hour of running time. We had much more material and needed more time to present the research in a well-rounded manner, so I decided on using private finance to complete a second episode. Meanwhile, we realized that in the original funding application the budget for archival copyright material was seriously underestimated. As it

turned out, the achievements of the Bolyais have never been portrayed in such a comprehensive manner and available material relevant to our film was extensive. At present we are in the preparation stage of the final third episode and are applying for further grants.

Apart from the interview with Pietrzykowski featured in *The Valley of Blows*, does your work have other Polish connections?

In my years as an amateur filmmaker, I made a road movie while hitchhiking across Poland and hope to have it digitalized this year. I also had a film project that was rejected by funding bodies on numerous occasions, its working title is “Solidarity in Hungary” and would be on the so called Polish markets (A.K.A. Comecom markets, flea markets), places where you could buy counterfeit products of inferior quality that bore the names of western brands. I remember the time when everyone - from the media to taxi drivers, from cabaret performers to the postman - had something to say on this kind of bootlegging. Yet, there isn't a single documentary on this topic in Hungary. I haven't given up on making it.