

## Sporty, traumatised men

Masculinity and the bodily inscriptions of cruelty in Szabolcs Hajdu's *White Palms*<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract:

The present paper interprets the award-winning Hungarian film *White Palms / Fehér tenyér* (Szabolcs Hajdu 2006) in a wide social, cultural and historical context, from the point of view of such issues as sport, identity, nationality, masculinity, trauma and loss. So as to explain why and how the film diverges from the international genre patterns and in order to reveal the full cultural significance of the film's narrative and subtle bodily metaphors, the article explores the influence of local conceptions of history and nationhood on sports, and, in turn, analyses the compensatory nature of sports in the discourses of nationality and masculinity. Furthermore, it theorizes the symbolic, representative potentials of the athlete's body in terms of *the king's two bodies* theory, and calls attention to the ways this body fails to undergo the kind of idealization customary for the king's body in medieval law or the athlete's body in the victory narratives of mainstream cinema. Following Kaja Silverman, the article connects this failure of idealization to an ideological crisis characteristic of Hungary before as well as after the fall of communism.

“Hold your ankle. Come on, hold your ankle! What did I tell you? I said, hold your ankle!” – shouts the coach to the child Dongó, while hitting him with a folded skipping rope in the gym. But the boy slips out of his hands, runs out, grabs his clothes, throws them out of the dressing room's open window, and jumps out. “Dongó, are you crazy? What is wrong with you, you little wretch?! Where are you going? Come back, fuck, do you think that anyone will take you seriously except for me? You are nobody! You are a gymnast! Do you know what that means, you wretch? It means that your muscles have taken hold of your shitty little bones! The fibres have hardened and your growth has slowed down! You are ours now! You belong to us, gymnasts! Don't you hear?! You belong here, to the gymnasts!” – he keeps shouting through the window, while Dongó hastily puts on his clothes in the street. “Fuck you” – he says half aloud, then he lights a cigarette and goes to the Russian circus in town, so as to replace an acrobat who has fallen ill...

If there is something like “Hungarian sports film,” Szabolcs Hajdu's *White Palms* (2006) is definitely one of the genre's outstanding examples. However, similarly to the best sport films, *White Palms* is not specifically about sports. In these films sport, as boxing according to Scorsese, is “an allegory for the theatre of life” (Crosson 1): one could argue about both the sports film and sport in general that it carries metaphorical meanings, and is “always closely bound to social meaning” (Babington 9), in other words, its significance is inseparable from its social, cultural and historical context. It is quite symptomatic that while discussing the most canonical Hungarian sports film, *Two Half-Times in Hell* (Zoltán Fábry, 1973) in his cult Hungarian radio show, Róbert Puzsér and his guest do not say one single word about football, and discuss the film entirely in the context of fascism, terror and power. Probably, for the same reasons, few spectators of *White Palms* would say that it is about gymnastics. Surely, a significant part of the screen time is filled with sport scenes, we see the trainings during Dongó's childhood, his work as a coach in Canada, moreover towards the end of the film the “great contest,” the hero's ultimate test also gets to be arranged (arguably one of the essential components of the sports film genre). What is more, the film mostly applies documentary aesthetics, shot with hand-held camera, without extra-diegetic music, and even the dialogues are very brief. The filmmakers have cast professional sportsmen for all the leading roles of this semi-biographical film: the child Dongó is played by two Romanian gymnast brothers, Orion Radies and Silas Radies, his Canadian disciple and later rival, Kyle Manjack is played by the world champion Kyle Shewfelt, and the main character, Miklós Dongó is performed by Miklós Hajdu himself, the director's brother, whose life inspired the story. These men, who work with their bodies

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in their everyday lives as well, also rely on their bodies, gestures and silent gazes when it comes to acting. Moreover, as many amateur actors of the film, they also often improvise. Putting the body to the forefront in this manner – as the critic Gábor Gelencsér has pointed out (302-303) – is one of the most striking characteristics of the “new Hungarian film” of the 2000's: Hajdu, as Kornél Mundruczó in *Johanna* (2005) or György Pálfi in *Hukkle* (2002) and *Taxidermia* (2006), also distances himself from the traditional direct social criticism of Hungarian films by way of staging and thematizing the body in new ways, by turning it into an active shaper of the film language. According to Gelencsér, this is what allows these directors to “speak about the social-political-ideological context of the past and the present in an original and authentic voice, as opposed to the failed attempts of the 90's” (302).

As a result of its documentalist style and the highlighting of the body, *White Palms* manages to look authentic to the Eastern European spectator: it deftly avoids the claptrap dramaturgy of Hollywood-style sports films, yet, by applying typically space- or body-based visual metaphors it creates a film text rich in figurative meaning. In the childhood training scenes one feels that the bodies' disciplinary practices stand for a social-political allegory with subtly revealed personal dramas, and in the Canadian and American sports scenes one also notices the daily struggles and alienation of an Eastern European post-communist subject in “the West.” Thus, *White Palms* is not only about the life of a gymnast or the remembrance of state socialism. As one could argue that films about the past are usually “trying to solve the problems of present day identity issues” (Murai 10), Dongó's solitary figure also makes one face some of the key issues of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century post-communist subject. Here the sportsman can be seen as a contemporary cinematic version of the alienated artist figure of 20<sup>th</sup> century novels and art films: he may stand in the spotlight from time to time, but he lives on the margins of society, often in heterotopic spaces (see: Király 174), in a sort of reflexive distance from “normal” life, thus his figure affords us a view of our own, well-disciplined lives from a new angle. One of the greatest merits of the film is that it manages to achieve this with very few words, in austere and melancholic images, and with simple shots communicating alienation, loneliness and vulnerability.

And yet, *White Palms* is still a sports film, as the genre is by definition a hybrid one, incorporating other genres as well. Apparently sport, in spite of all its inherent drama and visual pleasures, requires narratives or themes of another kind in order to create a powerful, effective film experience. For example, the sports film often mixes with the biopic, as in *White Palms*, *Rocky* (John G. Avildsen, 1976), *Raging Bull* (Martin Scorsese, 1980), *Ali* (Michael Mann, 2001), or partly in *Chariots of Fire* (Hugh Hudson, 1981), with the historical film, as in the above mentioned *Two Half-Times in Hell*, *Szabadság, szerelem / Children of Glory* (Goda Krisztina, 2006), or *Invictus* (Clint Eastwood, 2009), but there are successful cases of its combination with the family film, as in *The Warrior* (Gavin O'Connor, 2011), and even with the Bollywood-style musical, as in *Lagaan* (Ashutosh Goariker 2001). In all these examples sport functions as a kind of 'carrier': the sporting bodies become the bearers of symbolic significance, the signifiers of all kinds of ideologies, values, attitudes and other identity-elements, thus in the dramatic situations of the film's contests the spectator can cheer the characters as if one's own identity, career or life were at stake. From this point of view Hungarian sports films suit the international trends. This symbolic tendency is quite obvious when, at the dramatic climax of *Two Half-Times*, the female companion of the German colonel frantically yells *Das ist ein Spiel!*, yet the colonel, seeing the humiliation of his team, shoots a Jewish-Hungarian player dead, but similarly clear in the childhood scenes of *White Palms*, at the enumeration of bruises (traumas), when the boys are tending to the injuries they suffered during training.

The present paper interprets Szabolcs Hajdu's award winning *White Palms* in a wide social, cultural and historical context, from the point of view of such issues as sport, identity, nationality, masculinity, trauma and loss. It tries to answer such questions as *How does White Palms change the generic patterns of the American sports film? What is the significance of narratives of victimhood and loss in an Eastern European context? How does the film present the relationship between the state socialist past and the democratic present, between East and West? And: What*

*characteristically Eastern European constructions of masculinity appear in the film?*

*White Palms*, which was one of the first films marking the emergence of a new generation of post-communist filmmakers, tells the story of the life of a Hungarian gymnast in a loosely structured narratives that jumps back and forth in time between the childhood of Dongó in a provincial town in Eastern Hungary in the 70's and 80's, training with a sadistic coach (Gheorghe Dinica), and his work after the regime change in Canada as a coach and in the USA as an artist at the Cirque du Soleil in Las Vegas. The above mentioned key concepts of my analysis, similarly to the film, are as important and timely in Hungary in 2015 as at the time of the shooting of the film almost ten years ago. The sports policy of the Orbán governments, and particularly the government's often criticised football stadium programme clearly show that sports are crucial elements of Hungarian identity-politics, so much so that the elevation of the level of Hungarian football may hold the promise of future election victories. The representation of sports in Hungary has a peculiar history, one that differs from those of the “great” western societies analysed by international sports historians. I would argue that the film's narrative, symbolism and its constructions of masculinity can only gain their full significance in this uniquely Eastern European context.

### ***Sport and national identity in Hungary***

One may assess the paramount importance of sports in the discourse of national identity in Hungary even by listening to the sports news one single time on one of the national radio or TV stations. Usually the sports news coverage starts with the results of Hungarian athletes, and (quite annoyingly) often do not get any further than that. Apparently the news that a Hungarian athlete made it through the qualifiers of a big international event, or finished it at the 15th place, is more worthy of mentioning than the names of the ones who actually won that competition. Most Hungarians are proud of their countrymen's sports successes, these outstanding achievements are among the last sources of the country's national pride (in a manner similar to the successes of Hungarian scientists). It seems that according to the symbolic logic of sports, as soon as a player puts on the national jersey and steps on the field, one becomes the synecdochic representative of a whole nation, therefore his or her success or failure is almost automatically interpreted as that of the whole community. These achievements (or under-achievements) may be as significant events in the sports fan's identity games (so as to use Anikó Imre's term), as the “matches” of international politics. (After the matches of the national football team or the international matches of Hungarian clubs club usually there is a whole torrent of comments and analyses on the pages of social media, such that the events of world politics seldom provoke.)

It is easy to recognize the compensatory logic of sport in these discourses of national identity: though the importance of the country has immensely shrunk during the “stormy centuries” of history, “we” can still show “what is the Hungarian spirit” and be equal to the great nations of our times. Apparently, the more uncertain or miserable life is, the more important sports become. Arguably the best example of this cultural phenomenon is the role of the “Golden Team” in the Stalinist-type dictatorship of the 1950's. The “golden” national football team, which nobody could beat in the world for four years from the summer of 1950 on, “did not only legitimize the regime: it was also the compensatory-symbolic binding element of a terribly oppressed society” (Fodor and Szirák 110). While the average Hungarian citizen of the Rákosi regime could easily feel like a disempowered, wretched nobody living under a cruel and inhuman dictatorship, the figure of the “golden foot” Ferenc Puskás appeared in the urban legends of the time as a kind of “folk tale hero” or the “tough lad who outwits the people in power” (117). It is also quite telling that “when in 1982 secondary school and university students were asked what they considered to be the most glorious events of Hungarian history, the most common answer apart from the 1848 uprising against the Habsburgs was 6:3” – the victory over the English football team in the Wembley in 1953 (Réti 126). Hungarian sports films often follow this trend, and especially team sports (as football or water polo)

become easily the symbolic representations of the nation: the German-Hungarian football match in *Two Half-Times in Hell* is as much of a symbolic representation of an ideological and political conflict as the 1956 Hungarian-Soviet water polo match at the Melbourne Olympic Games in *Szabadság, szerelem / Children of Glory*.

Seeing all these links between the discourses of national identity and sport, it may not be surprising to realise that the roots of our contemporary representation of sports go much deeper into the past than either the modern Olympic movement or radio and TV broadcasts of sports events. Though with the invention of the modern concept of nationhood the athlete's body gained new kinds of significance in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which was further strengthened by the modern Olympic movement's nation-based ordering of competitors, these nationalistic discourses carry on and reinterpret a much older tradition of representation. I argue that the representative symbolism of the athlete's body works in a manner similar to the way the king's two bodies did in pre-modern European societies. What connects these two seemingly distant signifying practices is the transferability of symbolic meanings between a living, natural body and a public one. This tradition, which Ernst H. Kantorowicz called the theory of *the king's two bodies*, distinguishes between a living, mortal, natural body on the one hand, and a public, symbolic, immortal one on the other. When a king died and the next took his place, the symbolic meanings associated with the second body were transferred to the natural body of the new king, thus elevating him into a new position. When there was no new king to follow, the public body could be transferred onto an artificial body, an effigy, that served as the carrier of the king's symbolic powers (see: Belting 41). I would argue that similarly to medieval kings, sportsmen and sportswomen have "two bodies" as well: at the moment of putting on the national jersey they acquire the second, symbolic body, they go through a transubstantiation analogous with the king at his coronation. The athlete's body (or its TV or filmic image) is as open to symbolic resignification as that of the king (or a wooden effigy). Moreover, one could argue that these representations, the visual image of the athlete and the effigy of the king, are created *precisely* in order to take on these meanings. This is why the winning athlete's success becomes the glory of a whole community (when they listen to the national anthem together with him in front of the TV), and this is why the present day failures of the Hungarian national football team are followed by several days of national mourning... As Kantorowicz has pointed out apropos of the king's two bodies, these corporeal significations can be interpreted as the continuation of a mystical tradition (Kantorowicz 196, Balogh 40). According to this historical narrative, the symbolism of Christ's body, the concept of the *corpus mysticum* went through several displacements through the centuries. First it was extended to the church (Kantorowicz 196-197), then to the king (this is the main subject of Kantorowicz's book), and finally to the nation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: "This concept of a body without decline, ageing, weaknesses and imperfections lived on in the idea of the immortal nation. This political body always signifies the community, with the king as its head and the community as its subjects..." (Balogh 40). I would argue that the way the symbolic dimension of sports gained strength in the 20<sup>th</sup> century can be read as yet another displacement in the history of the *corpus mysticum*. Its time came when the civilizing process (in the sense of Norbert Elias's theory) reached the point when direct nationalistic discourses were more and more replaced by those of national sports, just as fighting and direct physical violence in everyday life was gradually replaced by competing in sports.

As I will show later, Dongó's relation to sport, competition and victory is also strongly shaped by the duality of the personal, living body, and the public, symbolic one. Mapping the Eastern European modifications of this corporeal symbolism is as important for the understanding of the behaviour of the characters and the inner logic of these constructions of masculinity as for the full comprehension of the causal relations driving the narrative.

### *Stories of loss*

The above theorised symbolism of the athlete's body is probably not specific to any geographical or

cultural region. All the more characteristic of Hungarian culture of sport, however, is the application of the popular master tropes of the local view of history to the history of sports. The most striking characteristic is the immense popularity of the tropes of loss and decline (widely used in local historical narratives) in stories and films about sport. If one compares Hungarian sport films with international, and especially American, examples, perhaps the first difference one notices is the distance Hungarian films keep from the “affirmative pleasures” (Babington 9) of the “victory narrative” (17) so definitive of the genre. In Hungarian sports films – though they usually incorporate several key elements of the international generic pattern – one seldom sees “real heroes,” that is, people who realize the dangers or problems of their communities, decide to fight these even it means facing conflicts or putting themselves in danger, and finally change the course of fate by overcoming the difficulties.

The small gymnasts in *White Palms* do not seem to be chasing glorious, heroic successes. Rather, they look like suffering, helpless victims of a cruel, humiliating regime. The training programme of “Uncle Feri,” the coach, does not produce brave heroes with straight backbones and eyes on the horizon, but rather distressed, wounded boys with averted eyes, people who have gradually lost their ability to feel happy or at home in the world. The typical punishment of the boys, when they have to bend down and hold their ankles without a word or a move while the coach spansks them with his sword, clearly indicates the “positions” relating to heroic masculinity practised here. If one can risk generalizing comparisons between the national cinemas of the former Eastern bloc, one could argue that this lack of heroic characters affiliates Hungarian (sports) films with Czech cinema (see: Mazierska 24), however, *White Palms* and most other Hungarian films do not present this situation as (at least partly) funny, as the Czech examples, but rather with a strange, tragic apathy. The lack of heroism could also connect Hungarian films with the Romanian New Wave, yet, as Hajnal Király argues, usually “in Romanian films protagonists tend to have at least one big and intense monologue” reflecting the cause of their miseries, whereas “in the Hungarian films under analysis these remain undeclared and are revealed in a poetical, often symptomatic representation of places and bodies” (179).

In *White Palms* one never sees the childhood victories of Dongó, all the competitions he won: the medals and certificates decorating his room are only fetishized by his parents, their display is just another part of the humiliating show that they force upon their son in front of others. Moreover, the parallel editing montage of the final, most dramatic sequence of the film juxtaposes a traumatic childhood incident (when Dongó falls from the high trapeze in the circus) with the world championship of his adulthood, suggesting that it is because of the traumatic mark left in Dongó by his accident that he makes a mistake in his final jump, thus “only” winning bronze medal. Apparently, other Hungarian sports films also share a liking of lost battles: the last shot of *To Half-Times* shows the dead bodies of the players, and even Péter Tímár's film (1999) about the historical victory over the English, *6:3, or Play it Again, Tutti! / 6:3, Avagy játszd újra Tutti!* places the “great victory,” “the match of the century” into the distance of a dream-like, nostalgic, bitter-sweet fantasy of a mentally challenged refuse collector. Dongó's story, if one only considers “the facts” building up the narrative, could also be arranged into a victory plot: all the victorious childhood competitions, his survival of the fall, his recovery, his (presumably) financially successful work in Canada and the USA, his world championship third place and the victory of his trainee – all these events could very well constitute an “American style” affirmative narrative highlighting how one may overcome difficulties and gain success. Yet, these affirmative emotions never gain precedence in *White Palms*, one only feels the protagonist's loneliness, vulnerability and alienation. Even the scenes that take place in the New World there is a pervasive sense of apathy and “emptiness” (so as to use Júlia Széphelyi's term). Is it merely the usual art film topos of the alienated (anti-)hero, the rejection of the simplifying, ideological approach of American genre cinema, or is it rather the manifestation of certain local cultural traditions?

In my opinion both aspects are important for one's understanding of the film, and if one looks at the second one (the traditional local constructions of narrative and masculinity), one may also understand better Hungarian cinema's traditional distance from the clichés of genre cinema.

The most important cultural phenomenon to be acknowledged in this respect is the long standing popularity of narratives of decline and loss. I would argue that these tropes have been in use for several centuries and function very much like *performative master-tropes* in Hungary (in the sense that Judith Butler uses these concepts in her theory of body and gender). In the present context I understand by this expression such cognitive constructs that were once mobilised successfully to explain historical events of great emotional charge, therefore they became master-tropes, principles widely accepted in the region, used again and again for the explanation of more and more events, until (in a Nietzschean fashion) people forgot that they were metaphors and mistook them for the truth. The process when certain tropes or cognitive models become invisible master-tropes through repetition is a well-known one in psychology, it is there in Freud's theory of trauma, it is the basis of Butler's theory of performative reiteration in the construction of embodied gender identity, but it can also be applied to conceptualisations of history as narrative. As a recent thematic issue of the Hungarian sociological journal *Korall* entitled "Narratives of victimhood" clearly indicates, narratives of loss and decline have been widely accepted conceptualisations of history in Hungary at least since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The popularity of such constructions of masculinity as the martyr or the victim are deeply intertwined with these narrative master-tropes. It was the literary historian Béla Németh G. who first clarified the tendency in poetry, naming this type *value- and time-contrasting poems*, the basic rhetorical structure of which is the stark contrast between the glorious past and the woeful present. It is important to realize that many of the most canonical poems of Hungarian literature – poems included in primary and secondary school curricula, works strongly influencing Hungarian identity politics – belong to this type, among them the Hungarian national anthem by Ferenc Kölcsey.

This cultural heritage, which obviously has a great impact on local formations of masculinity, becomes even more significant for the present study when we realize that the rhetorical construct of "once a fort, a ruin now" did not only shape 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Hungarian poetry and popular views of history, but it also appears in documentaries (see: Györi), feature films and even sports history. One of the most amusing chapters of this otherwise grim story is the media response to the humiliating 6:0 defeat from the Soviets at the Mexican Football Mundial in 1986. As Zsófia Réti observes, "most popular interpretations ... understood the match in terms of a symbolic clash between the two countries" (127), and staged it as the latest episode of the long series of national tragedies in Hungarian history (see: 127). She argues that "the past glory and subsequent fall of Hungarian football is a generally accepted model shared by the vast majority of the community. The 1986 match suits this narrative perfectly..." (130). Accordingly, the newspapers on the day after the match placed the event in the *national misfortune narrative*, and often associated it with the defeat of the Hungarian army by the Ottoman Turkish at the battle of Mohács in 1526 (which marked the end of the independent Hungarian Kingdom, its partitioning between the Ottoman Empire, The Habsburg Monarchy and the Principality of Transylvania). This episode of Hungarian sports history indicates how the traditional national misfortune narrative can become a master trope capable of paradigm-expansion, thus offering ready-made answers for present (sports) events.

I would argue that the above mentioned master trope and the cultural phenomenon one could call the *Mohács-syndrome* effectively shape *White Palms* and Hungarian sports films in general as well: it influences the directors' choice of stories, their interpretation of the events, the lack of belief in victory-narratives, and the constructions of masculinity deemed "authentic." What distinguishes *White Palms* from the various texts and films affected by the trope is that Hajdu's film highlights the causal relationship between past and present, trauma and its effects, thus it seems to be consciously investigating the inner logic of Dongó's miseries, losses and ineffective search for freedom.

The influence and results of the above detailed tropology become even clearer when one compares the cinematic presentation of Dongó's body with some of the principles of the king's two bodies theory. The most striking difference is that while *White Palms* investigates the wounds that stop someone from becoming a heroic winner, the weaknesses and faults of the king's natural body are overcome and overwritten by the perfection of the political body (Kantorowicz 7). According to the "mainstream" conceptualisation of the two bodies "doubt cannot arise concerning the

superiority of the body politic over the body natural” (9), in other words, all bodily weaknesses are effaced by the symbolic meaning written on and over the natural body when royal power is bestowed upon it. I argue that this “mainstream” operation of medieval body politics is still discernible in the victory narratives of mainstream sports films: in these enabling, affirmative stories we witness how the natural, living body is overcome by the symbolic one, erasing all signs and effects of former weakness. By contrast, *White Palms* tells the story of trauma and loss, it tells about the failure of such a fantastic-fantasmic overcoming of difficulties through the transubstantiation of the body. *White Palms* tells about the situations when the natural body is stronger than the symbolic / ideological / political body, when the sportsman does *not* become super-human. Thus, Kantorowicz's two body theory calls attention to the differences between the philosophies of the body applied by different sports films: while Hollywood-style victory narratives usually show how the hero works through and eventually overcomes all difficulties, how he or she trains strenuously, how one turns one's living, fragile, imperfect and mortal body into the immortality and perfection of the victorious ideological / political body, the not-so-elevating, but all the more human stories of loss as *White Palms* reveal the preponderance of the living body, that is, its failure to become an idealised fantasy-construct. Though the latter type of narratives can be read as authentic representations of a most human situation, in the context of sports films in general they are more of an oddity than a typical case. In *Masculinity at the Margins*, apropos of American wartime cinema Kaja Silverman theorises such bodies of failure and underachievement by highlighting how they are connected to communities in historical times when the *ideological belief* needed for idealising constructions of gendered subjectivity is weak (see: 15-23), and following Silverman I have theorised such bodies of Hungarian post-regime-change cinema in those terms (see: Kalmár). As Silverman has argued in case of such films as *The Best Years of our Lives* (William Wyler 1946) and I have argued apropos of *Kontroll* (Nimród Antal, 2003), the successful interpellation of the subject (in the Althusserian sense of the term) depends on the subject's belief in the dominant fiction and ideological formations of the community. Following Silverman I argue that historical trauma can considerably weaken a community's belief in such idealizing narratives, which also leads to the rejection of certain fantasmic, “heroic” types of masculinity. In other words, the incident when Dongó momentarily loses his balance and makes a step back after landing can be interpreted as the failure of the symbolic / ideological / political body to overwrite the living, personal body (and the traumas carried within it). In other words, in *White Palms* the “wiping away of every imperfection” (Kantorowicz 11) of the natural body cannot take place.

Let's compare Dongó's story with the victory narrative of *Invictus!* In the latter film, the unexpected victory of the South-African rugby team at the 1995 World Cup that the country hosted soon after the fall of Apartheid is associated with the inner strength of Nelson Mandela (Morgan Freeman), the country's first democratic president, and the moral ennobling of the rugby team. The film suggests that the team wins because the long years of political imprisonment could not break Mandela's humanity, and with the help of the team's captain (Matt Damon) he overcomes all racial prejudice and transforms the racially selected, almost all-white team into a symbol of the “Rainbow Nation.” The “uplifting” ideology of the film, the elevation of the body by something invisible and immortal, is summarized by the poem *Invictus* by William Ernest Henley, quoted several times in the film:

Out of the night that covers me,  
Black as the pit from pole to pole,  
I thank whatever gods may be  
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance  
I have not winced nor cried aloud.  
Under the bludgeonings of chance  
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears  
Looms but the Horror of the shade,  
And yet the menace of the years  
Finds and shall find me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll,  
I am the master of my fate,  
I am the captain of my soul.

The poem summarises mainstream sports films' approach to the body: it is about idealism and idealisation, the strength of the inner self, about the unconquerable soul that can overcome all (physical, emotional) difficulties and traumas. This essential super-self is not affected by physical conditions, it remains self-identical, always self-possessing, master of its fate. It does not take long to recognize the similarities between this essentialist, idealist approach, and the affirmation of the political body's privileged status in the king's two bodies theory, according to which "not only is the body politic 'more ample and large' than the body natural, but there dwell in the former certain truly mysterious forces which reduce, or even remove, the imperfections of the fragile human nature" (Katorowicz 9). However, this view of the body, which appears as an empowering, uplifting attitude in *Invictus*, seems more like a sadistic, inhuman denial of the physical and emotional determinants of human life in the Eastern European context of *White Palms*. According to the latter view, one can never be an absolute "master" of one's fate, one cannot completely obliterate the wounds one received throughout one's life, moreover, the attempt at such mastery may easily lead to cruelty. As László Strausz points out, the presentation of the human body as a "memory-container" (26) is quite characteristic of the new Hungarian film of the 2000's: in these films bodies "carry within themselves the characteristics of the historical times surrounding them in the form of imprints" (28). In other words, contemporary Hungarian (art house) films tend to apply a pattern markedly different from the one seen in *Invictus*: here bodies are not the sites of the dramatic struggle in which the spiritual overcomes the physical and the present overcomes the past, but rather the places where the strength of the past and its traumas show.

However, it seems that in *White Palms* the symbolic resignification of the athlete's body, the way it is endowed with a second, symbolic, invincible body is not only problematic because of the preponderance of the living body and the imprint of traumas carried in it. It is not only that in the Eastern European context the belief in the dominant ideological fiction necessary for the smooth (and naive) internalisation of idealising formations of subjectivity is missing. The childhood scenes of *White Palms* suggest that Dongó is consciously and tactically resisting these physical processes of ideological indoctrination. In *White Palms* becoming an "invincible" hero through endowing the natural body of the athlete with a second, symbolic one is presented as the in-corporation of the ideological norms of an inhuman social order. A fine example of this approach is the scene when, presumably as a result of the bruises and scars found on the children, a few parents enter the gym while the training is still going on. The coach tries to send them out, but when the father of a recently wounded boy decides to stay, he orders the young gymnasts to practice the jump over the vault. Now, when he is being watched, the coach decides to encourage the boys with kind words instead of the usual curses and beatings. When it comes to Dongó, who is the most talented in the whole team, he deliberately messes up the jump three times in a row: he does not assume the role of the gymnast to show up with, he does not perform for the glory of his cruel coach. The scene can be interpreted as an example of Eastern European tactics of resistance, an allegory of the way films from the region may reject idealised, heroic character types together with the ideology of such invincible heroism. When Dongó stops short at the vault, pretending not being able to jump, and stares right up to the coach, it is not only an image of a teenager in rebellion against the adult world, but also more than the subject of state-socialism in passive resistance: in this image *White Palms*



also marks its resistance to subject-positions that try to efface all that is human in us for the sake of an image of perfection. *White Palms* – as all films of Hajdu – presents characters who must swim against the current, establish themselves not by relying on the dominant ideologies and values of the societies around them (as in *Invictus*), but by resisting them. Needless to say, such narratives do not lead to “perfect” bodies and glorious, uplifting, happy endings: the symphonic orchestra of the dominant ideological order never plays for such endings.

The competition between Dongó and his Canadian trainee, Kyle, at the world championship is a prominent example of these differences. In the TV interviews before the contest Kyle clearly states that he came to win, while Dongó says that what matters most for him is to show after all those missed years that he can do gymnastics. Yet, with a wry half-smile he adds that he does not like to lose. This difference regarding one's relation to the idealised-ideological “second” body becomes even more visible when we see Kyle posing for the press photographers after his victory (while Dongó simply disappears). Kyle's naive posing, his unreflected enjoyment of the second, invincible body, his belief that the two bodies may coincide, that he *is* the winner, together with the flashes of the photographers momentarily blinding the film camera turn the scene into a self-reflexive moment of the film, a commentary on cinema itself. This scene may remind one of Kaja Silverman's comments on idealisation in *The Threshold of the Visible World*, where she argues that the most important ethical problem posed by genre cinema's idealising approach is that it offers the spectator an illusionary, day-dream-like experience of being one with the ideal (that one can never really live up to in everyday life), the euphoric joy of which effectively disables one's intellectual and critical awareness, thus making the spectator completely blind to ideological manipulation (39). With the image of the “heroic” winner posing in the blinding light of idealisation, *White palms* seems to call our attention to this dangerous effect and the ambiguousness of the masculinities produced by it.

### ***Past and present, East and West***

Resistance, however, does not make Dongó either free or happy. *White Palms* is not *The Matrix* (Wachowski Bros., 1999). Whereas in the life of Mr. Anderson aka. Neo (Keanu Reeves) sports (martial arts) are associated with resistance and the expression of autonomy, they belong to the potentially liberating cyber world where physical boundaries may be overcome in the celebration of the perfect, cyber-super-human body, in *White Palms* sports remain a material, bodily practice, and distancing from “mainstream” types of masculinity never creates autonomous, self-reliant characters who live happily on the margins of society and its dominant ideology. In *White palms* resistance does not lead out of the system, there is no outside to the Matrix of power. In other words, resisting the dulling forms of ideologically overcharged *assujettissement* (to use Foucault's terminology) still leaves one empty-handed and confused. Let us recall the scene when one day Dongó turns back from the door of the gym. We see him peeping through the half-open door as the other boys are all standing in line and Feri, the coach calls out his name. A perfect example of the interpellation of the subject in Althusser's sense, one could say, yet what happens here is rather the reverse of Althusser's famous example: when witnessing the order, or system created by the Law (the gym, the straight line of boys, the uniforms, the coach and his whip-like sword), our protagonist turns *away* from the Law. In classical genre cinema this would be a moment of joyful self-liberation, as such examples as John Huston's 1981 *Victory*, an Americanised 'remake' of *Two Half-Times* (with Micheal Caine, Sylvester Stalone and a victory plot) show. But when Dongó turns and runs away, there are no joyful, uplifting images of freedom. We see the little boy wandering aimlessly around in the grim, labyrinth-like housing estate, while the hand-held camera never allows us to look around and place him in a large, liberating space. We never feel that now Dongó can look at his life from a distance, that he can see through things and is now free to make the right decisions.<sup>2</sup> In other words, by rejecting the ideological coordinate system of society and the

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed analysis of desorientation and the lack of freedom in contemporary Hungarian and Romanian films see: Hajnal Király's article „Leave to live” in the bibliography (especially 174, 180).

idealized athlete identity, Dongó seems to lose his orientation. He goes to see his mother, working at a nursery school, yet he only looks at her from the distance, through the bars of the fence. He goes up to the top of the apartment building, looks around (in a shot reminiscent of Béla Tarr's shot of the housing estate in the opening scene of *The Prefab People / Panelkapcsolat*), yet the view of the grey blocks in the grim, November weather does not suggest freedom or joy: Dongó is standing close to the edge of the ten storey building with his head slightly bowed, and the camera moves around him in a way that makes the spectator dizzy. It is rather the fear of falling that appears here. It is quite telling that the scene ends with the image suddenly darkening when the camera looks into a dark, deep pit between the buildings.

As all the childhood scenes take place in Debrecen, and most events of Dongó's adult life take place in Canada and the USA (except for the world championship), the relation between past and present is partly told through spatial metaphors. Yet the relationship of the two kinds of spaces does not simplify the relations of the state socialist past and the democratic present. In the opening scenes of the film we see Dongó's arrival to Canada as a coach, but the metal-glass-neon world of the Western city seems as chaotic, dizzying and maze-like as the above mentioned housing estate in Eastern Hungary. Moreover, Dongó's first experiences do not have the traditional meaning of coming to the free land associated with New-World arrivals, nor does it make us feel that he has come to a more home-like place where he can experience a more authentic subjectivity. In this scene *White Palms* relies again on spatial and bodily metaphors: Dongó sits down next to the door of a building so as to enjoy the thin Canadian sunshine and to celebrate his arrival with a cigarette. Yet this scene of smoking – traditionally used in Hungarian cinema as a motif of philosophical reflection and rest – is almost immediately disturbed by a security guard, who informs Dongó that he cannot smoke there, as it is too close to the building. He suggests that Dongó moves over to the two other “banished” men standing, smoking and talking noncommittally about the weather at the curbside. Dongó moves on, joining the two others. He does not talk to them, just looks at his shoes. So much for the illusion of freedom. Similarly to so many other protagonists of post 1989 Hungarian cinema, he cannot find his home in the much desired West (see: Király 177-178). The way he is ordered around again, how his freedom is limited, the sight of him hanging his head and the cold inauthenticity of the three men's conversation give the spectator quite a clear idea of his new life in Canada.

The relationship of the past and the present, Hungary and the New World is further complicated by the difficulties he meets in Canada as a coach. We get the impression that Dongó has been dreaming about freedom all his life (the opening shot of the first retrospective sequence is that of Dongó watching a bird sitting on one of the beams of the gym), yet when he hits a boy playing too wildly at the training in Canada he becomes the agent of the very violence that he was running from. Moreover, his next assignment as the coach of Kyle, the talented young teenager with behaviour issues, is also presented as a trap. As all these examples may imply, the relationship between past and present, Debrecen and Calgary is not depicted so much as a contrast, but rather as a relation of causality. As Gábor Gelencsér remarks, “the results of the heartless disciplining of his childhood trainings surface in his adult behaviour,” and “the childhood failure foreshadows as well as explains the ones he suffers as an adult” (306). *White Palms* does not create a politically or ideologically motivated opposition between the state-socialist Debrecen and the “free” Calgary. Rather, it shows the events through the subjective filter of the protagonist. In this sense, the film can also be read as a trauma narrative, as it reveals the life-long effects of past traumas on the present (see: Strausz 25). Let us recall Dongó's work at the Cirque du Soleil in Las Vegas, the last scene of the film! Due to the ever moving, often off-focus hand-held camera, and the quick, montage-like editing, the street views of Calgary and Las Vegas are as confusing as the state-socialist housing estates (only faster, less static maybe). Yet, the representation of Dongó's life in Las Vegas also includes some memorable static long shots, where he is alone in large, empty, technological spaces. Dongó's solitary figure standing on the roof top, smoking between two taller buildings before the show can be read as the image of post-traumatic subjectivity. He stands alone in a geometrical, empty, glass-and-concrete-and-steel environment, “in the most rootless city in the world” (Strausz

25), there is no other organic form except for him, there is no chair to sit, no view of the surrounding space, no perspective. Again, Dongó looks entrapped in a bleak, labyrinthian, technological space. As the later show itself, this long shot that we can contemplate in silence can be interpreted as a surrealistic, post-traumatic, dreary emotional landscape.

If there is any difference between past and present, East and West, that is told through the differences between approaches to coaching. The childhood gym is a prison-like, dystopian place characterised by such motifs as the disciplinary fencing sword of the coach, the lining up of the kids, the brutal punishment of the ones out of line, the permanent sadistic atmosphere, the premeditated humiliation of boys in front of the girls, the exclusion of the parents from the trainings, and the close ups of the wounds and bruises on the boys' bodies. Since Miklós Jancsó's *The Round Up / Szegénylegények* (1966) the lining up, the pointless ordering around and constant shepherding of the mute, humiliated men is an established trope of oppressive power in Hungarian cinema. When Gábor Gelencsér referred to “the Kádár era as a training plan,” he pinpointed precisely this parallel between training in competitive sports and the totalitarian methods of socialization in communist dictatorship. This parallel is further strengthened by the close connections between gymnastics and the disciplinary and supervisory mechanisms of modernity. Miklós Hadas, in his seminal work on the history of sports and masculinity in Hungary, argues that “gymnastics is meant to create the bodily foundations of modernity” (168) in the sense that “it deepens and extends the institutionalisation of the civilizing process” (166), and encourages a kind of attitude in which there is a great emphasis on “self-exploitation, self-discipline and self-restraint” (167). He believes that gymnastics “can be justifiably interpreted as the *incorporated ethos* of the modernizing citizen, as par excellence *body politics*” (155), as it “involves one's conditioning for delayed satisfaction, thus it entails a considerable potential for modernization: during its cultivation there is a great emphasis on repetition, practice and monotony-tolerance. These activities are conducted with the guidance of a 'foreman' (later a gymnastics teacher), and they are practised in groups and require self-discipline and alignment (176). *White Palms* recognises and productively utilizes this link between the state-socialist social experiment (which can be regarded as an extreme example of modernity), the alienation in modern societies, and the potentially cruel self-disciplinary techniques in gymnastics. (Let us only recall the emphasis *White Palms* lays on the *aligning* of the boys – one of Hadas's key concepts.) Apparently, the gymnast (similarly to the citizen of modern societies and the sad little boys in the film) “primarily fights with oneself” (Hadas 156), and he tends to take his internal struggles with himself, wherever he goes.

As I have noted above, the burden of the past and the inner struggles can be distinctly felt in Dongó's Canadian and American life, even if here we see different strategies of training and coaching. In Canada the parents can constantly supervise the trainings from a room with reflexive windows next to the gym. When Dongó hits the misbehaving kid, all the boys freeze and stare at him in silence. He looks at them, and then looks towards the mirror with the parents behind. In *White Palms* this is a moment of self-reflection, both literally and metaphorically, both for Dongó and the post-communist spectator, a scene calling attention to the destructive after-effects of past traumas. When Dongó has to abandon his work with children and starts coaching Kyle he manages to motivate him and make him train by starting to train himself. Yet, as we have seen, he cannot feel at home here either: his troubling past remains with him all his life (see: Strausz 25, Király 177). It is this burden of the past that makes him lose his job with the children, makes him lonely and outcast, and this is why he fails to win gold medal at the world championship.

The connection of individual and social, literal and figurative meanings, which has been recognized as one of the crucial principles of the athlete's body, works in this case as well: through Dongó's story *White Palms* subtly talks about relevant social issues of post-communist societies. Contemporary Hungary's relationship to its state-socialist past is as ambiguous, fuzzy and un-worked-through, as the former Kádár regime's relation to the Stalinist-style Rákosi-regime of the 50's or to the 1956 uprising. This problematic, undiscussed and unprocessed relation to the past may very well be a major hindrance regarding the country's post-communist socio-cultural development. As one of the (recently passed) leading Hungarian sociologists, Elemér Hankiss has stated apropos

of the late Kádár-era,

“apart from a few taboos, one can publicly talk about almost any aspect and problem of life, which is obviously a great achievement in the Eastern-European context. On the other hand, it is also true that the above mentioned taboos often make it impossible to explore the deeper causes of social problems. As a result, they prevent finding thoroughgoing solutions to these problems, and also keep public thinking in a permanent state of uncertainty and impurity.” (Hankiss 49, also quoted by Réti 130)

This “permanent state of uncertainty and impurity” is still one of the essential determinants of Hungarian memory-politics. I would argue that these unspoken taboos work similarly to traumas resisting verbalisation: they both form blocks in the processes of remembering, in one's “healthy” relation to the past. As opposed to some other post-communist countries, in Hungary the leaders of the past regime were not banned from public services, the former state party managed to remain a major political force (after a slight name change and facelift), much of the documents of the former secret service were destroyed, the list of the agents was not published for decades, and the leaders of the former communist bureaucracy successfully transferred its political might to economic power. As the historian János Rainer M. argued at a 2015 conference in Budapest, doing justice to the past and its victims was not either complete or successful in Hungary, where “the history of the state security agencies is that of the destruction of documents” (see: “Rejtve marad a múlt”). These processes, as the EU's yearly country reports and other studies indicate, have undercut Hungarians' faith (or “ideological belief”) in the new democratic system, and probably contributed to making government corruption a national sport in the country. Apparently, starting a new life is as difficult on the level of the society as on that of the individual.

*White Palms* was shot at the time when the results of this “uncertain and impure” relation to the past were not only felt, but also indicated by the media and sociological researches. The film, however, does not engage with these issues in a didactic way, but rather expresses the results in subtle visual metaphors. Probably most people who saw the film remember the mark of the coach's sword in the mat on the floor, carved out through all the long years, or the wounds on the boys' bodies, or the mark of Dongó's foot in the mat at the world championship, the indent that marks his mistake. These are all traces, symbolic marks left by objects and bodies, telling us about the effects of the past preserved in bodies. These “impressions” and wounds are the central motifs of the film: they tell about the way certain painful experiences penetrate people to the bone. It is this past carried in our bodies that makes it impossible to become winners or heroes blissfully blinded by the white light of victory, it is this embodied past that comes to the fore time and time again, revealing the fragile, living, human body behind the “ideal” one constructed by power and ideology.

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