

Body Horror and Post-Socialist Cinema: György Pálfi's *Taxidermia*

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György Pálfi's *Taxidermia* (Hungary, 2006) is a landmark work of post-socialist cinema. It reflects upon the history of Hungary over the past century: a history of socio-political failures, betrayals, and disappointments. But more particularly, the film is the product of a specific and profound disillusionment, one that still resonates for us today. The end of Communist Party rule in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989 led to a “genuine elation, caused partly by the incredible ease with which the much-feared dictatorial powers crumbled”; entire societies felt “a rush of liberty and... an outbreak of collective imagination, intelligence, and inspiration” (Szeman and Tamas 2009, 22). In the aftermath of this exhilaration, however, things went bad. The newly freed societies were swamped, as the Hungarian philosopher Gáspár Miklós Tamás puts it, by “oligarchic rule, fake electoralism, a yellow press, a precipitous decline in culture and education, a revival of authoritarianism and racism/ethnicism, misogyny, and homophobia” (Szeman and Tamas 2009, 26). Conditions today, in the early twenty-first century, are thus quite different from anything that Central and Eastern Europeans hoped for, or imagined, when they brought down the actually existing socialist regimes that oppressed them. For Hungary and the other former socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe have been entirely absorbed within the framework of global neoliberal capitalism. The only “winners” in the new social order, Tamás says, have been “the transnational corporations and the power networks that can be loosely called ‘Western’ ” (20). The result, for the people of Central and Eastern Europe, has been “an inhuman, unjust, unfair, inefficient, anti-egalitarian, fraudulent, and hypocritical system that is in no way at all superior to its predecessor, which was awful enough” (24).

A similar sense of disappointment haunts us in the West. In Western capitalist societies, the events of 1989 were greeted less with exhilaration than with a smug, triumphalist assurance that the values of liberal capitalism had been established on a worldwide basis, once and for all. Symptomatic of this is the way that Francis Fukuyama celebrated the events of 1989 as marking “the end of history” (Fukuyama 1993). Fukuyama placed capitalism in the very position that socialism had previously claimed for itself: that of being the unsurpassable endpoint of social struggle, the Hegelian culmination of all human hope and effort. Today, however, this sort of proclamation rings hollow. Far from fulfilling the needs and desires of humanity, the universal triumph of capitalism seems to have propelled us into a condition of perpetual financial instability, increasing economic inequality, and a ubiquitous cynicism that corrodes all effort and all hope. We are now in the terminal state that Mark Fisher calls “capitalist realism”: a situation in which “beliefs have collapsed at the level of ritual or symbolic elaboration, and all that is left is the consumer-spectator, trudging through the ruins and the relics” (Fisher 2009, 4). History has not ended, so much as it has been worn out and exhausted.

Taxidermia is very much a product of – and a reflection upon – this atmosphere of disillusionment and demoralization. The film has a specific Hungarian focus, but it resonates with Western-capitalist concerns as well. *Taxidermia* might well be described as an exercise in *genealogy*, in Michel Foucault’s Nietzschean sense of the term: an investigation that works “to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history’s destruction of the body” (Foucault 1998, 376). The film relentlessly foregrounds bodily stress and torment, even as it performs an excavation of Hungary’s traumatic twentieth-century history. It has three parts, set respectively during World War II (when Hungary was ruled by a fascist regime allied with the Axis powers), during the time of Communist Party rule, and in the capitalist present. Each part juxtaposes the private and the public: a body-horror case study in imploding masculinity is joined with a send-up of the spectacles of power and privilege. The three parts trace the lives of three generations of men (although, from one generation to the next, paternity is dubious).

Taxidermia’s first part tells the story of Vendel Morosgoványi (Csaba Czene), a soldier during World War II. Stuck in a remote outpost, he does not see combat; lonely and sexually frustrated, he spends his time masturbating in bizarre and inventive ways. The second part of the film focuses on Kálmán Balatony (Gergő Trócsáni), a Socialist Sports Hero in the 1960s, the era of so-called “goulash Communism” (when Party rule involved “soft repression” and a certain degree

of economic liberalization). Balatony is a champion in the (imaginary) Olympic sport of “speed eating,” which involves shoveling as much food into one’s mouth as one can, as quickly as possible. The third part of the film, set in the contemporary post-socialist era, concerns Kálmán’s son Lajos Balatony (Marc Bischoff), a pallid, thin, and painfully shy taxidermist, who ultimately applies his grotesque art to human as well as animal bodies.

The first part of *Taxidermia* takes place deep in the countryside, in almost total isolation. An army Lieutenant (István Gyuricza) lives in a small house with his obese peasant wife and their two teenaged daughters. There is no hint of warfare, and no contact with the rest of the world – except for one scene in which some other officers visit, and they all make a toast to “the final victory” (i.e., that of the Axis powers). Morosgoványi, the Lieutenant’s orderly, has a small room in a shack, apart from the main house, that also includes an outhouse, and a barn for the animals. The Lieutenant treats Morosgoványi as his personal servant, browbeating and bullying him, and making him do all the household chores. Morosgoványi also serves as a captive audience for the Lieutenant’s pontifications on how “cunt makes the world go round.” The relations between the Lieutenant and his orderly could be described as fascist; but perhaps they are better understood as feudal. The master’s domination of his servant is entirely direct; it is not mediated by money, by spectacle, or by any pretense of personal independence.

This opening section of *Taxidermia* is centered upon Morosgoványi’s grotesque and abject body. The orderly’s face is disfigured by a hairlip; his expression ranges from a rigid attention to the Lieutenant’s orders, to the tense contortions and blissful release of orgasm. Alone in his tiny room, Morosgoványi compensates for his servitude and loneliness by engaging in fantastical acts of masturbation. His penis shoots off sparks of flame like fireworks; his ejaculate spurts into the heavens and becomes a star. He stimulates himself by playing with lit candles, by pederastically imagining sex with Hans Christian Anderson’s “Little Match Girl,” and by spying through peepholes on the Lieutenant’s beautiful daughters, as they bathe in an enormous tub or engage in a snowball fight. At one point, while he is watching them, Morosgoványi coats a hole in the wall of his shack with lard, and inserts his penis, thrusting it frantically in and out – only to have it pecked at by a rooster. His scream of pain is transmuted into the voice of the Lieutenant’s wife, calling the girls back into the house for dinner.

Morosgoványi’s sexual performances are mostly shown to us in sequences that juxtapose extreme closeups and long shots, with nothing in between. There is

frequent cutting, but the camera never moves. In this way, we learn the intimate details of Morosgoványi's autoerotic fetishes and rituals; but we never get a sense of him as a feeling and inwardly reflecting subject. The camera treats Morosgoványi in much the same way that it does the barnyard animals with whom he lives: especially the pig which he is supposed to care for. "Don't worry about your figure, just grow nice and fat for me," he says to the animal, tenderly cradling its head in his lap. Shortly afterwards, the pig is slaughtered for a feast. There is an extended montage sequence of the dead animal being skinned, cut up, and roasted. The sequence includes several closeups of the pig's internal organs, oozing as they are removed from the carcass. Pig flesh is equated, via montage, with human flesh. Morosgoványi, like the pig, is reduced to the abject status of mere meat. He lives a life entirely subjected to the whims of others, tormented both by the cruel limitations imposed upon him, and by his own physical cravings. Pálfi's cool, elliptical editing style puts us in a strange position: we empathize with Morosgoványi's sufferings, and with his desperation, but he remains too strange and alien for us to "identify" with him.

Eventually Morosgoványi is seduced by the Lieutenant's plump wife. His frenzied sex with her is presented, like his masturbatory fantasies, in a series of fragmented closeups. They utter obscene endearances to one another ("my pretty mangalica piggy"), as they fuck in the same immense tub that was previously used both for the daughters' bath and to hold the bones and entrails of the slaughtered pig. In a rapid-fire sequence, as Morosgoványi rocks back and forth he seems to be simultaneously (or alternately) penetrating and grunting over the bodies of the wife, the two daughters in turn, and finally the pig. In the very next scene, the Lieutenant executes Morosgoványi for his transgression with a quick bullet to the head. In the scene after that, the Lieutenant's wife gives birth to a boy, presumably the fruit of her dalliance with Morosgoványi. The midwife, leaving the birth chamber, spits on the ground in disgust, right in front of the Lieutenant. The baby is healthy, but he has been born with a little squiggly pig tail. The Lieutenant accepts the child as his own; but first he brutally snips off the tail with tweezers.

That baby grows up to be Kálmán Balatony, the protagonist of the second part of *Taxidermia*. Kálmán is enormously stout, as befits his role as a speed eater, an athlete pushing his body to extremes. Today, there actually is a global fringe subculture dedicated to the sport of "competitive eating" (Nerz 2006); but *Taxidermia* hilariously presents it as a massively popular, Olympic-level athletic competition, supported and promoted by the Communist State. International speed

eating matches take place in large stadiums, before cheering crowds. Jet fighters fly in formation overhead; Young Pioneers march and wave flags during the pauses between rounds; military officers and Party officials watch from their box seats. Speed eaters are trained from childhood, and offered extensive coaching – as athletes in the socialist countries actually were during the Cold War. Successful sportsmen like Kálmán are rewarded with access to special privileges otherwise only available to the Party elite: choice uncrowded vacation spots, rare edible delicacies like fresh fruit and caviar, and even travel to the West. By focusing all this public spectacle and elite privilege on the figure of Kálmán the speed eater, the second section of *Taxidermia* grotesquely parodies the official culture of “actually-existing socialism.”

This second section of the film also ups the ante on bodily disgust. The camera dwells on the bloated bodies of Kálmán and the other speed eaters, as they gorge themselves on soup, pudding, caviar, chocolate “at the fluid stage,” and a “horse sausage” that is “dry, dangerous, and full of shit like gauze and wadding.” The contestants chew and swallow this stuff as the crowd roars, and the commentator delivers a breathless spoonful-by-spoonful account of the match. Then between rounds, in order to make room for more, the contestants puke it all up again, in flows of half-digested, liquidy gruel. The camera seems to dote on these displays. It moves in lengthy, fluid shots, panning horizontally past all the competitors, or circling around Kálmán. These mobile long takes are strikingly different from the fixed shots and dense montage of the movie’s opening section. Morosgoványi’s masturbatory fantasies were private rituals, gaining their meaning and intensity through metaphorical associations – hence the heavy use of montage. But Kálmán’s physical convulsions are addressed outward, and assume an audience. They are imbued with grandiosity, and blown up to spectacular proportions, like everything else in official socialist culture. This body frantically ingesting and then regurgitating food needs to be shown at length, in order to capture the full duration of its actions. This frenzied rhythm of incorporation and expulsion is only halted when suddenly, in the heat of competition, Kálmán is paralyzed with lockjaw. He halts in mid-chew, his body rigid; then he passes out and topples, his spoon still stuck in his mouth.

Despite his unusual body and his extreme profession, Kálmán seeks to have a “normal” life – something that Morosgoványi could not even dream of. As he recuperates, he starts to woo the female speed eating champion Gizi Aczél (Adel Stancel). Eventually they get married. They seem happy enough together, en-

joying the domestic bliss and material well-being provided by “goulash Communism.” We see them in stereotypical romantic poses, in spots like the amusement park, the ski lift, and the beach. Of course, they continue to stuff themselves with large quantities of fattening foods, even as they are engaged in these more typical amusements. However, all is not well in this socialist paradise. Gizi sneaks out during the wedding celebration to have sex with another speed eater, Kálmán’s rival. After the marriage, Gizi becomes pregnant – much to Kálmán’s delight, as he assumes he is the father. The doctor orders Gizi to go on a strict all-vegetable diet. But he relents after Kálmán passes him a bribe; everything is negotiable in actually existing socialism, as long as you have the perks and privileges to pay for what you want. The gynecologist marks down Gizi’s condition as a myoma (a non-malignant uterine tumor), so that she may continue her usual speed-eating regimen. Sometime later, Kálmán and Gizi are invited onto a high Party official’s yacht, in order to give a command performance for a visiting Soviet dignitary. As a demonstration of their prowess, they consume 45 kilograms of red caviar in twenty minutes. But Gizi takes ill after this exhibition, collapsing while the Soviet official drones on about international brotherhood and the task of constructing Communism. Cut immediately to the sound of infant cries, and a tracking shot of babies in the hospital. Gizi has given birth prematurely to Lajos, an unusually frail and scrawny boy.

Lajos Balatony, as an adult in post-socialist Hungary, is the protagonist of the third and final part of *Taxidermia*. He is a taxidermist, running his own small business. His shop is cluttered and claustrophobic, a grotesque menagerie of stuffed animals of all sorts, much like real taxidermists’ workshops (Milgrom 2010). There is also a Michael Jackson poster on the wall, reminding us of how Hungary has been entirely incorporated into global capitalist culture. Lajos does not seem to have much of a life. Every day he follows the same routine. After completing his meticulous taxidermical labors, and shutting up his shop, he goes to the supermarket. He buys the same items, in the same quantities, every day: 30 kilos of margarine, and 800 candy bars, at a total cost of 38,526 forints. At the checkout counter, he asks the cashier for a date. But she doesn’t even bother to reject his proposition; instead, she simply ignores him, and informs him of his total. After this rebuff, he goes to a cafe, and sits alone for a while at a small table. Then, he heads to his father’s apartment, to feed the cats and to clean.

Kálmán has become a monster, both physically and morally. Gizi has left him (we glimpse her on television, as the coach of the American Olympic speed-eating

team). Now Kálmán is so bloated and enormous that he can no longer move. He has become little more than an obscene mountain of flesh. He sits in his chair, watching speed-eating contests on TV, and scarfing down the candy bars that Lajos brings him, without even bothering to remove them from their wrappers. He alternately feels sorry for himself, and boasts that he is still the champion he once was. His only remaining passion in life seems to be to fatten his cats, and train them in speed eating. He has them locked in a cage, where they are fed exclusively with the margarine purchased by Lajos. They are always growling angrily from behind the bars. When Lajos comes by to do the household chores, all Kálmán can do is to curse and insult him; he is disgusted both by Lajos's anorexic thinness, and by his introversion and meekness.

One day, faced as usual with Kálmán's bitter recriminations, Lajos angrily storms out, neglecting to lock the cats' cage. When he next returns, he finds a new tableau of body horror, an obscene spectacle of excess. Kálmán lies dead, with his belly burst open. His bloody entrails extend in a trail outwards from his body; they are strewn across the floor like so many sausages. Maybe his bowels exploded from the stress of junk food overload; or maybe the hungry cats attacked him. In any case, the animals have eaten parts of his body. Lajos, however, is unfazed by his discovery. He calmly responds, in the way he best knows how: with the art of taxidermy. He carefully restores Kálmán's flesh, and stuffs and mounts him. Then he prepares himself for a similar fate.

In order to embalm his body while he is still alive, Lajos constructs a complex device of gears and wheels and harnesses. He straps himself into this apparatus, and proceeds to remove his own viscera, to replace them with stuffing, and to apply preservatives. The apparatus holds him in place, keeps his circulation going, and presumably dulls the pain enough for him to operate on himself. We see closeups of flesh being surgically sliced open and sutured up again, of internal organs being neatly extracted, of fluids bubbling through tubes, and of intestines being untangled and wound carefully along spools. At the last moment, Lajos presses a button; the machine decapitates him and cuts off his raised right arm. Lajos has turned himself, as well as his father, into a trophy or a statue.

Each of *Taxidermia's* three parts thus presents a particular *regime of the body*, associated with a dominant political and economic order. This is how the film works as a Nietzschean/Foucaultian genealogy. Each of the three regimes has its own representational style. Each of them also involves a specific organization and regimentation both of individual human bodies, and of the general "body politic."

Each defines “masculinity” in its own particular manner. Each is characterized by a certain set of concrete bodily practices, together with a certain articulation of power relations. Each regime breaks down the male body in its own way, the better to remold it and control it. Through its form and style, no less than through its content, *Taxidermia* makes visible (and audible) to us a ubiquitous, but diffuse and impalpable, network of power relations, social norms, and ideological background assumptions. Each part of the film traces one of the ways that social, political, and economic forces are literalized, implanted directly in the flesh, and thereby expressed in the bodily anguish of a single male protagonist.

Taxidermia does not tell an actual story, so much as it dramatizes and explores a discontinuous series of attractions and repulsions among grotesquely deformed bodies. The film moves, without offering us any explanations or logical connections, from Morosgoványi’s masturbation, to Kálmán’s speed eating, and finally to Lajos’s taxidermy. At the same time that it presents these historicized images of bodily appetite and disgust, *Taxidermia* also deliberately elides the major turning points of recent Hungarian history: the liberation at the end of World War II; the Revolution of 1956; and the dismantling of the one-party socialist system in 1989. It does not show us those moments of “general elation,” and of the “outbreak of collective imagination, intelligence, and inspiration.” Rather, it is entirely concerned with the normalized oppression that succeeded each of these moments of opening and hope. In its refusal to focus upon these uprisings, or “lines of flight” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 3-4 and passim), the film emphasizes the arbitrariness and unpredictability of historical change. A social regime is not determined by the events that gave birth to it; if anything, it is organized as a systematic betrayal of these events.

It is worth dwelling on the way that *Taxidermia* actually handles the transitions from one regime to the next – which are also the transitions between the three parts of the narrative. The first segment of the film ends with a shot that shows us baby Kálmán, his pig tail just having been cut off, held up in the air in the Lieutenant’s arms. From there, the camera pans in a circle, downward to the ground, up again the length of the Lieutenant’s body, over his head and into the sky. Without a cut, the sky is suddenly crisscrossed by the flight of 1960s jet fighters. The camera continues its circle, down from the zenith, to a stadium in which a speed eating contest is being held. Eventually, the camera reaches the adult Kálmán, shown in a closeup shoveling soup into his mouth with a large spoon. The shot continues, as the camera pans around Kálmán, eventually viewing him from the back, and

showing beyond him the cheering crowds in the stadium's stands. Later in the film, the second segment ends with the scrawny baby Lajos sucking at Gizi's enormous breast. The camera pans sideways, to a window of opaque glass; then it passes through the glass, with coruscating refracted-color effects. On the other side of the glass, we see an extreme closeup of feathers: the underside of a wing, the bottom of a bird's body, and an orifice from which a bit of excrement squirts out. There's a cut to a closeup of the excrement hitting and staining the ground, from which the camera pans upward, then zooms through a doorway into the adult Lajos's taxidermy studio. The camera tracks through a series of corridors and into a back room, where it circles around an enormous stuffed bear, finally reaching the sight of Lajos putting some finishing touches to the bear's upraised paw.

In both of these sequences, the passage of time is elided, and replaced by a camera movement through space. We are taken without pause, and in a single motion, from a character's infancy to his maturity, and from one social system, and one kind of intense embodiment, to another. History does not progress; it merely reconfigures, trading one way of breaking down the male body for another. More generally, *Taxidermia* systematically avoids portraying any processes of organic development; it relies instead upon spatial juxtapositions and analogical correspondences. In one astonishing montage sequence in the first part of the film, the Lieutenant's enormous tub is rotated on its axis, and we see the various uses to which it has been put: bathing, sleeping, storing the pig's bones, laying out a corpse, cradling a newborn baby, doing the laundry. These are all constituent elements of the supposedly traditional way of life, predating both communism and capitalism, that this portion of the film depicts.

There are also repetitions and echoes among the various segments of the film. For instance, animal entrails appear in all three portions. We move from the slaughtered pig upon whose remains Morosgoványi fucks the Lieutenant's wife, to the viscous, gristle-filled foodstuffs of Kálmán's eating competitions, to the animal bodies that Lajos stuffs and mounts. The viscera Morosgoványi removes from the body of the slaughtered pig in the first section are mirrored by the viscera Lajos removes from his own body in the last. Or again, there are suggestive resonances between Morosgoványi's prosthetically enhanced sexual body, Kálmán's monstrously engorged eating and vomiting body, and Lajos's anorexic, self-eviscerated body. In all three cases, the men's bodies directly register, and immediately suffer, the social forces that pass through them and mold them.

Taxidermia thus insists upon a radically discontinuous history: one that is filled

with resonances and reconfigurations, but that is not subject to mediation, and does not exhibit any sort of narrative development. The practice of genealogy, Foucault says, “does not seek to define our unique threshold of emergence, the homeland to which metaphysicians promise a return; it seeks to make visible all of those discontinuities that cross us” (Foucault 1998, 386-387). Such a vision of history is radically opposed to the sort of unified and self-reflective account advocated by Hegel, Kojève, and Fukuyama. The historical movement depicted in *Taxidermia*, a passage from fascism to communism to capitalism, cannot be understood as a linear or dialectical progression. It is rather a succession of contingencies, a series of mutations, in the course of which “the body is molded by a great many distinct regimes; it is broken down by the rhythms of work, rest, and holidays; it is poisoned by food or values, through eating habits or moral laws; it constructs resistances” (Foucault 1998, 380). *Taxidermia* precisely works by calling attention to, and indeed monstrously inflating, those everyday “rhythms of work” and “eating habits” in the course of which the male body, in particular, is systematically and repeatedly broken down.

In this way, *Taxidermia* offers a reproach to Western neoliberal imaginings. The film’s genealogical method underscores the contingency of capitalism’s claims to finality and universality. In the United States, and in the West more generally, we feel as if capitalism has always been with us. We cannot remember a time when it was not; and this is part of the reason that we cannot imagine things ever being different. For the people of Central and Eastern Europe, to the contrary, the capitalism of the last twenty-odd years might well seem like a bizarre alien imposition, as hostile and inhuman as socialism before it, and fascism before that. We in the West tend to have an inveterate belief in the inevitability of the “free market,” even when we are no longer persuaded of its virtues. Today, in the United States and Western Europe, we are no longer told that, as consumers, we can “have it all.” Instead, we are told that we must embrace harsh austerity programs, and give up on all those things that we used to take for granted, but that we cannot any longer afford. Yet the underlying apologetics for corporate and financial domination remain the same; as before, *There Is No Alternative*. Such is the dilemma of capitalist realism. But as Tamás says, “who can badmouth East Europeans, new to market capitalism of the last variety, if they do not believe in all this nonsense? Why should they?” (Szeman and Tamas 2009, 26). The corrosive, sardonic wit of Pálfi’s film exposes the groundlessness of our Western assumptions. In its historical vision, *Taxidermia* is almost a work of science fiction, as it “cognitively estranges” us (Suvin 1972, 372) from our sense of capitalism as the end of history.

Taxidermia performs its task of cognitive estrangement through a series of violent contrasts. The film is both viscerally charged and icily allegorical; intimately physical in its exploration of masculine desire and bodily disgust, and sardonically distanced in its satirical portrayal of social and political rituals. On the one hand, *Taxidermia* is a highly controlled, harshly formalist film. In its nearly inhuman detachment, and its rigorously schematic organization, it is as severe as anything by Kubrick. Yet at the same time, it is filled with uncomfortable and unpredictable details. With its strategy of gross exaggeration and caricature, it insistently focuses on the excesses of the unruly flesh in a way that rivals early Cronenberg. This tension between schematic formalist distance and affective intensity has its roots in earlier Hungarian film, and perhaps especially in the historical dramas of Miklós Jancsó. It is also reminiscent of the aesthetic strategies of certain other European directors, like Pasolini and Greenaway. But Pálfi's particular conjunction of intimacy and allegory, or of body horror and alienation-effect, works as a formal methodology for his genealogical investigations.

The difficulty, no less than the beauty, of *Taxidermia* comes from the way that the film presents its body-images directly, without historical development and without psychological explanation. These body-images are immediately visceral, and indeed disgusting; and yet they are also abstract and allegorical. Kálmán's binge and purge cycle, for instance, makes me queasy. When I watch the second part of the film, my stomach starts to rumble and I have a faint taste of nausea in my mouth. The film, like other works in so-called "body genres," operates by a sort of affective contagion. It *forces us to feel*, arousing the audience with "a sense of over-involvement in sensation and emotion," that implies "an apparent lack of proper esthetic distance" (Williams 1991, 5). At the same time, however, speed eating evidently forms part of an abstract intellectual scheme. It has its place in the film as a calculated figure for the excess, the bloated sense of importance, and the empty propagandistic displays that were characteristic of the culture of Eastern European socialist regimes. Morosgoványi's masturbation and Lajos's taxidermy are similarly emblematic of these characters' social situations. From this point of view, the dramatization of strange bodily practices runs the risk, as allegory so often does, of "seem[ing] willed, reductive, and heavy" (Jayamanne 2001, 165). Allegory implies too great an aesthetic distance; the opposite of the excessive nearness of body genres. The schematism of *Taxidermia* goes together with its cool, distanced formalism, the tight control of its cinematography and editing.

This conflict between visceral intensity and allegorical distance, or between vul-

gar bodily content and abstract, schematic form, is itself the whole point of *Taxidermia*. We might even think of the resultant dissonance as Pálfi's postmodern version of Eisensteinian intellectual montage. The result of this clash of incommensurables, however, is not Eisenstein's dialectic, but rather the collapse of all mediation. For Eisenstein, "from the superimposition of two elements of the same dimension always arises a new, higher dimension" (Eisenstein 1949, 49). In *Taxidermia*, however, the superimposition of different dimensions of expression (content and form, or the visceral and the intellectual, or the affective and the cognitive) leads to a flattening, a reduction of dimensions. Reflection is folded back into immediate experience. To embody "actually existing socialism" in a repulsive speed eating contest, or to express "capitalist realism" in a machine for self-evisceration, is to short-circuit the relation between the literal and the figurative, as well as between what Marxists traditionally call the base and the superstructure. In each of the film's three sections, a whole assemblage of social institutions, ideological presuppositions, reiterated practices, and complex determinations is inscribed directly upon, and made to fall back upon (*se rebattre sur* – cf. Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 11), the male protagonist's body. In *Taxidermia*, there is no mediating term in between the social regime (fascism, socialism, or capitalism) and the flesh that exemplifies and suffers from it – just as there is no mediation in the historical passage from one of these regimes to the next.

As it presents historical assemblages in this way, *Taxidermia* is haunted by the figure of the "bachelor machine" (*machine célibataire*). I take this term from Deleuze and Guattari (1983, 18 – although the official translation unhelpfully renders the phrase as *celibate machine*). Deleuze and Guattari themselves borrow the term, via Michel Carrouges (1954), from Marcel Duchamp (who coined it to describe his large work *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even*). The bachelor machine can best be understood, as Constance Penley describes it in relation to film theory, as a highly complex and articulated mechanism that works "to represent the relation of the body to the social, the relation of the sexes to each other, the structure of the psyche, or the workings of history" (Penley 1989, 57). The bachelor machine is a male-initiated and male-centered device; it is "typically a closed, self-sufficient system," whose "common themes" include "voyeurism and masturbatory eroticism, the dream of the mechanical reproduction of art, and artificial birth or reanimation" (57). The bachelor machine is thus a symptom and an expression of "a fantasy of closure, perfectibility, and mastery" (58). For Deleuze and Guattari, the bachelor machine is an apparatus for producing enjoyment, or *jouissance*, as a kind of surplus of "intensive qualities" extracted from an oppres-

sive social order: “a genuine consummation is achieved by the new machine, a pleasure that can rightly be called autoerotic, or rather automatic; the nuptial celebration of a new alliance, a new birth, a radiant ecstasy, as though the eroticism of the machine liberated other unlimited forces” (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 18).

Lajos’ self-taxidermizing device is quite explicitly a bachelor machine; Morosgoványi’s autoerotic arrangements, and Kálmán’s organized binge-and-purge routines, are more implicitly so. In all three cases, the male protagonists insert their own bodies into complex, extended mechanistic circuits which exacerbate and amplify their desires. These circuits do not just “represent” social forces for the individual subject; rather, they actually *transmit* these forces directly into the male body, which suffers and “enjoys” them in a solipsistic, self-amplifying spiral that can only culminate in death. In all three sections of *Taxidermia*, the impasses of the social order are experienced as dysfunctions of masculinity. One usually speaks in such contexts of a “crisis” of masculinity; but the film presents this “crisis” as a chronic and recurrent condition. Bachelor machines, like Deleuze and Guattari’s “desiring machines” more generally, “work only when they break down, and by continually breaking down” (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 8). When mediation is bypassed, and all the determinations of power and authority are directly inscribed in the flesh, there is no room for the “symbolic” dimensions of masculine privilege. All three protagonists of *Taxidermia* are engaged in starkly material practices of stimulating, regulating, and breaking down their own bodies. These practices can be seen, in Judith Butler’s phrase, as “reiterative and citational performance[s]” of masculinity (although, unlike Butler, I do not see the intensely corporeal performances of these bachelor machines as predominantly being matters of “discourse”: cf. Butler 1993, 2).

Morosgoványi’s furtive pleasures work as crass (and potentially carnivalesque) parodies of the Lieutenant’s patriarchal commands and pontifications. But at the same time, these private rituals are the orderly’s only respite from an otherwise total subordination to the Lieutenant. Kálmán’s enacts something like a normative masculinity as he woos and marries Gizi; his moments with her are the only scenes in the film that offer the prospect of anything like ordinary happiness. But these enactments are little more than a false facade, as is evident both from Gizi’s adultery, and from the way that Gizi and Kálmán are forced to live their life together entirely at the Party’s beck and call. As for Lajos, his taxidermic labor is his only line of escape from the depressive position to which he is consigned both by Kálmán’s monstrous Oedipal domination and by the total dissolution of

social ties in the course of Hungary's postsocialist transition. For all three men, masculinity is little more than an uncomfortable, and ultimately unconvincing, simulation. For all three, the intensified, and self-annihilating, material performance of masculinity in the bachelor machine marks an attempt to escape from the encompassing social regime. But this attempt inevitably proves futile, because it remains caught within, and materially instantiated by, the very logic from which it seeks to escape.

Taxidermia offers no visions of liberation, therefore. The film presents all three of its social regimes as claustrophobically closed, self-replicating orders: autopoietic systems, as Niklas Luhmann would say (Luhmann 1996). Each of these systems actively works to repress and stifle change. Each is defined by a reductive, self-confirming logic, and a corresponding regulation of the male body. More specifically, each of these regimes has a characteristic political-economic system, a particular form of social organization, a set of prescribed ways in which individuals relate to one another, and a preferred form of ritual expression. Each has a set of privileged operations on the body that define its possibilities and limitations. Each has its own set of criteria for determining access to power and material comfort. And each has its own typical forms of affective disorder, from which its protagonists suffer. These characteristics can be summarized in the form of a table:

Morosgoványi	Kálmán	Lajos
Fascism/Feudalism	Socialism	Capitalism
Hierarchical/Aristocratic	Mass Public	Private
Military chain of command	Prestige and Privilege	Atomistic Isolation
War	Sports	Art
Masturbation/Murder	Feeding/Regurgitation	Taxidermy/Evisceration
Rank	Connections	Cultural Capital
Obsession/Compulsion	Engorgement/Exhibitionism	Anorexia/Masochism

The first part of the film links military hierarchy and patriarchal authority to sexual frustration. Morosgoványi's phantasmic masturbation is the only form of action open to him in an entirely rigid social order. His every attempt to claim a bit of pleasure for himself is unavoidably transgressive; and he is eventually executed by the Lieutenant in punishment for these transgressions. The second part of the film targets the mass spectacles, ubiquitous propaganda, and enforced public participation of actually existing socialism. It suggests that this exaltation of the public and the collective can only take the form of a literally nauseating excess, directly manifested in Kálmán's bloated body. Kálmán receives certain privileges from

the Party, as a result of being a champion, and the husband of a champion. But once the Party has fallen from power, he is simply cast aside; he is immobilized, and left to stew in his own impotent anger and self-pity.

The third part of the film registers the ongoing reverberations from the shock of the formerly socialist countries' transition to actually existing capitalism. The continuing monstrosity of Kálmán's presence in the flesh suggests that the legacy of Hungary's socialist past still "weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living" (Marx 1968, 97). Nonetheless, Lajos also suffers in full measure from the alienation and disconnection that are endemic to capitalist society. The traumas of privatization and atomization are registered in his scrawniness, his inexpressiveness, and his unhealthy pallor, and above all in his social isolation. He is unable to connect with other human beings – or even to get a date. The Western freedom and abundance that Hungarians dreamed of before 1989 is now achieved in the form of the supermarket, with its bright and sterile fluorescent lighting, its long rows of immaculately packaged products, and its cashiers who scrupulously avoid any contact with the customers. In this context, Lajos's profession of preserving dead bodies seems like a gruesome *reductio ad absurdum* of the commodity fetishism that drives a capitalist economy. We kill things, in order thereby to invest them with an unchanging simulation of life. Lajos only escapes from his unbearable alienation by replicating it in the final form of his own self-extinction and aesthetic self-transmogrification.

This final transformation, which makes a kind of coda to the film, is worthy of greater comment. An extensive sociological study of the transition to capitalism in Central Europe, by Gil Eyal and his collaborators, suggests that the situation in the formerly socialist countries is one of *capitalism without capitalists* (Eyal, Szelenyi, and Townsley 1998). State socialism has been dismantled; institutions and enterprises have been privatized; all areas of life have been made subject to the play of market forces. But the newly ascendant "cultural bourgeoisie" of countries like Hungary "appears to have been more successful in establishing the market institutions of modern capitalism than in creating a class of individual private proprietors, especially in the corporate sector" (9). The new elite in these countries is a *managerial* one, rather than a group of *rentiers* or owners (most of whom remain in Western Europe and North America). This is why, as Tamás also suggests, the "nomenklatura bourgeoisie" are not really dominant economically, or "in terms of profit" – even if, individually, "most of them are quite wealthy" (Szeman and Tamas 2009, 20). Rather than forming a traditional capitalist class,

the new elite of Central and Eastern Europe is dominant *culturally*. Eyal et al. argue that “cultural capital” – as opposed to economic or political capital, according to the distinction made by Pierre Bourdieu (1986) – “dominates the social structures of post-communist societies” (Eyal, Szelenyi, and Townsley 1998, 36).

How does this emphasis on cultural capital fit into the schematics of *Taxidermia*? An answer comes in the form of Lajos’s aesthetic apotheosis. With his bachelor machine, Lajos transforms himself and his father into statues. As works of art, they possess a greater measure of value and prestige than either of them ever had when they were alive. Their uncanny preservation after death recalls the actual work of artists like Gunther von Hagens and Damien Hirst, both of whom have derived considerable cultural cachet from their taxidermical recycling of human (von Hagens) and animal (Hirst) corpses. Von Hagens, himself a refugee from the socialist world, has gained at least a minor measure of notoriety, or capitalist celebrity; while Hirst has come to epitomize the brash excesses of the post-Warholian business- and celebrity-centered international art market. Works like those of Hirst have sold for extraordinarily inflated prices; contemporary art has increasingly been conjoined with high fashion on the one hand, and with high finance on the other. Lajos ironically joins this international art/celebrity/fashion/finance circuit, as after death he is celebrated both as an artist of genius, and as the commodified work of art itself. Lajos had no power, and received no recognition, while he was alive; but now, transformed by death, he achieves prestige by embodying “cultural capital” in person, as it were.

In the final sequence of *Taxidermia*, we see the formal opening of a new museum exhibition of Lajos Balatony’s work. The museum is an imposing stone structure, without windows; the space inside is vast, and only minimally furnished, as befits the postmodern international style. There are many guests at the opening, and they all stand nearly motionless, elegantly and immaculately attired in white, as the camera tracks past them. These people are the new elite, the possessors of cultural capital, in a disenchanted, post-socialist world. Doctor Andor Regőczy (Géza Hegedüs) addresses them from the podium. A simultaneous translator repeats all his words in English, the international language of art and commerce. The Doctor had previously engaged Lajos to prepare a creepy ornament for him: a tiny human fetus, encased in glass as an ornament. Returning to the taxidermy shop to retrieve this trophy, he was the one who discovered the bodies of Kálmán and Lajos. Now Doctor Regőczy presents their preserved figures to the assembled audience. Lacking a head and a right arm, Lajos Balatony has nonetheless

preserved himself forever: an “archaic torso,” the Doctor says, rivaling the statue famously described by Rilke. The brutalities of feudalism and fascism, and the grandiose ambitions of socialism, have both vanished from the world. They only persist embalmed, in a bloodless and idealized afterlife. Lajos’ solitary, capitalist bachelor machine has itself been dismantled, leaving behind only its final product.

After all the grotesque and disgusting metamorphoses of the flesh that we have witnessed throughout *Taxidermia*, we are left with these sanitized and pacified body-images, safely rendered as figures of cultural capital. Such a conclusion is the only one suitable to our neoliberal era, where There Is No Alternative, and where everything has already been thought of, and subsists only in order to be recycled. In Central and Eastern Europe, as much as in the Anglo-American world, all is dissolved in the acid of a universal cynicism. As Tamás says of the mood in contemporary Hungary, most people look askance at “the mere implausibility of having social and political principles of any kind at all! Most people don’t regard Marxism as criminal, but as naïve. But this is people’s opinion of liberalism or Christianity as well. Any view seemingly contradicting individual or collective selfishness or self-regard seems incredible” (Szeman and Tamas 2009, 28). *Taxidermia* completes its formal scheme by closing the circle, erasing its own singularities and excesses in a perfected aesthetic image. At the end of the film, we realize that we have already heard the start of the Doctor’s speech; it came at the very beginning of the film, over the opening titles. All of *Taxidermia*’s genealogical work happened in a parenthesis that has now been closed.

But this cynical closure is not Pálfi’s final word. At the end of his speech, the Doctor warns his audience that there are limits even to art; “there are things that just cannot be mounted.” What’s missing from the completed work is the *inner experience* (Bataille 1988) of its production: what Lajos felt at the very moment of his decapitation. And the other protagonists’ deep experiences are missing in the same way: Morosgoványi’s masturbatory pleasures, and Kálmán’s small struggle for a measure of meaningfulness and dignity. These are the exclusions that haunt the capitalist order, even in its subsumption and commodification of all previous orders. As if to demonstrate this absence, in the final shot of the movie the camera slowly zooms in on the mounted body of Lajos. Eventually, the hollow of Lajos’s navel fills the screen. But the camera continues to zoom, moving through and inside the navel. *Taxidermia* ends with a totally dark screen: we have entered the void of Lajos’s evacuated insides. There’s nothing left but to cue the final credits.

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