

Péter Virginás

SHAPES OF AESTHETICS: OLFACTORY, CINEMATIC AND SOCIAL

Presa Universitară Clujeană



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Academic reviewers:

Associate professor, PhD, Habil. Anna Keszeg

Associate professor, PhD, Habil. Constantin Pârvulescu

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**Universitatea Babeş-Bolyai
Presa Universitară Clujeană
Director: Codruța Săcelean
Str. Hasdeu nr. 51
400371 Cluj-Napoca, România
Tel./fax: (+40)-264-597.401
E-mail: editura@ubbcluj.ro
<http://www.editura.ubbcluj.ro/>**

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Foreword¹

This volume is organised around three main themes explored in a series of individual studies. On the one hand, I build on the phenomenological approach to film festivals developed in my doctoral research. Films are intrinsic to film festivals, and I became aware of local film cultures coagulating around productions of national cinemas during my fieldwork at an international film festival in Romania. Also, I took an interest in films that appeared to have a rather fluctuating and ineffable audience base: contemporary extreme cinema. I was curious about how filmmakers from Central and Eastern Europe would fit this trend defined by a dependence on the festival circuit and by the affective and cognitive challenges posed by individual films (Frey 2016). In parallel, my broader interest in fragrance cultures has led me to adopt a post-phenomenological approach, focusing on perfume-reviewing practices and online fragrance communities.

Collecting and reviewing my studies across these disparate fields, I have found that aesthetic experience emerges as a shared concern. And, next to engaging the senses – whether visual, aural, proprioceptive, or olfactory – media and mediation appear to play defining roles: in terms of institutional structures, cinematic form, fragrance narratives, and digital platforms. Such an integrative perspective is pertinent in the context of the digital turn, when understanding aesthetic experience requires attending to how subjectivities are implicated not only in the deployment of senses and aesthetic experience itself, but also in forms of

¹ During the writing of most essays included here, as well as during the preparation and finalisation of the manuscript, I was supported by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences through the Domus Creativity Scholarship (2025, Domus Alkotói Ösztöndíj, Magyar Tudományos Akadémia).

mediation. As aesthetic relations are mediated and become fragmented, such proliferation entails the multiplication of subjectivities and aesthetic objects.

Viewing the objects of study, diverse as they appear, as sharing aesthetic and sensory logics is supported by the 'creative aestheticisation' perspective (Reckwitz 2017, 2020). Although the aesthetic singularisation argued by the German social theorist builds on the singular, or unique qualities of aesthetic events, it is not confined to the sphere of art objects. Instead, it refers to the curation of everyday consumption practices as an aesthetic awareness that permeates the construction and negotiation of identities, values, and social positions in contemporary conditions.

Still, the specificity of each concerning sensory modality – first and foremost visual and olfactory, then also proprioceptive – and the particular ways mediation shapes each domain dealt with throughout the book demand close analysis rather than abstraction. Or, media-technological conditions determine how each domain engages the senses in particular, specific ways. Olfactory experiences can only be approximated, in online fragrance communities, through shared descriptions, reviews, and archiving. In the case of fragrance cultures, insofar as olfactory aesthetics and the corresponding affectation of the senses are interrelated with the invisibility of fragrant smells, this reverses the transparent, invisible defining feature of media advanced by media theorist Richard Grusin (2010, 2015). If the distinctiveness of the olfactory realm can be grasped by viewing it together with the functioning of the media, cinema is obviously a paradigmatic case of mediation effected by the coordination of sight and hearing, or by enabling affective experiences through visual and auditory stimulation.

Film festivals in general both diffuse and enhance the cinematic experience through art discourse, curatorial selections, and awards. Shared communal viewing and encounters in festival contexts point to the social dimension of film festivals (Harbord 2009), whereas at the individual level, they designate their proprioceptive and spatial experiences. In their turn, fragrance cultures centre on olfactory experience, which is both intimate and shaped, at times, by the awareness

of how others perceive it, thereby creating proximity or distance between bodies. They contribute to the formation of the self and relate to social positioning and aspirations. At a broader level, production and commercialisation practices shape fragrance cultures, influencing their evolution in relation to material affordances, inequalities, and generational dynamics.

Beyond these domain-specific foci, their shared aesthetic dimension points to the multiplicities inherent in aesthetic events. Alongside a conceptual multiplicity, these can be understood in terms of the multiple voices involved in aesthetic experience (Lazzarato 2009), including the subjectivities of both creators and consumers. At film festivals, curators, audiences, and films themselves generate competing aesthetic meanings. In cinema, formal complexity produces multiple affective and cognitive responses. In fragrance reviews, community members articulate different olfactory interpretations. At the same time, the variety of aesthetic objects and relations gives rise to both different shapes and configurations of aesthetics. Attending to these multiplicities highlights how bodies, senses, and social positions are always at stake in aesthetic encounters. The social and political dimensions of aesthetic experience can be rendered more concrete by thematising conditions of access and participation.

The essays collected here draw on diverse disciplinary perspectives – film studies, film festival studies, and aesthetics informed by media studies – and employ a range of methodological approaches. Some essays engage in formal analysis and film criticism; others draw on fieldwork, interviews, and qualitative research. While each essay maintains its own theoretical framework, they share a commitment to exploring how senses, mediation, and aesthetic experience interweave across mediated forms and different sensory modalities.

The first two essays examine fragrance cultures. The opening essay traces the trajectory from the aesthetics of smell – the sensory perception of fragrance – to performative aesthetics, in which fragrance becomes a medium for self-presentation and social practice. Using both historical and post-phenomenological perspectives, this essay maps how

mediation shapes fragrance experience, attending particularly to the skin: its entanglement with contemporary visual imagery and with the body's olfactive archive.

The second essay shifts focus to knowledge production within digital fragrance communities. Next to particular linguistic and material competencies required for fragrance reviewing practices, it advances an aesthetic approach through attention to multiple bodies: the perfume object itself, one's own embodied experience, and the bodies and perceptions of others.

The third essay addresses the relationship between smell and cinema. Acknowledging narrative and cross-sensory influences, it asks how smell appears in film and how it is engaged. Through an analysis of a film by contemporary Hungarian director György Pálfi, the essay examines the interplay of the senses and how audiovisual mediation engages with the olfactory realm. Returning to Pálfi as a focal point, but from a different analytical angle, the fourth essay examines filmmaking practices that resonate with ecocritical perspectives. Drawing a parallel with the work of contemporary Austrian film-maker Peter Brunner, the essay explores the related themes of collapse and agency, situating them within contemporary debates on cinema and environment.

Taking Pálfi as a significant representative of the new Hungarian cinema, and in relation to my earlier research on film festivals,² the third part of the volume begins by exploring Hungarian cinema in the Transylvanian context. Focusing on Hungarian films at Romanian film festivals, the research takes a critical perspective, investigating how individual films, festival curation, and national film policies together constitute specific cinema cultures. A second essay examines contemporary Romanian historical cinema, as showcased at the

² Three of the studies within the present volume have been published previously; these include the exploration of reviewing practices in online fragrance communities, a festival review investigating the Hungarian and Romanian film cultures at a past edition of the Transylvania International Film Festival, and the book-closing essay summarising the theoretical framework of my doctoral dissertation, which was conducted in the Hungarian language. In addition to the aforementioned studies, the remaining essays underwent linguistic revision.

Transilvania International Film Festival, Romania's premier international film event. It focuses on how the festival's eventness – the specific experience of gathering, encounter, and collective engagement with film – shapes audience formation and mediates cultural memory. The next essay examines the relationships between the festival's host city, urban cultural policies, and cinematic heritage. Drawing on the aesthetic paradigm applied to film festivals by researcher Ann Vogel (2022), it situates festival phenomena within broader urban and cultural contexts, showing how they mediate relations among cinema, the city, and audiences.

The relationships between film festivals and films may be explored through organisational viewpoints that emphasise film festivals' role in bringing together the often parallel realities of production and consumption. Preferences and awards vary across international film festival contexts. However, if social changes and sensibilities increasingly present challenges to the organisational structures of film festivals, accountability may also be directed toward entities perceived to be outside the film festival circuit. Accordingly, financing bodies film-making, whether country-level or transnational, can be scrutinised, as they shape film production, thereby indirectly influencing consumption patterns.

The bodies of work of the three filmmakers examined (Pálfi, Giurgiu, and Brunner) extend beyond the films analysed in this volume. While comparative analyses can reveal country-level disparities that affect filmmaking practices, focus on their individual trajectories – encompassing their artistic vision, thematic preoccupations, and other professional, film-related activities – enriches our understanding of contemporary cinema in Central and Eastern Europe, as shaped both by national contexts and by variations within and across them.

Similarly, the phenomenon of fragrance-collecting in online communities deserves sustained, field-oriented research. Collecting fragrances relates to multiple dimensions of identity: it is aligned with aesthetic self-fashioning and personal identity, while also shaped by commercial production, design and narratives that create identity

markers independent of individual consumption. Such practices emerge not merely as separate instances, but as patterns of aspirational and material cultures. In particular, focusing on Eastern European contexts, research could reveal how sensory practices, digital mediation, and regional identity intersect.

As countless efforts toward aesthetic singularization, consumption practices draw on sensory experiences and, as they become ubiquitous social phenomena that transcend individuals and form collectives, often go unchallenged, leaving the sensibilities on which they are grounded unexamined. Whether, in light of an enduring aesthetics of the original, the curated, and the cultivated, we can also sustain tendencies related to the manufactured, the reworked, and the hidden as similarly significant aesthetic qualities will remain a topic for further inquiry.

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Aesthetics of Smell and Fragrances: The Enduring Significance of Experiences Defined by Beauty

The association of the aesthetic with works of art has long shaped discourses about fine art. Likewise, the idea that beauty is apprehended through the senses is often treated as universal. Accordingly, the view that aesthetics infuses everyday experience originates in the ancient Greek conception of “cosmetics” (see Serres 1985 (2008), 32-34). The philosophical unification of the ‘two halves’ of aesthetics suggested above has been argued both with suggestive examples (i.e. music, see Serres *ibid.*) and with the conceptual notion of the sensible (e.g., Deleuze 2003, as well as Deleuze in Smith et al. 2022). Thus, whether abstracting, with Kantian disinterestedness, the notion of beauty from ‘things of beauty’, or exploring the affective conditions related to aesthetic pleasure vis-à-vis beauty-objects, such efforts will follow similar threads. The significance of aesthetics has also been posited in terms of aesthetic economy (Reckwitz 2017; Reckwitz 2020).

In what follows, I will explore the aesthetic dimension in connection with the olfactory sense; specifically, insofar as they can be related to qualities of beauty (Drobnik 2006; Diessner 2021), fragrances constitute a subdomain of aesthetical concern, and, at the same time, the aesthetic dimension of the olfactive sense (or the aesthetic *per se* as in the most famous literary example to support such claim, i.e. the literary novel *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer* by Patrick Süskind). In other words, an

aesthetics of smell concerns fragrances or perfumes, given both their purpose and reception.

On the one hand, the aesthetic dimension of fragrances has been emphasised by highlighting their artistic composition (Roudnitska 1991 and Dubois 2021, 126-128). Thus, the notion of the creative ‘master perfumer’ who creates fragrances as works of art has likewise necessitated aesthetic appreciation. Furthermore, the anchoring of aesthetic dimensions to fragrances has been equated with specific statuses of value, as expressed by prices or exchange values attached to fragrances produced within particular timeframes, and identifiable by manufacturing/batch code numbers.¹ Still, whether downplaying the mass-production aspect – that was established earlier in the context of bourgeois Western culture (Corbin 1986) - has been successfully effected by art discourse may need to take into consideration also other aspects, such as the classification of fragrances as luxury products, as well as the perspective on fragrance-creation as determined by science and technology.

On the other hand, it has been argued that perfumery constitutes only a subset of olfactive aesthetics (cf. Shiner 2020, Diaconu 2024). Accordingly, artistic interventions can be distinguished by a variety of differences, particularly their scope and their singular, site-specific features (which make plausible the claim to art). We may observe that both conceptual fine-art practices and mainstream mediated discourses about fragrances have distinct foci on the olfactory, though they overlap,

¹ As a sidenote, here we may refer to vintage perfumes defined first and foremost by scarcity, whereby many, once marketed fragrances have become sought-after items for consumers who increasingly define themselves as collectors. Such phenomena are sustained by reformulation debates, most frequently as concerns about the cheapening of fragrance formulas for cost-cutting reasons, but also due to ingredient availability, substance harmfulness (as regulated by the International Fragrance Association, IFRA), etc. The fact that vintage olfactory flavours are reminiscent of the past could be rephrased by claiming that the former can function as temporal relays. Bygone perfumers’ olfactory concepts and the associated material designs may resonate across time and space; thus, some will be praised as timeless masterpieces while others are labelled as ‘dated’, or even forgotten. See also subchapter on early cinema and fragrances.

particularly in museum contexts. We can suggest that even if qualitatively different, such various approaches – whether authored perfumes or olfactive sensoria in artistic contexts – can be grasped as stimulating aesthetic takes on the world in a similar way (i.e., in terms of engaging the olfactive sense). Therefore, claims of artistic value for perfumes depend on the aesthetic criteria selected and, ultimately, on shared understandings and common views regarding the particularities that should be considered.

Thus, in what follows, the focus will be mainly on the experience-related dimensions of commercial fragrances, with the caveat that they constitute literal examples of what could be termed ‘experience-based consumption’. Accordingly, as my interest concerns ‘wearable aesthetics’, where certain adjacent conditions need to be met, namely an awareness or conscious perception of olfactive stimuli (following the application/intended use of a fragrance commodity purchased or tested), as well as viewing perfume-wearing together with other aesthetic concerns, most frequently those involving or related to personal appearance. Therefore, a few caveats that may hinder an exclusive treatment of the olfactory need to be considered. First, we may observe the proximity of visual aesthetics, especially those involving apparel and clothing fashion brands, or denoting synergies with the equally praised artistic direction thereof. An aesthetic consumption-approach should take into consideration the increase of fragrance-related media content (i.e. dedicated YouTube and TikTok channels which feature regularly uploaded content by knowledgeable fragrance-enthusiasts); enabled by media technologies, it can be viewed as evolving toward more engaging stimuli and qualitative changes concerning the presentation and appearance of perfumes or the fragrance world, if not quite a detour from their functional roles.² Similarly, beauty care (with all its gendered particularities) is also significant, insofar as we acknowledge the use of fragrances as part of self-care routines, together with personal hygiene products intended for skin, hair, and so on, as well as the diffusion of

² See also concerning subchapter.

fragrances into product lines, particularly within the practice of well-known and globally marketed houses. Whereas fragrance-wearing is largely defined by its invisible and fragrant features, the above aspects lend additional dynamics to it.³ The entwinement of sensory particularities shouldn't be surprising then; that olfactory stimuli can (also) engender cross-modal interactions across different sensory dimensions, such as tactile and visual (cf. Spence 2011), has been exploited by concerning advertisements (see following subchapter).⁴

Therefore, in the case of fragrances, alongside their sensory characteristics, we can experience emotions that range from positive to negative. Fragrances may seductively enter social interactions and attract curiosity or capture interest if noticed, thus resulting in liking or disliking – so that some may feel aversion, or even disgust upon catching them (see Herz 2006, 190, 194); we can think here particularly about strong, penetrating, and unusual scents. Thus, an aesthetics may be advanced in *and* toward a 'consensual' way, including contexts associated with the purposeful or usual wearing of fragrances, neither socially nor culturally (although even those contexts aren't odourless as such). Understandably, instead of such no-go zones, there has been significantly greater interest in captivating or engaging fragrances, which can make the case for olfactory aesthetics more easily. The immediate pleasures in smelling fragrances, or the hedonistic aspect (Sfirschi-Lăudat 2023, 8), are obviously entangled with bodies, or how bodies move and look, and an aesthetic approach to fragrances may, at the same time, seemingly detach from the instinctual, baseline level.

³ That the nose isn't just about sniffing can be argued by the increasing significance given to facial aesthetics. In this essay, wherever olfaction is mentioned, it refers to the nose organ and its capacity to smell; however, the focus will gradually shift to another body part that appears indispensable for fragrance experience, namely the skin: as felt in its close, concrete materiality, as well as its metaphoric, visual appearance.

⁴ Without rushing toward synaesthesia, we may also observe aesthetic cultures involving culinary pleasures (foods and beverages); within the proximity of smell receptors, smells registered by the nose vs. tastes registered in the mouth and then inevitably entering the smell receptors of the nose enable differentiating orthonasal and retronasal stimuli as differences in degree (see also Herz 2006, 191).

Therefore, if beauty could be grasped as being novel, singular, untouchable and powerful (as listed by Wark 2020, 19), we may find these features as the emerging criteria of fragrance criticism; the set of key questions posed by perfume critics Luca Turin and Tanja Sanchez, namely does it smell interesting, or is it new (to the senses), does it smell good, or does it exert a kind of power? (cf. Turin and Sanchez 2008; 2011) have been considered as guidelines to the aesthetic assessment of a(ny) fragrance(s). The aesthetically pleasing features, insofar as they include untouchability, appear to necessitate abstraction, not just from the containers/recipients of fragrances but also from the physical mediums which carry them (skin, hair, clothing pieces and similar objects). Hinging on the qualities of the olfactive realm, we may observe that a non-object-specific notion of beauty – while at an abstract, or, in our case, fragrance-free level – should be taken into consideration for an aesthetics of the olfactive, particularly since liking, attraction, and pleasure may be considered necessary but not sufficient components of the experience of beauty (cf. Diessner 2021, 147, 151).

This direction is consistent with the recognition that subjective perception is shaped by several objective parameters, including the volatility and evaporation rates of scent molecules, which depend on the temperatures of the air and the carrier body, as well as individual skin features that can affect the absorption of fragrant molecules. Therefore, if the quantitative duration of fragrant molecules is perceptible until they evaporate off their carriers (be it skin, hair, or clothes), relationships among the same fragrant molecules as governed or defined by their differing intensities can give rise to qualities.⁵ Some olfactive notes may be present throughout the entire duration but with differing intensities, and others may be felt again under certain conditions. In contrast, others may vanish completely (i.e. ephemerality at its most obvious). As ‘an

⁵ It is perhaps worth mentioning the grounding perspective of dividing perceptual dimensions into two kinds of perceptual continua, namely *prothetic* (magnitude) and *metathetic* (qualitative). The former are concerned with continua having to do with quantity (i.e., *how much*), while the latter describes continua where the stimuli are arranged in qualitative terms (i.e., *what kind* or *where*) (Stevens, quoted in Spence 2011, 978).

aesthetic combining the transitory and tenacious, evanescence and permanence within a memory marked by an affective temporality and exhalations of corporeality '(Jaquet 2021, 105-106), the comprised elements can be viewed within a phenomenological unfolding of a fragrance experience. By drawing closer, we may suggest that ephemerality and duration, although denoting differing temporalities, can be superimposed by designating the most affecting encounter with a smell compound that is registered in memory.⁶ The ephemeral quality is often taken for the aesthetic *per se*, whereby the aesthetic experience of beauty contains a feeling of the ephemeral – either related to the passing or transience of the feeling itself, or that of the stimuli (Hanich 2024, 158-159).⁷ The possibility of practising olfactory aesthetics is particularly tempting, given that ephemerality has been observed to be characteristic of odours of nature (Herz 2006, 193), while its coupling with duration has been indebted to the skilful composition of fragrances (albeit such evolution would be chemically determined). An aesthetic discourse is therefore relevant insofar as it addresses the entanglement of different and ephemeral qualities, as those are connected to fragrance creation (perhaps made palpable by the sequence of top-, middle- and basenotes established by the French perfume-making tradition).

⁶ To retrieve the characteristic features of fragrant molecules from memory is an intentional act and may be sustained if having the related olfactory knowledge, whereas recognizing a fragrant odour upon sensing it again, may occur irrespective of will and concerns biological wiring; such ramifications are, however, beyond the focus of the present study.

⁷ Ephemerality in the case of cinema may be grasped with the transience of moving images, or the movement captured by the moving image format, which, by portraying e.g. nature as beautiful, may give rise to aesthetic appreciation based on conscious processing of the transitory character of the experience, thus beautifying it: 'The elegiac sense of the ephemeral, [what] Freud (1915/1957, 305) called "the transience of what is beautiful" is particularly pronounced as one knows that the scene one is currently perceiving will end soon: the beautiful moment – Goethe's *schöner Augenblick* – will disappear like the fading face drawn on a fogged mirror. Likewise, the film, as the material bearer of beauty, might decay, and natural beauty as the object of representation might wither or end up destroyed.' (Hanich *ibid.*)

Then, while duration is measurable, or objectively ephemeral, an ineffable ephemerality to infuse subjective experiences refers to a(ny) fragrant experience resonating either with the wearer or with the person(s) perceiving it. Whereas it can be subject to meaning-making, it isn't the same as attaching meanings to fragrant odours. While both meaning and scent are contextual (Herz *ibid.*, 194), one needs to be aware of mediations at different registers. Beyond the aesthetic principle governing subjective liking, one can enhance the translatability of fragrance experiences by attending to the olfactory aspects of interpersonal and quasi-personal spaces, and to the functional mediation between the senses that defines them.

Stories and Fragrant Media

As fragrant odours in and of themselves are about subtle and less subtle relations⁸ between smell molecules and their carriers, one can be prone to conceive or translate 'the stories' of fragrant matters. The 'characters in the story' reveal themselves on different time-scales and in changing spatial entanglements, only to evaporate and eventually vanish. The sequence of head or top-, middle- or heart, and basenotes is an abstract story (an oxymoron) which, in the case of a single fragrance, may iterate its pattern endlessly.

Beyond its origin or formation, can a fragrant smell have a different story? Conversely, can a story have a smell? When answering the first question, advertising copy materials about fragrant products come into mind. Fragrance reviews can also be taken into consideration; particularly those posted on platforms gathering fragrance communities reflect idiosyncracies stemming from personal perspectives, particular moods and writing styles. Considering the mind as engaged in associating and interpreting elements in the context of perception, odours or scents are assigned meanings and references despite being not present (cf. Herz *ibid.*). The mental faculties complete any missing gaps, as when

⁸ See, e.g. scents considered bold, harsh or strong.

reading a literary work which entertains an olfactive perspective, perhaps similar to making sense of film fragments that lack explicit story elements.

Therefore, in answering the second question, we can draw on the multisensory or multimodal nature of human perception, whereby recent research indicates that although odours engage the olfactory sense, they can also elicit activation of other senses (Spence *ibid.*). Notwithstanding the aforementioned described with the notion of crossmodality (Spence *ibid.*),⁹ we can acknowledge that representing the olfactory dimension (audio)visually poses difficulties. The 2006 feature-length adaptation of Patrick Süskind's already mentioned *Perfume* novel by director Tom Tykwer appears paradigmatic. However, it remains debatable whether it is sufficient enough to claim 'olfactive cinema' (cf. Jiaying 2014), as qualitatively different from the aesthetics of film, even if there have been subsequent efforts.¹⁰

At the same time, fragrances appear in cinematic narratives straightforwardly. First, a 'media history' of fragrances' can encompass various films which feature fragrances: commercials and an increasing

⁹ That distinct stimuli are felt by specific senses, which in their turn may give rise to other sense modalities has been dealt with in a manner reminiscent of breaking down old myths. Accordingly, evidence that the synaesthetic character of experience has been rather an exception, has been reappraised by stressing multisensory perception also in everyday life contexts, whereby not only presupposed rankings between the senses have been dismissed, but simultaneously, cognitive processing has been reassessed as encompassing multi-directional routes among the senses; see extensive research based on the notion of *crossmodal correspondence*, described as a compatibility effect between attributes *or* dimensions of a stimulus (i.e., an object or event) in different sensory domains (Spence 2011, 973).

¹⁰ The novel has also been referenced in a more recent mini-series set in a contemporary context (titled also *Perfume*, 2018), wherein the characters not only cite the novel, but they also show superior olfactive capabilities, not unlike the protagonist of the (in)famous novel. The quest driving the main character further strengthens the 'indirect' connection: it echoes and foregrounds the themes of eroticism and death, while it assigns significant role to both perfumes and the olfactory sense. On a different note, recognising that the abovementioned literary work is a story of education as well, we can emphasise attentiveness and conscious self-education as being the primary tool to access and hone the vast realm of the sense of smell, but taken to extremes in these examples.

number of films that focus on the theme of fragrance creation, mostly documentaries and portrait films about acclaimed perfume creators (or even fashion designers involved in fragrance creation). For our argument, it is worth mentioning media content produced by fragrance experts, particularly bloggers/vloggers who are literate or well-versed in both fragrances and films.¹¹ Accordingly, one can list fictional films in which fragrance bottles appear not so much as product placements, but rather as meaningful props. As such, they can be interpreted as conscious aesthetic decisions on the part of the film-makers as well (e.g., scenes in which characters apply fragrances amidst their grooming practices, or even prompting dialogues between the characters). Associating fragrances with films or with particular characters and scenes from films constitute evidence to suggest the permeability of sense dimensions.

The implications for mainstream fashion discourse and imagery concern the subliminal or ‘threshold-level’ communication exploited by advertising techniques, as well as the trademark exhibitionist and/or provocative aspect of fashion. We can suggest that fragrance commercials remain symptomatic of not only the multimodal nature of human perception, but significant also in terms of its crossmodal variations. At the same time, as composed, written fragrance narratives, they appear as subjects not quite worthy of semiotic debates. Critique in this regard has been formulated by referring to the poorness of the language when it comes to the olfactory domain (Dubois 2021).¹² To put it differently, the largely reference-free domain of the olfactive denotes less linguistic, but more conceptual difficulties (see e.g., Herz *ibid.*; DiStefano et al. 2021, 174).

In addition, fragrance narratives are not taken at face value; despite moments heightened by multisensory advertisements, the attractive force attributed to fragrances requires attentiveness and awareness which

¹¹ See article series posted on online fragrance community platform *Fragrantica.com*, as well as various written content on individual or collective sites (e.g. *ecofrenchlab.com*, *Persolaise.com*, or the *Perfume Nationalist Podcast* by Jack Mason).

¹² Still, the various types of narrative information or content subsumed (stories serving as backgrounds or which may include inspirations for making particular fragrances, or even details about the personal creative practices or styles of particular perfumers) may eventually prompt buyers.

are amenable to subjective variations, since one may as well be repulsed as a consequence of exposure to the olfactive effects of fragrances, or closeness/proximity to them (see also Herz *ibid.*, 190, 194). In everyday context, claiming that fragrances enhance one's appearance and personality can be subsumed under the manifold functions and roles assigned to fragrances across history and cultures (see, e.g., Drobniak 2006, 207). Accordingly, fragrance-wearing in real-life contexts has become even more entangled with advertising; both have adapted to contemporary digital media consumption, wherein involvement and participation strive to be 'more' real or realer than in conventional advertising narratives.

We can infer, in parallel with the olfactory sense, the involvement of the haptic in the perception of fragrances, as signalled pertinently by the spread of contemporary, ubiquitous short-format videos about fragrances (Hammar and Johansson, 2024).¹³ If anything, by serving as evidence that written or recorded media engaging with the olfactory realm will ultimately mediate, or translate – mainly through words, and to a much less extent aurally/through sounds –, pictures of objects, but also textures, viewers are engaged to make use of their specific sense(s), including also the tactile.¹⁴ In parallel, these new media formats appear as refined, updated tools of 'truth' in the sense of the evolution of advertising. They are also aligned with age-based targeting and corresponding media usage. Beyond their common labelling as tools of (sexual) attraction and individual success, it can be argued, in connection with fragrances, for a shift toward contemporary ideas about ways of

¹³ As the cited authors argue, 'SFV is a fitting medium to showcase personality, mood, and stories behind people, brands, and products. Since perfumes are unique products that rely heavily on sensory experiences, such as smell and emotion, hence it's challenges of communicating the essence of perfumes through traditional advertising (Paris et al., 2020). This further makes advertising of perfume an intriguing avenue for exploration through short-format videos (Hammar and Johansson, *ibid.*, 4).

¹⁴ Or, placing perfume bottles in particular contexts (which invariably become pixel-content), the (perceptual) conventions that apply implicate both visual and tactile aesthetics, which, in their turn, can be described as integral to cultures of perfume consumption (see, e.g. Xouplidis 2017).

living and personhood.¹⁵ In my view, such a perspective correlates with the ‘faithful stories’ of touch-sensitive short-format videos, particularly when coupled with accepted (or alleged) expertise, engaging language, and online personas or personal images they promote. Thus, it can appear not that difficult to argue for smelling a picture (in an abstract way, so that its material medium, such as photopaper, bookpaper, or hot plastic display, etc., is excluded), just as well as seeing or, even less fathomable, hearing or touching a smell, particularly amidst incessant scrolling.

Inferring associations with recalled qualities of the senses, and perhaps quasi-synesthesia (cf. Spence *ibid.*),¹⁶ can appear, however, more frequent and precise in written reviews, rooted perhaps in closer relationships with the literary traditions (DiStefano et al. *ibid.*, 172),¹⁷ as well as in the experimental and less risky nature of anonymous/anonymised authoring, media platforms gathering fragrance enthusiasts and creating online communities (in chronological order of appearance: Basenotes.net, Fragrantica.com, and Parfumo.com) present and mediate

¹⁵ The changing behaviour of fragrance consumers has recently been thematised in mainstream fashion discourse. See Rosenstein, Jenna: Spritzing perfume can help ease daily stresses: why the fragrance obsession is at an all-time high. *Harper's Bazaar*, October 24, 2025. <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/uk/beauty/fragrance/a69143768/perfume-popularity-trend-explained/>

See also ethical consumption practices, as well as their relationship to trends within the lifestyle paradigm resolving ambiguities, namely Hedonistic asceticism (‘Hedonistische Askese’ as proposed by Schnaller-Fornoff and Fornoff 2023); these may emerge in the case of contemporary fragrance-consumption as positions opposed to the exponentially growing number of fragrance releases and increased consumption (i.e. buy less, or buy/trade with fellow fragrance consumers instead of paying higher retail prices set by fragrance-manufacturing corporations and commercial distributors).

¹⁶ For details about odour synesthesia, see Di Stefano et al. (2021): accordingly, ‘the most common direction goes from smell to hearing and then to sight, while the most uncommon is from smell to taste and from smell to touch (*ibid.*, 157). We can add that such findings help map reviewers’ individual predilections regarding the use of synaesthetic metaphors.

¹⁷ Cf. ‘As might have been expected, writers and novelists have refined linguistic skills that allow them to use metaphorical language in a more unconventional manner than the general population...[and] due to the different function of poetic language with respect to its standard usage [...] poets are expected to make use of synaesthetic metaphors, frequently applied as a form of styling (Di Stefano et al. *ibid.*, 158).

countless stories and social contexts in which fragrances appear and are used.¹⁸ As a counterargument, language has been regarded as a “biased” field in which to investigate dissipating sensory perception not just because common linguistic terms are used to describe the stimuli falling along different continua (or in the context of semantic mediation of crossmodal correspondences), but also given the multisensory nature of everyday human perception, whereby the *mediation* of cognitive structures can serve to reduce the complexity of the former (Spence *ibid.*, 988-989). Still, it is suggested that the connection between the sensible and narrative can be mapped by the use of synesthetic, narrative and mixed metaphors in fragrance reviews (see Zawisławska and Falkowska 2021, 148).

Thus, we can observe that various media formats and individual techniques create and mediate (narrative) content to varying effects. Viewing the narratively packed, first-person perspective of written fragrance-reviewing and/or promoting writers/bloggers/YouTubers or TikTokers reflect predilections for spoken words to the detriment of written ones, we may still suggest the efficiency of language to ‘resonate’ with affects (Rutherford, 2011, 130, 284-285) – in terms of readers or users replicating the envisaged mental images or metaphors.¹⁹ In fragrance reviews, the textual approach, or the semiotic bodies constituted in

¹⁸ If, in the case of film or cinematic media, we may find the shared aspect of aesthetic appreciation in phenomena like cinephilia and fandom/fan cultures (both understood as preferences for cinematic media and its creators), online fragrance communities perform something similar: constituting countless subgroups, but still subject to high individual variations of taste, which have been conventionally assigned according to particularities reflecting aspects of fragrance-production: vintage perfumes, mainstream designer fragrances, niche and artisanal or ‘indie’ ones, middle-eastern fragrances etc.

¹⁹ Those may include but are not limited to fragrance conventions and cultural references, e.g., the association of simple fragrance notes with cleanness and authoritarianism, and therefore with professionalism; complex ones with attraction, and bodily pleasures as the fulfilling outcomes of personal encounters. On the other hand, placing fragrance bottles in such contexts implicates particular conventions that engage visual and tactile aesthetics, which, in turn, may be described as integral to contemporary cultures of consumption.

fragrance experiences, are made evident (Sfirschi-Lăudat 2023, 8), while taking into account the contemporary platformised, technological determinations, we can also observe that such processes have their algorithmic mirroring (namely, the digital processing of any such contents). In this sense, when turning to media content posted and shared by various users on Instagram or TikTok, we may recall the notions of hypermediacy and re-mediation as symptomatic of the functioning and circulation of images in the early 21st century (see Grusin 2010 and Grusin 2015). Placing fragrance bottles in such contexts, the particular conventions implicate visual and tactile aesthetics that appear integral to contemporary cultures of consumption. Meanwhile, the ‘analogue’ context remains the originally affective testing ground;²⁰ thus, we can conclude that a multitude of contextual elements should be ‘hanging together’, or ‘work’ the mind to make plausible projections, just as engaging films or media do.

Early Cinema and Fragrances

The connections between aural, visual and olfactory stimuli aren’t straightforward, but particular instances appear to create relays among them. Although fragrances represent only one strand of the broader olfactive realm (as mentioned earlier, see Corbin *ibid.*; Diaconu *ibid.*), films that explicitly address perfumery have nonetheless been taken as evidence for the visual mediation of olfactive sensations: either the smells perceived by characters on screen or prompting viewers to recall odours

²⁰ We should recall the view on olfaction as a cultural experience, which, like any sensory experience, also highly depends on technological development in every culture, that is, on what is named *la culture matérielle* (material culture) (see Goody 1977; Warnier 1999, both quoted in Dubois 2021, 133).

Accordingly, focusing on the Eastern European context, we can suggest that in the past, there was arguably little passed on from one generation to another in terms of perfume culture. Conversely, consumers have become more eager than before to indulge in the feast of the senses according to both Western and Middle Eastern style consumption patterns. As such, ‘visibility’ or palpability not only in terms of activities in related online groups but also across spaces of leisure could be explained by entwined global processes, a triumph of neoliberal conditioning to be sure.

associated with their own memories, as well as with the living beings, materials, or objects depicted on screen (e.g., Jiaying *ibid.*, 115).²¹ Albeit few in number, we may list here, beyond a few art cinema pieces, fragrance commercials authored by critically acclaimed film directors (see also previous subchapter). Insofar as we consider both films and fragrances to be concerned with aesthetics, we can observe parallels shaped by creative artists through technology-enabled practices.

At the same time, scaling up creative artistry and practices at a mass scale requires us to seek contextual clues. We can infer how different senses are addressed and engaged, which in turn implies that the modes of capturing attention and of sustaining attentive appraisal also differ. In other words, the evolution of the cultures of looking, of spectacle, or attention in general (e.g., Crary 2001), can be viewed in conjunction with the 'social rediscovery' of the olfactory realm (Corbin *ibid.*), thereby viewing the increasing popularity enjoyed by fragrances starting from the end of the 19th century and the mass interest manifested toward moving images as complementary.

In this vein, I will explore the entwinement of attraction and performance, as identified in the case of, on the one hand, both the cinematic and the olfactive media, and, on the other hand, in the context of related social practices. Eventually, the argument concerns not so much the cross-pollination of cinema and fragrance culture; rather, by remaining conscious of being positioned in the present, the differing qualities of early (or silent) cinema and now-vintage fragrances appear to mediate qualitatively different, olfactive and visual pasts (although they can share material props).

If emerging cultures, cinema and fragrances appear to correlate in terms of function and popularity, we can ask whether they share any non-proprietary, underlying features. On the one hand, we can view function and popularity in terms of processes which have been explored at length by social historians – such as commodification, (conspicuous) consumption, mobility and urbanisation (see e.g. Corbin *ibid.*). The fact that

²¹ See essay by Jiaying (2014) about the 2006 cinema adaptation by Tom Tykwer of Patrick Süskind's novel: *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer*.

industrial incentives would promote rising self-care and thus scale olfactory self-awareness and culture is difficult to disentangle from historical contexts (cf. Corbin, *ibid.*; Vosnaki 2018).²² On the other hand, modernity in the mass-mediated form of cinematic media has been considered as numbing on the human sensorium, while its potential to awaken a quality of sensory experience and memory would be capable of undoing those earlier mentioned 'numbing effects' (Rutherford 2014a, 285). We suggest including here, amidst olfactory load onto the sense(s), fragrances as well; thus, we may speak of subjectivity-generating patterns in an enlarged sense, as based on relationships or contacts among the senses to bring together the semantic and the somatic.²³

At the same time, by observing similarities in terms of mass consumption, or the impersonal appeal characteristic of both films and fragrances, we can identify additional commonalities between fragrances and early cinema: their silence coupled with perceptually high-pitched impact, or the aurally indirect nature, as well as non-narrative forms, which characterised cinema in the first decade of the 20th century.²⁴

²² Accordingly, if the slogan of 'smelling good' was aspirational and considered to reflect well-off members of middle class, it was aided by critique concerning members of the less well-off, considered in terms of 'lower classes'. That the majority of the population was smelling bad would be reasoned by uneducatedness in grooming practices; however, such an assessment missed the mark since poor and precarious living conditions correlated with hygiene standards that were to blame for defective self-care (cf. Corbin *ibid.*).

²³ Cf. '[Walter Benjamin] links the reception of cinema to the transformations in reception across other terrains of modern life, such as the experience of advertising, which produces 'a momentary fusion of vision and object' (336). This blurring of boundaries between subject and object forms Benjamin's attempt to theorize 'new forms of subjectivity' (321).' (Rutherford 2014a, 287).

The Benjaminian notion of 'mimetic experience/ innervation' by the two-way process of extension and introjection has been argued to define the somatic and tactile forms of perception as well (Hansen, quoted in Rutherford 2011, 32, 171, 308).

²⁴ Although fragrances compositions are subject to narrations, as well as one can put into narratives diverse elements such fragrance characteristics, conditions of creation, or threads of evolution or their history - just like in the case of any aesthetic object -, the form of fragrances remains non-narrative (see previous subchapter).

In this second regard, the thesis by film historian Tom Gunning on the period before narrative took hold argues for a particular consciousness that shaped how moving images were both constructed and viewed (see Musser 2006; Buckland 2014, 44-49). Accordingly, a third spectatorial position – that in which the filmed subject plays to and acknowledges the beholder...shifts theatricality from the profilmic to the process of exhibition itself:

“...it is the direct address of the audience in which an attraction is offered to the spectator by a cinema showman...” (Gunning, quoted in Musser *ibid.*, 170).

Therefore, when looking at early cinema pieces, beyond documentarian gains (in terms of visual information about how people looked, behaved and how their built worlds and living environments looked like, all of which may retrospectively challenge the claim to non-narrative form) a working effect of early cinema, namely its conscious attraction could be seen as characterising not just the images themselves, but also the positions involved: those of actors, actresses, and the onlooking spectators. The ‘early’ attraction of cinema images (cf. Buckland *ibid.*) would be exhibitionist and non-narrative by implicating the intersubjective aspect as the POVs of both characters and spectator-positions, as diegetic and non-diegetic variations.

The qualitative difference from theatricality, by way of the cinematic medium’s affordances, has then little to do with facial expressions and body movements of actors and actresses, but rather with establishing a normative, and therefore also public ideal of perception, itself being coupled with reflexive, interiorizing, and thus intimate angles related to the (presentation of the) self. Therefore, as a sort of performance which isn’t just visual could also be considered in the case of the olfactory, though the other way around as to its effect.

Performance considered in terms of the iterative, thus olfactively meaningful force or intensity that could or can be attributed to a(any) fragrance (which, by the way, denotes the common understanding of performance among fragrance enthusiasts) enables an olfactive aesthetics of the diffusive, evaporating fragrant liquids. The implications of visual

nature – such as media(ted) fantasies created for fragrances promotion, including their naming, advertisements, bottle design etc., as well as that of the tactile dimension, e.g., spraying the atomizer, splashing the bottle, or moving one's perfumed body/parts –, compel us to consider overlapping not just with aesthetics of visual media, but also with performance – both as an entwinement of kinesthetics and spatiality, found particularly significant, according to the Benjaminian insight, for the early cinema period (Rutherford 2014b, 90). Viewing fragrance-wearing as a performative gesture conveys layers of how a person acts and presents themselves. In a sense, this can be clearly placed within the broader context of grooming practices, with respect to social settings and the functions conferred upon them. Understanding the conscious presentation of the self in Goffmanian terms, as a socially performing act, we can observe its ambiguous relationship with the exhibitionist aspect, particularly as taken to extremes by clothing fashion that deliberately wants to provoke.²⁵ While I am not suggesting that wearing perfume amounts to acting a cinematic role, and certainly don't argue for an unproblematic correspondence with the undefined attraction as above referred to, particularly since fragrances may evoke a range of opposite affective responses, there is an enduring sense in which the performative aspect is pivotal on both levels (if not quite constituting plain attraction, thereby subscribing our argumentation to mainstream fashion discourse).

The attraction of image as exhibitionist and non-narrative is perhaps closer to everyday experience, despite the specific ways in which it can appear – namely 'cinematic manipulation' via close-ups, slow motion, reverse motion, substitution and multiple exposure (Parikka 2012, 9). If, in the case of cinema, we have particularly or inherently visualising techniques of movement, which have mediated radically new experiences which hadn't existed before (early) cinema at all, the argument has been that those aren't limited to vision, even if visually coded (e.g., Rutherford 2011, 111-14). Perhaps it is instructive to turn to

²⁵ I have discussed this aspect also in terms of the connections between fragrances and clothing fashion (Virginás 2022, see concerning chapter in this book).

the long shot (as facilitating immersion) and the close-up in the cinematic medium (as noted, characteristic of both early and later established trends in narrative cinema, including contemporary media). If early cinema was interested in a certain modelling of human encounters (as attraction made conscious), its explanatory powers can be applied to various contemporary forms of media that use the cinematic medium, insofar as we may classify its later iterations as maintaining its own mimetic character. Does the ubiquity of the personal perspective and the practice of more direct, or strongly articulated subjectivities in short-form videos, while emphasising authenticity, mean a complete break from the conscious role-playing of early cinema actors and actresses?

As raising attention in the cinema/media context has been essential from the beginnings, the shifts brought by media technologies to contemporary societies can be grasped in terms of how the former modulate spectatorship by virtue of their affordances (e.g., including monetisation aspects that are essential for product-related content driving beauty-care and fragrance culture).²⁶

Thus, unfamiliarity with a medium and its opposite, medium-literacy should be relevant for both bygone masses of spectators and contemporary consuming audiences, even if image-related differences emerging both in intensity and in quality – between, on the one hand, moving-image sequences of silent cinema (that depict, e.g., people walking or moving in and around historical city spaces or decorated interiors) and those of contemporary media, can be suggestive of scaling. If ‘remediation’ (cf. Grusin 2010) of, say, contemporary eventful stage-

²⁶ The different media conditions of contemporary societies – in the manner of the multiplying, miniaturizing media in a spatially less congestive manner while observing the impact of large display formats as well – appear to reflect differences in degree as per the evolution of cultural production and -consumption: from passive consumers (akin to the consumer society of the 20th century Western countries) to active, empowered variants within contemporary, global-nomadic contexts; theorizing about economies of aesthetic nature (Reckwitz 2017), societies of singularization (Reckwitz 2020), re-mediation (Grusin 2010 and 2015), or ‘enrichment’ (see Boltanski and Esquerre 2020) may equally function to grasp both the cinematic- and the fragrance-oriented variations.

performances of early silent cinema doesn't succeed in fully conveying attraction, it isn't because it has been divested of its non-narrative and exhibitionist qualities. Thus, we may turn to attraction, particularly as an expression of non-narrative form, in the embodied experience of a fragrance or aromatic ingredient as it hits the olfactory receptors. Focusing on olfactory sensations as being outside (historical) time, such effects tell about the illusory character of the aesthetic experience (cf. Hanich 2024). That certain contemporary fragrances can also be argued to successfully evoke olfactory sensations of past, even ancient, times is attributed to their inclusion and composition of specific fragrant notes and accords; it is not unlike contemporary mimetic efforts that turn to the period of early cinema.

However, the time relay opened in the case of vintage perfumes can amount to a different engagement of the senses, not irrespective of them being capable of triggering both personal and indirect, vague memories. We can mention here discerning qualities of certain famous fragrances, such as those composed and marketed first in the early decades of the 20th century.²⁷ While the present circumstances obviously differ from those of the past century, it makes us wonder whether today's fragrance enthusiasts are affected differently than those a hundred years ago. The dividing line between fragrances considered timeless and those dated not just in terms of olfactive sensations but also about how bodies are perceived 'olfactively' (namely, do bodies also 'appear' as aged, or vintage?). The enduring attraction, while affected by manufacturers' tweaking fragrance formulas for reasons involving ingredient availability, health hazard and/or manufacturing cost reduction, it has been (semantically) explored and translated countless times; it can be considered as adding up to a rich cultural history, that is including not just references to historical contexts, but also to lifestyles as imagined and/or practised in past.²⁸ By tracing genealogical paths when dealing

²⁷ Perhaps it isn't necessary to mention any, as any concerning canon should be compelling, and, at the same time, subject to change or revision.

²⁸ We can include here the tracing of backstories that invariably permeate the creative origins of well-known fragrances, as well as the symbolic-visual representations,

with (such) fragrances appears as an enrichment of the fragrance experience.²⁹

We should also mention that vintage fragrances are particularly well-suited for preservation purposes, and by doing so, values can be conferred upon them. Then, as remnants of bygone eras, parts of collections, or even leftover personal objects, should we speak of artefacts to be displayed in museum contexts (as evidence of craftsmanship and luxury consumption while reflecting collection agendas of institutions or various persons), or even fragrant exhibitions (see Shiner 2020, as well as various museum exhibitions),³⁰ Such trajectories are not only reminiscent of how silent films are re-set in contemporary contexts but also tell of current affinities that appear to echo past habits of Baudelairean confluence.

Skin, Atmosphere and Media Affordances

International media platforms that gather fragrance enthusiasts (e.g., *Fragrantica*, *Basenotes*, or *Parfumo*) constitute a rich resource for various research purposes. User data on specific fragrances is obviously significant for those interested in consumption and marketing-related trends. Obviously, fragrance reviews may be read in diverse ways; some may be comparing reviewers' linguistic formulas and capacities (cf. Zawisławska and Falkowska 2021), and we may even probe digital media literacy in the context of fragrance culture. Here, by maintaining the focus on wearing fragrances - in accordance with the scope of the previous subchapters – we assume that fragrance reviews by individual users can be examined in terms of revealing countless phenomenological experiences.

whether printed media images, magazine advertisements, or the appearance of fragrance bottles in film scenes. Taken together, these add up to media-archaeological approaches in their own right.

²⁹ The proliferation of interest may be linked to other artistic or scholarly preoccupations; in Romanian context see articles and other media content published at: <https://osmereview.blogspot.com>.

³⁰ See: e.g. at Prado Museum in 2022 and 2024. <https://www.museodelprado.es/en/whats-on/exhibition/the-essence-of-a-painting-an-olfactory-exhibition/07849a71-d9b0-faeb-94c1-689f2614f8d0>

The phenomenological nature of the experiences emerging in the course of testing and wearing fragrances may be hard to grasp; in this regard, we may be at a loss as to what should be focused upon. In evaluating fragrances, aesthetic criteria (Turin and Sanchez, 2008, 2011) have been widely accepted. On the one hand, it goes almost without saying that fragrance reviews can reflect the myriad ways in which individual fragrances affect the self and others. We can see that the personal and social dimensions involved by fragrances can be related to the functionalities assigned to them, while the subtleties of both intimate and public spaces – as defined at the olfactory level, and subsequently, made intelligible (via reviewing) – can plunge deep into personal lives and social contexts. In parallel with olfactive atmospheres created by scenting various bodies and by fragrances that emanate into the surroundings, fragrance wearing, as an enduring practice, may suggest the body's archiving capabilities, if not quite to reflect aspects of personality.

The Skin Argument

The nose does only sniff, and the eyes see only, but one does attempt to complete each other, not just because the person can't just cancel out their sense organs, particularly for a prolonged time, but because a sense can be voluntarily used to complete the stimuli coming through another one. Proportions arguably differ, as we may conceive reading about a fragrance to be more relevant than sniffing around the film. Whatever limited use a 'secondary', or complementary sense might have, the overarching significance can be grasped rather in terms of the capabilities of the main media involved, cinema and fragrance respectively.

By drawing on commonalities stemming from well-known historical conditions such as mass production and consumption, the parallel evolution of fragrances and cinema has been explored in the previous subchapter. Instead of artistic claims, the focus on aesthetic concerns (as in 'cosmetics' directed to the self) has been relevant for arguing for the social aspect of fragrance-wearing, particularly through insights from theories of film, media, and the social (namely, attraction and

performance). This subchapter continues along the same path; to explore particularities of the olfactory, it will draw on the film-phenomenological perspective of the film-as-skin beyond mere semantic proximity, as a phenomenological approach to the connection among different senses (tactile, olfactory, and visual). Given that fragrance experiences are often accompanied by visual impressions, understanding the cinematic through the metaphor of skin helps articulate how image and olfaction can be superimposed, contributing to an extended, totalizing affect akin to that produced by fragrances.

Even if advancements regarding perception and optics of light have largely made it clear the manifold processes involved in film-watching, i.e. the screen as reflecting light and the film as reconstructed in the spectator's brain, there is, in a different continuum than the physical space, also an illusory one which is needed on both 'sides' of the screen: in terms of the production, film-makers may often record scenes or edit by taking into account also the 'ideal spectator', so there are projections of themselves involved (as (if) watching from the movie seats or viewing the cutting table or the desktop screen during the editing process); on the reception side we have the actual spectator, which means that, regardless of fictional or documentary genres, insofar as he or she is affected and relates to the events unfolding before her/him, it becomes her/his world.³¹ Acknowledging that spectator(s) inhabit two (or more) worlds simultaneously – the diegesis and their own physical space (Elsaesser and Hagener 2010, quoted in Bordun 2017, 3) appears as a fitting argument. Notwithstanding the emotional affectation of the viewer, the focus remains, for the sake of the argument, on emphasising the projection of the viewer's mind engaging with events unfolding on the screen. It is not a stretch to say that this 'space' explodes/implodes (somewhere in between) while leaving intact both the surface of the

³¹ This is perhaps in parallel with the aesthetic experience of cinema as encompassing the real, or reality of experience and the illusion of it: "[The] experience of beauty is [...] characterised by both a *real happiness* about a momentarily succeeding, fully resonant relationship with the world and an *illusion* that breeds sorrow and longing because this relationship with the world is not a stable part of our everyday, lived experience." (Rosa 2019, quoted Hanich 2024, 159).

cinema screen and the physical body perimeters of the spectator. In this sense, the existing and measurable space-distance, as well as the thinking brain, are concrete, existing realities in the context of remediation within the viewer's mind, or the double mediation effect of cinema (Hansen, quoted in Rutherford 2011, 115).

Although the extension of one's sensing organs, in the sense already posited by McLuhan, might constitute further reference, phenomenological approaches to the cinematic medium have argued for more complicated arrangements. Accordingly, the 'compound' idea of the cinematic medium has been advanced to describe it as 'neither the celluloid strip of the images, nor the camera that filmed them, nor the projector that brings them to life in motion, nor the beam of light that relays them to the screen, nor that screen itself, but all of these taken together, including the audience's position caught between the source of the light behind it and the image projected before its eyes' (Krauss 2000, quoted in Anderson and Leister 2019).

Viewing the experience of cinema as emerging out of a series of interrelated elements, has emphasised, significantly, the shared quality of the sensual, both among the senses and as applicable also to the medium '[...]like things that cannot touch on each other without themselves being touched; and this interdependence would figure forth the mutual emergence of a viewer and a field of vision as a trajectory through which the sense of sight touches on what touches back [...], potentially opening up an affective or even inter-corporeal relationship with the work (Krauss 2000, quoted in Anderson and Leister 2019).

Thus, given the phenomenological perspective, intentionality, it is argued, would enable, within the visual focus or attention as the primary sense engaged by the medium, a sense of touch – albeit a multidirectional and linguistically ambivalent one, as, e.g., touching can be read as both emotional and exploratory. At the same time, the affective, bodily engagement of viewers is also signalled through touch, whereby a film's 'skin' refers to a 'contact between the concealed, invisible, and untouchable elements of the images and sounds – up there, on the screen

– and the spectator’s body, which empathically embodies the revealed images and sound’ (Barker, quoted in Bordun 2017, 204-5).³²

Insofar as the notion of skin expresses more than touch itself (cf. Serres *ibid.*, 26), we can assess the film-as-skin being subject to (spectatorial) touch. And, formulated elsewhere as the embodied, visceral experience of cinema that is felt on skin (Rutherford 2014a and 2014b), or reacted to both emotionally and physically, we may certainly view such perspectives as drawing on the skin as the surface of contact for one’s body in her or his interactions with the world; in that sense, its own medium-like quality perhaps foregrounds that of the cinematic mediation of the world.

The multitude of stimuli – visual, aural, olfactory, and so on – acting on the body is reflected by multisensory perception, argued to be foundational of living experience. We can also observe that different media or medium-specific differences engage the ‘thinking body’, while the senses can trigger one another (cf. ‘crossmodal correspondences’, Spence *ibid.*; Spence 2021), thereby enriching or complicating sensible experiences.³³ In this regard, we can observe that the skin is prominent within the sensuous experience of fragrances. Being the membrane, or the outermost layer of the body, the skin serves as a medium for both the tactile and the olfactory senses; it carries the fragrance(s) to the point of becoming indistinguishable from them. While the skin can be engaging both senses, its entwinement with touch may appear as an active-passive couplet; the active sense of touch itself mediated through layers of skin, which sustain a protective function around the subjective, and from the

³² Although sight is dilated by the dynamics of immediacy and distance, where the immediacy may be translated as a presence, and the distance as absence (cf. Krauss 2000, 44), it may not quite dispel the ‘limit between the body and the world’ in the traditional, or usual cinema experience; rather, it has been argued to configure the intersection of the visual and the haptic, in terms of ‘haptic visuality’, as the preference modelled by the primarily visual medium (see e.g., Marks, reviewed in Rutherford 2011, 111-121).

³³ By way of the crossmodal correspondences between the senses, research has brought evidence to dispel the exotic, and for the most part ineffable quality of synesthetic experiences (cf. Spence 2011, 2020, see also previous subchapter).

outside elusive, immaterial self. The skin is fixating coenesthesia, thus the internal sense of the 'I' (Connor 2008, 3-4; Serres *ibid.*, 22); by going beyond registering stimuli, where higher cognitive levels of interpretation can be equalled, in the olfactive case, with making sense of scents involving the bodily, perceiving, and thinking self, so that one can also view the body as an archive.

Olfactive Atmospheres and Perception

The notion that smells contribute to an atmosphere, or that they function as markers of it (cf. LeBreton 2021, 13), reiterates a central phenomenological claim: atmospheres are perceived through bodily presence (Böhme 2017; 2020). Bodily presence, in turn, shapes how different spatialities are experienced, including the internal and external spaces defined by one's body, its position, and its surroundings. Likewise, approaching spatial sense as sensitive to quantitative, volumetric and qualitative determinations underlines affectivity. In other words, if fragrances fill spaces as they evaporate, personal experiences can emerge as smells are imbued with affectivity (Lebreton 2021, 14; Böhme 2020).

We can observe that the phenomenological immediacy could be traded for a cultural and social significance of smells, aided by the commercial commodification of olfaction (Drobnik 2006, 1-2), with various significant outcomes for consumption trends: e.g., niche and independent perfumery can appear as distinct, or virtually every product either is claimed to have a distinctive scent, or it is marketed as odourless. In this regard, we can reasonably assume an extrinsic model of the scope and unfolding of fragrances, as intended by the fragrance-makers (at times reflected also in the suggestive naming of fragrances, or described in press materials/ad copies, interviews, and so on). At the same time, such emerging olfactive atmospheres would (have to) find internal references within those who experience them. Therefore, to the extent that atmospheres are a merging *within* of what is sensed outside one's body, and even not limited to its proximities, we may speak of overlapping dimensions despite very different registers of causal origins,

such as sight, sound or smell. We may also notice that atmospheres created by particular sensations, and which may or may not transfer to other sensory domains, are quintessentially what affects are about.³⁴ For one thing, as fragrant materials emanate from human bodies, materials and objects (personal ones, like clothes, or room interiors if we think of perfumed room-sprays or scented candles), they do seem to occupy an in-betweenness in the sense that they literally evaporate in the spaces between bodies. Fragrances become detached from their sources and by doing so they create atmospheric spaces (Böhme 2020, 371); the 'in-betweenness' of atmospheres as argued conceptually by the philosopher Gernot Böhme, or the fact that, as they arise in a person who is perceptually attentive to an(y) environment, he or she attributes it to human and nonhuman, living and non-living elements of that environment (Böhme 1993, quoted in DeMolli et al. 2019, 2-6) is a useful approach to the workings and effects of fragrances - as a paradigmatic case of olfactive perception.

When discussing atmospheres, we may observe that multisensory perception is involved, with stimuli engaging different sensory domains that potentially dominate one another. Furthermore, we can regard perception as active, encompassing the mental processing of registered sensations. Valence assigned to olfactive stimuli may be related to the olfactive knowledge of the person(s) sensing it, even for a fleeting moment (or precisely because of it), it can be registered, as mentioned before (see Herz *ibid.*), as likeable/dislikeable on a spectrum of the positive and negative. Accordingly, we can observe olfactive atmospheres as defined most often by pleasant or unpleasant odours; in the case of fragrance compositions, some may be perceived, at times, as coming to the fore, while others recede into the background, or disappear (in a spatial analogy).

³⁴ By mentioning affects, we should also add that 'the phenomenological difference from both emotions and moods can be grasped as the externality of atmosphere ...as the sensory qualities of a set of surroundings...thus properties of the external space rather than inner states of the beholder' (Di Stefano et al. 2021, 180).

That fragrances are indescribable by many people, perhaps due to their registering as formless, if not quite ephemeral, constitutes limitations or difficulties to subsequent interpretations. Making sense of what is smelling in the air has been closely connected to a survivalist mode. In this sense, linguistic variations in terms of expressions, like ‘smell’ or ‘feel’, e.g., danger may be drawing attention to both the presence of smells as noticeable by registering them, *and* also to one’s presence in physical, bodily terms. Thus, odours can be surprising not in themselves (cf. Böhme 2020, 40). At other times, they may appear at first, on the one hand, as being difficult to decouple from certain references (because it is a countermove, or it goes into the opposite direction if compared to what is being instantly sought by the mind upon smelling or registering a smell - namely to identify where it comes from, what it is, and so on). Such a tendency, on the other hand, does require, in the case of fragrances, cognitive abstractions, whereas knowing and recognising smells and/or fragrant odours (as well as being able to discern their internal structures, variations, and dynamics) immediately activates reward circuits in the brain. Then, if found that, e.g., the smell of rose is conveyed by the liquid (or solid) containing rose absolute oil, rosewater, etc., similar cognitive actions are involved in disentangling different notes present in one or many fragrances, and also in the case of newly developed artificial components (which may present a factor of novelty so that one may lack the interpretative grid). Similarly, we may refer to ‘olfactive’ concepts underlying the creation of fragrances, e.g., those associated with different historical periods or specific spatial or temporal contexts. Thus, on the verge of endless comparisons, either by thinking of variations of the same fragrances, or by observing that most of them constitute reiterations of the same, already existing olfactory themes or palettes, or that fragrances subscribe to specific olfactory trends and olfactive families, we can suggest experiences of fragrances as paradigmatically mimetic ones.³⁵

³⁵ Cf. ‘[T]he mimetic faculty is a propensity for a type of perceptual experience; mimetic experience is ‘the correspondences actualized’ by certain types of representation—not the representation itself—and the experience of a relationship, of ‘patterns of similarity’ between things (Rutherford 2011, 113).

Fragrances and Individuality

Given the proximity with, or at times substitution of body and skin, we may certainly speak of fragrances' ornamental function, as decorating the wearer akin to a veil; in effect, translating an aesthetic approach to the olfactive dimension into a visual one (though itself is battling with the invisible). Therefore, we can suggest that the notion of veil – as explored by Serres (2008) – appears to capture the atmosphere created in the physical proximity of persons and objects. Against the opacity of skin, the veil is ethereal and transparent; in its ornamental role, we may suggest that it establishes instances of functional aesthetics, including fragrance use. Furthermore, insofar as it is something to be lifted, or at least entices one to look for what is underneath, it appears as an argument to substantiate the attraction and pleasure factors attributed to fragrances.³⁶

That we may suggest a more twisted effect concerning the self appears in a manner of superimposition of fragrance with personality, whereby the olfactive note of one's personality would emanate and dissipate (in that order) to her/his surroundings. In this regard, it is perhaps worth recalling Serres' thought on the body and soul laid bare, or exposed. Thus, 'body and soul are not separate but blend inextricably, even on the skin', whereby the 'compositure mixture' of them that is the skin (Serres *ibid.*, 26, 27) becomes a surface with *depth*. The (re)semblance with the surface-as-screen suggests both a self-reflexive, interiorizing act, where one's perception from the inside (i.e. the internal 'I' corresponding

³⁶ Similar effects abound in cinema: film-making that is not self-referential, but interested in affecting the viewer beyond what is visible on the screen has been a longstanding preoccupation for both practitioners and theoreticians of cinema. Obviously, creating dream-like images that enable subjective associations is a hallmark of creative, artistic image-making, favoured by certain genres, such as art cinema, mixed genre and erotic films. We may be well aware that it is precisely the last two instances which make it explicit the implication of skin and body, therewith opening up to 'reading' on affective levels also the enigmatic turns of the narrative, or what is (non)sayable. Particularly films mixing elements of horror and thriller genres, by way of their graphic depiction of events with extreme outcomes, appear as subject to both unconscious and conscious, or 'veiled' recollections by both characters and viewers, as well as stimulating interpretations due to the perplexity/confusion arising at the end of such films.

here with what is called sometimes ‘soul’, the baseline of the senses, see Serres *ibid.*, 172) is mixed with the outside, partial images of her or his body, here conceived as either veiled, layered, or its naked surface-skin carrying particular and generic odours.

Simultaneously with the bodily self, we can certainly also refer to an ongoing updating of an archive of the body. In parallel, an archive of scents as well becomes feasible via sensory memory - one that, while similarly employing the storing and retrieving capabilities /possibilities of the body and intellect, uses the body-as-archive. And, conceiving the tactile in terms of movements initiated from the inside, we may observe a functionality of kinesthetics – so that the moving body and/or its body-parts can initiate olfactory effects, even if those emerge as a cross-result of what is evaporating on its own. We could then ask what the functions of any such self-induced effects on the self should be.

We can recall that sensory awareness is always a subjective one, as it is tracing, perhaps, “that part of aspect of the inside of our body which we mix with the image of external bodies” (Bergson, cited in Bordun 2017, 175). In other words, next to ‘kinesthetic spatiality’ (introduced in visual terms in previous subchapter, see Rutherford 2014b), the notion of ‘kinesthetic empathy’ is made possible by way of the somatic archive and affectation, as defined above via Henri Bergson; if the perspective of the beholder or receiver has been implied in terms of pathos, we may inquire to understand the ethos of the perfume-wearing.

The paradoxical situation of how to communicate individuality (or instil it, for that matter) given the mass-production or seriality of fragrances (whereby one’s ‘fragrant’ self may not be unique despite directed effort) has been dealt with in various manners. We may observe a questioning of individuality, insofar as the skin appears as an empty map on which the perfume-maker inscribes their work (cf. Sfirschi-Lăudat 2023, 274).³⁷ In this sense, any illusion of personality produced by

³⁷ I reckon having much in common with the subject and the approach of the author (Sfirschi-Lăudat 2023); however, for reasons related to the manuscript deadline, I couldn’t assume an in-depth engagement with the insights of the work referenced here.

a fragrance – an impersonal, mass-produced yet highly sophisticated product – persists only as long as the scent itself endures.

The claim that the era of signature scents has been taken over by ‘fragrance wardrobes’ so that contemporary consumers choose what to spray on themselves from their own, curated collections (or that they layer fragrances to have the effect of individual, personal scent auras) is telling – beside significant aspects such as the seemingly endless consumer options coupled with personal affordances/wealth to indulge the senses – about an approach to the self as a composite, changeable and fragile,³⁸ while also coupled with an attention to moods as less focused and long-lasting feelings (as opposed to, or in parallel with the emotions and feelings as those have different durations and intensities, cf. DiStefano et al. 2021, 179-180).

Eventually, the temporality inscribed in fragrance experiences may be extended by the trend of collecting fragrances that recalls the Aristotelian notion of ‘form’ as expressing the intrinsic nature of an object, which includes, besides function, in the case of fragrances, it may be put in terms of primarily intended usage, also a different purpose and identity of its object-status. These two aspects largely correlate in the case of fragrance collecting, where fragrances become collection items emphasised in their object form, i.e., their bottles and packaging, and thereby become enriched (cf. Boltanski and Esquerre 2020). In the case of vintage and/or discontinued fragrances, one may speak of scarcity (as detailed in Boltanski and Esquerre, *ibid.*, 238-240), whereby enrichment means a closed game in which a particular object is re-emphasised in its originality or associated with another, but both retain their distinctive identities. However, scarcity may be mitigated, and, on many occasions, it may not constitute an impediment at all, since, depending on the criteria of collection, the focus can be, at one end, on authored, artistically endowed fragrances, and on dupes or “clone fragrances” at the other (or on anything in between). To be sure, since a clone fragrance functions as a cheaper substitute for the original formula, it can have a counter-effect to enrichment strategies, or it may not qualify as enrichment of one’s

³⁸ The main title of my own previously published article (Virginás 2022) is a conscious play on the liquid modernity concept introduced by Appadurai.

collection in terms of exchange value. While the act of copying remains unrecognised by either party, it is scaled up by consumer recognition and promotion, thus it fits into contemporary media production and social media behaviour and use.

Unsurprisingly then, the relentless search, or passion for new olfactive experiences – as observed in the case of fragrance enthusiasts, and facilitated or hindered by the overwhelming and exponentially growing number of commercially available scents – becomes exposed in concerning specialized media platforms (e.g., *Fragrantica*, *Parfumo*) and feeds those in an ongoing manner, while it acts as a personal archive, one that is encompassing individual efforts focused on the singular aesthetic qualities of one's life and personal appearance, as the manifold singularities of contemporary aesthetically inclined societies (Reckwitz 2020). Eventually, while the invisibility and traceability of both the workings of digital media (i.e. immediacy, transparency, and so on, cf. Grusin 2010; Grusin 2015) and that of olfactive stimuli appear to suggest an analogy at most, the significance of the visual is perhaps best rendered by the archiving functionalities of digital media contexts, and which, in their turn, can mirror the related phenomena of fragrance collecting.

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Liquid Wardrobes and Sensing: A Phenomenological Approach to Digital Perfume Communities¹

Introduction

Smell is the olfactory sense that acts invisibly among bodies of various kinds; in physiological terms, it acts like an inward muscle, while given the proximity of smell receptors to those belonging to taste, we may speculate that anything that has a taste also has a smell. As such, in the case of both senses, connections to the limbic system are accountable for the triggering of memories. The subjective experience of smelling becomes prevalent and may even appear as having explanatory potential in conjunction with matters of taste once fragrances or perfumes come to mind. In what follows, the notion of taste will recall either the palate or nutrition only in terms of scents that feature so-called food notes in their olfactory pyramids. As the sense of smell enables experiences that broaden the olfactory realm, the use of fragrances has been linked to sensory enhancement; accordingly, aesthetic concerns and fashion discourses need to be acknowledged simultaneously. First, we should remind ourselves of the explicit connection between fragrance use and fashionable clothing, an aspect made evident by social history (Corbin 1986). Subsequent difficulties arise to the extent that fashion phenomena now can be interpreted in a variety of ways (for a more recent overview of various fashion notions, see, for ex., Bruggeman 2014). Therefore, I

¹ First appearance: 2022. *Acta Univ. Sapientiae, Social Analysis*, 12: 113–130. DOI: 10.2478/ausoc-2022-0006

propose a shortcut that will lead to my argument and eventually bring fashion theory into debate.

The complexities underlying the creation of perfumes, but even more so the smells, by virtue of their intimacy, call for a close reading-type of practice. Once the privilege of critics to decipher or translate aesthetic sensibilities, such idiosyncrasies and the functionality of the digital culture now make for a plethora of information created and spread about perfumes. Reviews (either anonymous or signed) as well as forum chats about perfumes as objects outline an enlarged phenomenology in terms of perceptions of human bodies, their ways of acting and relating to each other. The notion of wardrobe, or the personal collection of one's clothing items, enables different facets of oneself or marks an extension intertwined with a distribution of personhood (Woodward 2007: 18); the parallel holds to the extent that inquiry should regard the contents of perfume wardrobes as indispensable.² However, in what follows, the thread of the analysis will gradually unfold from the material aspects and turn to the immateriality of concerning sensual experiences. By doing so, not only the so far under-analysed aspect of fragrances as merely completing looks would be reconsidered, but eventually an argument is being proposed for unravelling perfume consumption patterns as making sense via an aesthetics of attention.

Fragrance and fashion

As noted above, historical perspectives have extensively dealt with smells and body odours, as well as with the related function(ality) of fragrances in terms of adornment. Needless to say, to a significant extent, when applied to human bodies in various concentrations (as cologne waters, eau de toilettes, eau de perfume, perfume extracts, and oils), fragrances have been intertwined with glamorous, fashionable objects

² While I do not dismiss matters of perfume collection as unworthy of research, the attribute "liquid" used in the title (both in the literal and figurative sense) alludes to the necessity for zooming-out of the lenses in order to grasp connections with fashion and turn the focus onto the experiential.

(i.e., clothing and similar), and appearance ever since (see Corbin 1986, Beaulieu 2013). In parallel, from the point of view of fashion studies, the widely acknowledged theoretical benchmark has emphasized the aspect of signification via codes and signs: specifically, both tangible and intangible objects may have been expressing a fashion sense while being already part of the fashion industry or progressively incorporated by the latter (to be observed, “fashion industry” has been the operational term from (both) a structuralist and cultural studies approach; see Bruggeman 2014). Fashion draws on the novelty aspect with a notion of change, marking either the incorporation and/or dismissal of something as being in or out of fashion.

Moreover, it implies the *wearing* of clothing designed as such, but in an enlarged sense, it depends on being “displayed” in retail stores, magazines, or digital media, meaning that fashion is visually communicated. Thus, concerning garments, fashion emerges through wearing/display (both physically and digitally); it is visually effected. In my view, this particular aspect needs to be noted when looking at (dis)similarities in connection with the proximate field of perfumery. We may observe an emphasis on the visual components also in the case of perfumery, namely the perfume bottles as well as the corresponding advertisements that act as, indeed, signifiers. Then, if we take into consideration either the recipients carrying the liquids or the connected imagery, fragrances or perfumes are very much representational.

Nonetheless, a closer look may reveal a gap, a hiatus, or a break in the circuit, as the visual is actually relegated to the domain of packaging. In its place, the olfactory experience is that which underpins changing meanings of fashion(ability) contextually, even if being in harmony or in contrast with appearance will be ultimately sought after. That attractive looks coupled with a great smell should be overwhelming reveals a common-sense inference. The complementary functionality of perfumes reflects the dominant fashion discourse, as presented in magazines and in boutiques/retail stores. In other words, a person’s appearance has different components (not just clothing items but also hairstyle, footwear, and so on), each entering into relationship with or bearing the marks of

current or past fashion trends. In particular, given the proximity of fashion objects (clothes, garments) and the abovementioned bodily intimacy conveyed by or through smell molecules, the understanding of fashion as a “situated bodily practice” (Entwistle 2000, 2015) may serve as a valid starting point to grasp perfume wearing.

To be fair, the complementary relationship between perfumes and outfits has evolved so as to appear straightforward, as one may link, for ex., so-called leather fragrances with leather outfits to be worn in colder seasons or lighter, citrusy fragrances to be worn with warm-weather clothes. A more ubiquitous argument concerns fragrance classification according to the evaporation rate of smell molecules correlated with weather temperature and body heat (i.e., heavier fragrances to persist in cold weather or to be worn during the cold seasons, and lighter ones suitable to wear in warm(er) weather and hot climates). And we may also encounter a “morphing aspect” with one’s physical body, and so fragrances are conferred a second-skin functionality, which is, albeit different from the second-skin feature talked about with regard to clothing.³ If anything, this provides a claim to the synesthetic nature of human sense.

On the one hand, leading fashion designer houses have capitalised on this aspect early on (see the textbook example of Chanel by being the first fashion designer house to introduce perfumes), so today virtually any fashion clothing company has a scent line as well. Notwithstanding global inequalities, the seductive power of the likes of Chanel or Dior may lie in the fact that their cosmetic products are more accessible to mass consumers than their fashion clothing collections.⁴ While such a pull may be (dis)comforting, I find that fragrance enthusiasts also endorse the

³ Although this perspective has been constantly refined through a lens onto the embodied experience of wearing clothes, it appears as a commonly accepted starting point in many theoretical discussions of fashion phenomena; though media and cultural theorist Giuliana Bruno is not credited for introducing the notion of “second skin”, she gives a straightforward description as it applies to clothing as fashion (Bruno 2008: 147).

⁴ Investigating the relationship between the clothing and perfume lines of leading fashion designer houses should be, however, the subject of another inquiry.

slightly differing logic of perfume consumption. Accordingly, craftsmanship or excellent perfume creation is recognised as being different from fashion design practice, and, by extension, it has less to do with fashion designer houses or brands or with the luxury garments that those may offer. A closer look at creative processes may encounter a few notable exceptions, as the case of certain iconic, male-oriented perfumes created out of a synergy between perfume creators and fashion designers; before establishing his own brand, the activity of Tom Ford first at Yves Saint Laurent and then at Gucci or the creation of *Dior Homme* fragrance by Olivier Polge involving Hedi Slimane make well-versed arguments in this regard (such examples are rather the exception than the rule, and they might be useful for analysing other aspects, for ex., gender issues at different scales).

Therefore, on the other hand, the connection between fragrances and fashion clothing items appears arbitrary, especially from the perspective of fragrance literacy. The enlarged view on the wide pool of the fragrances often means having a different time scale, so preferences may go beyond mass-market options, towards higher-priced vintage perfumes or towards equally or even more highly-priced niche perfumes (whose creators do not offer other types of luxury fashion items). To the extent that owning and/or wearing fashion items betrays conspicuous consumption in a Simmelian sense, perfumes are also ambiguous. At the outset, spaces of display or acquaintance with perfumes / the initial consumption thereof appear superimposed onto department stores (what is more, large perfume chain stores now have their niche perfume sections, and strictly “niche” perfume boutiques have also found their place nearby). However, perfumes as collectible stuff, as kept in tangible glass objects, are confined to the sanctuary of the home. Though the liquids become invisible following the act of spraying oneself, the purposefulness of the act entails a need or demand to recognise perfumes as having exquisite value. This aspect, together with the previously mentioned “second-skin” feature, belies a kind of value transference, thereby designating the route towards perfecting one’s appearance. Certainly, what is in or out of fashion becomes, then, personal, or a self-

aestheticising project: it is highly influenced by perfume consumption habits, which range from a well-informed, self-conscious manner to less reflective ways (identified as visceral sense by some).

Since the present study envisages a collective context where perfumes are assigned the main role, a further aspect to be taken into consideration concerns trends of smell as having their own fashionability. Accordingly, given the scales of dynamics and constraints, we can refer to both specific perfumes as end-products and certain smell molecules that come to be regarded as contemporary, meaning here, for the sake of brevity, being in fashion (a thorough investigation in this regard should inquire into fragrance chemistry and the relevant economic actors). Whatever conceptual means are salvaged or at disposal to convey meaningful sense for the olfactory, the notion of the contemporary may be contrasted with the datedness of either fragrances and/or certain smell notes. In other words, that certain perfume smells are regarded as either “contemporary” or dated is obviously subject to interpretation.⁵ Similarities with fashion design practice occur, but only to the extent that we draw an analogy between perfume accords and basic elements of gendered attire.⁶ While the latter are reworked, tweaked twice a year, the creation of successful perfumes may (and usually) take up more time; and, in the case of successful fragrances, “fashionability” is certainly longer than one season (even if shelf life is fixed to 3 years). Here I would mention a gendered sub-aspect that appears to synchronise perfumes and fashion garments: menswear fashion is considered to be slowly evolving and not so prone to change (as opposed to womenswear).⁷ This may correlate with my observation that many male perfume enthusiasts are into vintage perfumes, so vintage perfumery may be either a starting

⁵ For ex., see agarwood (oud), then rose and oud combo, or specific notes like coffee, incense, or artificial new smell molecules like ambroxan, which do not have historical or real-world material resemblances.

⁶ However, in the case of fashion design, the cuts, shapes, materials, motifs, etc. are presented as ideas to be translated into garments for the next season; thus, fashion is more like a provider of “raw material” for what eventually will be worn in everyday life (Entwistle 2015: 118).

⁷ *Why Tom Ford Puts the Logo at the Tip* – interview with Tom Ford by Rachel Tashjian.

point or an endpoint of the “fragrance journey”, as it is voiced affectionately by many. However, I would not venture so far as to generalize by crediting an ancestral male attitude unwilling to accept nuanced changes; rather there is a sense of “intergenerational growth” (Robertson 2004) that appears to be guilty of the spikes of interest and praise in the vintage market and relevant for niche as well (to the extent that the latter reworks perfume trends from the past); it strikes me as more valid argument than, say, nostalgia.

Finally, a significant differentiating aspect acts like a lower threshold of admission in the case of perfumes (as opposed to interest in other types of fashion items to be worn). Assuming one is not shy to test perfumes means engaging in a thorough and systematic investigation of the perfumes offered by boutiques or retail stores at one's disposal. Such a strategy is different from a rushed moment of buying, and, by doing so, one can arguably gain a fuller sense of the desired object as opposed to putting on any number of garments/dresses in the fitting room. However, as I hinted at, this aspect reflects a difference in degree only, as the ultimate goal is, in case of being satisfied with the scent sample, still about entering into possession of the object. Thus, by taking note of technicalities (e.g., does spraying on clothes affect one's bodily appearance?), the question whether perfumes complete looks/appearance should be reformulated by turning to wearers' subjective accounts. In what follows, I will focus mainly on the multi-faceted experience of *wearing* in the sense that it serves (albeit not exclusively) as the third angle of the imaginary triangle, or the dot connecting garments of fashion and perfumes.

Perfume Media

The point of departure for my analysis has been defined by my perspective anchored in the present. Therefore, a positive consideration of the ever-expanding perfume industry (including the proliferating number of various fragrance-making companies, trained perfumers, and consumption on a planetary scale), i.e. as enabling diversity, as well as its “taste cultures” need to be acknowledged both via *and* in connection with

the digital realm. Particularly, my starting point has been that any diversity in terms of consumption practices could be grasped by the countless ways in which people relate to fragrances. Thus, while popular labels like “perfumista”, “fragbro”, or “fragheads” suggest the degrees of engagement (with such labels being used increasingly without negative connotations), the perspective of viewing consumption communities through the lens of mediatization, as proposed by fashion researcher Rocamora (2017) lays claim to a somewhat close connection or overlapping with the fashion industry.

The contemporary entanglement of fashion and digital media is useful to sketch an overview of perfume media. While most books on perfumes take historical perspectives on the subject, I think of perfume media in terms of digital media environments that create, publish, and/or update perfume-related content – from various YouTube perfume reviewers (most having been assigned the status of influencers) and other social media environments (mainly on Instagram but also Facebook and Tumblr). Given, however, the reliance of those on the visibility or the visual, as well as an exploitation of the affordances of the specific form of media all those have been using, should also include an analysis of the visual content produced as such.⁸ In parallel, there has to be also an acknowledgement of the circulation or flow of transindividual affects as not only enabled by contemporary forms of media but actually what the media are about and for (McKenzie 2020). The media tools available mean that we are less relying on the reproduction of definite, clear-cut tastes; next to a positively inclined, evolving, ever-mutating, geared towards the future, an overcoding practice (in a Deleuzian manner) needs to be addressed as well. This understanding of the functioning of media is, in my view, necessary to be aware of.

⁸ So, not only would it be difficult to outweigh the significance of the visual, but I cannot see examining such output without paying attention also to the inherent algorithmic regulations. All such aspects call for a different scope and method of analysis; in other words, by dwelling upon the better consumption/purchase suggestions, equal better rankings, I have envisaged diminishing gains.

Therefore, I intended to pay attention to perfume-related diversity as it has been reflected in its very own knowledge-generating potential (as briefly mentioned by Beaulieu 2013). So, I looked first at individual blogs that had an emphasis on the textual content. Such blogs or mini-websites and their creators (often professionally trained perfumers with an interest in visual arts as well as other creative-artistic practices) appear as nodes of loose networks, and they also command(ed) many individual followers.⁹ Some of these blogs may still be active, but many have been outdone by the different magnitudes by which forums or community sites operate. Of particular interest have been the intricacies of endlessly dissecting hard-to-find, no-longer-produced perfumes as well as contemporary ones (in more usual words, those referred to as vintage or semi-vintage and niche perfumery),¹⁰ as they have resulted in “community-generated” content. As I have been engaged in extensive

⁹ Some of the first wave of blogs are extinct (such as *ntsperfume.com* or *raidersofthelostscent.blogspot.com*), while others are still functional (like *kafkaesqueblog.com*). Even the much-cited Turin and Sanchez have been updating their blog until recently (<https://www.perfumestheguide.com>).

¹⁰ The fragrance world is rather straightforward in its classification; accordingly, the labels vintage or semi-vintage have been applied to perfume products marketed during the 20th century and the early 21st century by fashion designer houses and a few traditional, only-perfume-producing houses; several factors (like changing consumer trends coupled with temporary failure to sell) contribute to such products becoming hard-to-find and therefore collectible stuff, i.e. vintage as it applies to other types of, once mass-produced artefacts that have been culturally endowed in hindsight. To be noted, some vintage perfumes also fall in the category of niche, but in most cases, niche means a contemporary take on perfumery by perfumers with one-of-a-kind artistic style, complemented with the use of natural raw materials in spite of global scarcity and restrictions. Such operating conditions of the newcomer perfume houses (i.e., those established towards the end of the 20th century or that started to produce perfumes at that time) are now being copied by mainstream designer houses. Therefore, niche as an umbrella term appears as endemic to the perfume industry as the latter developed throughout the 20th century. And, to further complicate the picture, niche has its own mainstream, compared to which perfumers labelled “independent” are considered to be different to the extent that they evade certain regulations set for perfume industry professionals; pushing further limits in terms of perfume-creating concepts, ideas and even more limited distribution/availability, indie perfumery remains inversely proportional to mass appeal.

online research, two self-titled digital perfume encyclopaedias have consistently popped up, namely *Basenotes.net* and *Fragrantica.com*. I narrowed my focus to *Fragrantica*, since it appeared to be more diverse and also because of making content available in several other languages, apart from the global English. While both originated in the US, *Fragrantica* has been gaining more traction among users based across Europe; I should also mention that many use both.¹¹

When asking what the role of online fragrance communities is, we should reckon that they are obviously influencers of consumption. Moreover, we can loosely map the reasons why and how online fragrance communities are functional; perfumes are considered ideal objects for community debates given their varied and often subversive compositions in olfactory terms (Herman 2013). Within fragrance communities, we can easily distinguish general aims like searching for a signature scent, building or expanding one's perfume collection by communicating with fellow connoisseurs. The general effect is an enrichment of one's knowledge about the subject, and by being positioned specifically, becoming informed to debate about issues and giving advice on related matters. This aspect, however, is not what makes perfume-connoisseurship specific, as it merely reflects the intended use of media platforms, i.e. it emphasises the mediation aspect, or on the way how knowledge is communicated/circulated, and not so much on the knowledge itself (although any knowledge is modelled by such noisy factors as the affordances of a specific interface of communication). Accordingly, the self-aestheticising features enabled by users have

¹¹ *Fragrantica.com* presents a comprehensive database of perfumes (over 72,000 perfume entries listed, although including different editions of supposedly the same formulas) and has a fairly large number of users/members across the continents, with a bigger proportion from the English-speaking countries (over 700,000 registered members with active or online members fluctuating most likely according to working hours in the global North). While its own journal-like main page content is produced by its own perfume-loving editorial staff, they also recruit contributors from among the members (which, if anything, constitutes further evidence in support of my own endeavour in the sense that *Fragrantica* editors have also noticed the writing skills of certain members).

contributed to the specific illusion of bringing face-to-face the breadth of fragrances with the wealth of consumers (whereby members tailor their perfume collections as quasi-public wardrobes and communicate their level of experience). Thus, I have put a focus on user input about fragrance entries where members share written experiences and give their opinions. In other words, the performance of fragrances is voiced or assessed individually, as well as submitted to quantitative analysis according to certain parameters.¹² Tracing back such practices to perfume criticism as having emerged through various informed texts which had been published earlier (see, for ex., Edwards 1996; Turin–Sanchez 2008, 2018) may have had its appeal in terms of writers’ practical advices (for ex., training one’s nose) and general encouragement or invitation to get acquainted with this field of sensual beauty and precision chemistry. In other words, a specific genre of writing piece, namely reviewing and assessing particular fragrances, has fared well with the affordances of the digital realm. In other words, what interested me was the way in which highly idiosyncratic expressions have been emerging through common parlance but without repeating or reiterating the stereotypical language of perfume marketing; thereby, knowledge-bases created by and for perfume enthusiasts and perfume criticism as practised independently (the inherent consumer aspect aside) cannot be separated neither from each other nor from the heritage line of perfume criticism, as literate consumers took heed of the advice of the so-called first generation of independent perfume critics.

Looking at such a diffuse canon of perfumery by skimming through the reviews, I have occasionally stumbled upon insights that seemed remarkable (a subjective bias, I admit) by way of their style of formulation/expression as well as by individualistic sense that came

¹² On their turn, these are also indexed by specific notions: the appropriate seasons of wearing, longevity of wear, the “ideal” gender of the wearer of the perfume in question, as well as evaluation of price and quasi-technical variables such as projection, silage. All the previously mentioned amounts eventually, to an immense and constantly growing pile of data on both perfumes and users; thereby, both quantitative and qualitative analyses may be conducted (as of Spring 2022, over 1,200,000 reviews have been listed).

through, in the sense of “added” quality that both resonated with artistry and pointed to a functional knowledge of a kind.¹³ In spite of counterarguments against hand-picking and indirect interpretation, an overview of both perfume history and the contemporary conditions makes it rather obvious the prevalence of artistic quality. So, a focus on qualitative aspects appeared useful while I gathered an initial overview of differences among perfume-evaluating criteria or perspectives (priming various factors in terms of sensory, perfume-historical, quantitative or scaled approaches, and so on). In other words, a connection to the intellectual discourse of past and contemporary perfumery has been followed by gathering information about perfumes that have been given steady attention to by the already mentioned first wave of “independent” perfume critics and bloggers (see Turin and Sanchez 2018). The fact that I have been more familiar with perfumes for men has obviously influenced my inquiry. A narrowing of the vast subject area or a point of departure has been constituted by paying attention also to users who have been reviewing so-called genderless perfumes; therefore, my investigation was not blind to any gender scale but was not interested in user profiles categorised in terms of gender either.¹⁴ Thus, I have initially contacted a few *Fragrantica* members who

¹³ A similar observation has also been thematised by a journal report, albeit in the context of leisure time within the pandemic restrictions (see Syme 2021).

¹⁴ A slightly different but common path made it clear that the blurring of gender boundaries would be characteristic to a certain extent for lovers of both vintage and niche fragrances; here, we should note that a handful of classics have been increasingly regarded as wearable by the other sex, i.e. feminine perfumes by men and vice versa. In parallel, there has been a growing trend of genderless perfume products that remains characteristic of both niche and the more expensive, exclusive scent lines of the leading fashion designer houses. In most cases, one should not view this phenomenon of consumption as something that eventually applies equally to both sexes; an overview of quantified opinions or user data/input on wearing genderless or “universal” perfumes should suffice. It should be more interesting, however, to disentangle any such unintended causalities/consequences by taking into consideration, besides the gender/culture aspect, a variety of patterns, such as skin chemistry, as well as geographic location and climate (one may wonder, however, about any additional benefits of drawing anthropological maps of perfume usage beyond marketing value or further academic text output). Moreover, emphasising such an

have been reviewing and referring to both vintage and contemporary fragrances (although to varying degrees). The number of reviews posted, together with a certain consistency of reviewers to deal with perfumes in an ongoing manner, has been telling about their engagement with the topic; the number of reviews, as well as the consistency of the input or postings, have also been decisive for my sampling. Subsequently, I have conducted structured e-mail discussions about how they relate to perfumery and fashion, as well as details about reviewing practices. Recommendations of certain reviews and/or reviewers, as well as user profiles highlighted by *Fragrantica*'s own editorial staff (one of the respondents has drawn my attention to this feature of the *Fragrantica* portal), have constituted further criteria for reaching out to subsequent community members.

Perfume Experience and Critics

While perfumes are conveyed in terms that are similar to those concerning (fashion) clothes, we are reminded that “fashion articulates the body, producing discourses on the body” (Entwistle 2000: 4), and so fashion theorist Joanne Entwistle (2000, 10–11) has been calling attention to “...consider dress in everyday life as embodied practice: how dress operates on a phenomenological, moving body and how it is a practice that involves individual actions of attending to the body with the body”. Considering this emphasis on the phenomenological, embodied dimensions of wearing clothes, how does it translate to the wearing of perfumes?

The claim of diversity, therefore, will necessarily map onto a knowledge base to be understood as communication and inquiry about fragrances: what to wear on specific occasions, but also beyond, specifically in the sense of being able to participate in the fragrance discourse meaningfully. Consequently, what interests me is rather post-phenomenological, since, to the extent that it becomes knowledge, it is

aspect should also entail a recalibration of the research focus in terms of class- and income-related affordances.

recognised as such via multiple *mediations* of phenomenological experiences, especially when we consider it as being coupled also with, for ex., technical or scientific data from the realm of chemistry. It is at once “attending to the body”, as Entwistle has suggested, but also different. Significantly, such knowledge is built on “wear time” to the extent that smell molecules have a life span or duration that depends on / varies according to the surfaces that are sprayed. Similarly, by making use of the suggestion that the sense of smell may provide a basis for aesthetic critical reflection (Shiner 2020), we may turn to a Friedian conceptual distinction between “objecthood” and “art objects”, which in our case may resonate with how certain perfumes achieve status or are conferred such by fragrance connoisseurs.

Accordingly, some perfumes could be discerned as novelties by bearing a close resemblance to domains where creative output is essential, namely, arts and fashion design. In this sense, it has been rather obvious that the common thread of artistic quality could be seen as the defining feature of what has made certain perfumes outstanding during the past decades and up until our day. The same move glued the artistic quality to the perfume creator, or to the artist (Turin 2006; Turin and Sanchez 2008, 2018). However, the defining benchmarks of the aesthetically inflicted reflections appear to be set by the very character of fragrances, where the former involves synaesthesia by default. According to the now common insight that senses are intertwined so that making sense of oneself and/or the world should be considered a synesthetic act, in the case of perfumes, their inherent synesthetic character is even argued to lend itself to at times elusive subversiveness, which is prone to elevate/dethrone them as the very objects of pop culture (Herman 2013). While this view may not deprive the olfactory experience of perfumes of its classical Kantian undertones (with its components broken down into the distance, spontaneous play and disinterested pleasure of the senses, as it has been reflected by the community members whom I contacted), such contradictory approaches certainly need balancing for the sake of a feasible inquiry.

On the one hand, there has been a proliferation of perfume connoisseurship ever since the much-referenced perfume criticism of Turin and Sanchez, which can be viewed as propagating an autodidact way of relating to perfumes, or enabling anyone to voice their opinion and argue for a reboot of the discourse about fragrances. On the other hand, the advent of the digital media has enabled/driven most people to create content, or be the content themselves, a fact that still makes place for the amateur vs. professional debate. Nonetheless, an understanding of what is considered professional appears as fleeting and/or context-dependent; it should be limited neither to the language of marketing nor to the interviews taken from perfume creators. Therefore, I have been doing away with the binary categorisation of amateur and professional approaches; moreover, the literary or fictional component triggered in such a highly idiosyncratic and aleatory manner appears to me as a more professional approach in terms of language use.

Perfume connoisseurship can be grasped as a very individual project (at least so far), and it has been tapping into professional knowledge that goes into perfumery making (i.e. fragrance chemistry) and simultaneously developing a different vernacular approach to perfumery. In its turn, such language should not fall for the seduction of advertising or marketing while maintaining its rather different building blocks, which are to be viewed in terms of the experiential and the comparative dimensions. However, we should also observe that this claim by no means amounts to saying that the *experiences* of perfumes have been irreconcilably different ever since (except for experiencing the new or reformulated versions of vintage perfumes). Such concerns may be simultaneously positioned in a causal chain (which is an argument for perfume history). To sum up, the possibility to reconceptualise and relocate the artistic quality as becoming the proprietary feature/marker of written texts or reviews posted by registered members appeared as being not so much a translation/mirroring of the perfume creator's perfume concept but rather autonomous from any supposedly inherent feature of the perfumes considered as "art objects".

Sensing Bodies and Attention

Going back to the observation of social historian Richard Sennett – according to whom a change is one’s outer appearance; starting from the 19th century, it has been equated with a change of the “self” (Sennett 1974, quoted by Bruggeman 2014, 39–40) –, we may note that, apart from (im)perceptible mood changes, it has been implied that the scent someone is wearing/or the body odour that he or she emanates may have such communicative powers as well, if not quite in terms of a self, then at least concerning one’s disposition.

More recently, individual actions or practices in terms of wearing fragrances have been reviewed in depth to the extent of emphasising so-called cross-modal or intersensory valences related to the perception of both the self and others, as well as the function of fragrances in connection to those, e.g., mood, attraction (cf. Spence 2021). This is a reasoning from a cognitive and social psychological perspective that builds on the recognition that bodily experiences cannot be characterised as being homogenous, but they clearly have aspects linked to the subjective nature of smelling and to how a smell “feels”.

As such, communicative situations dependent on first-person and third-person perspectives ultimately reveal an anchoring in the paradigm of “body representations”, whereby bodies are to be conceived in terms of both schema (or the capacity to act, in a Spinozan/Deleuzian paradigm) *and* body image. While it is plausible to suggest their overlap to make sense (at all), the notion of “body schema” underneath the “body image” appears to guide a departure from the “objecthood” of scents, whereby dissipation or evaporation is ultimately meaningful only if phenomenologically felt. I believe this functionality is the core component of the critique against the representational understanding, or the subtext that invariably lingers when including fragrances in the mainstream fashion discourse (i.e. as *invisibly* completing one’s look). Fragrances or perfumes are surely invisible throughout the acts of wearing: not only in the sense that they are not representational in a Barthesian allusion but rather

perceptible along different “lines of flight” and therefore in need of interpretative keys.

The abovementioned body schema (which is dependent on the capacity to act) is relevant here as the intertwining of the sensory and the somatic, and which, joined by the cognitive aspect or goal, is – by way of the notion of “embodiment” as performance (as applied by fashion studies, see Entwistle 2000, 2015; Bruggeman 2014) – locked into a sort of performativity that appears valid for each “body” emerging in a fragrant encounter.¹⁵ As such, reminding ourselves that the notion of performativity is clearly indebted to the performative aspect of language itself, we should attend to and disentangle the construct that is the performing bodies in our context.

Thus, when asked about the dynamics between wearing vs owning/collecting fragrances, as well as having knowledge about them, one of the *Fragrantica* members replied that: “I don’t see myself as a collector but a reader, although fragrance isn’t really ‘read’ so much as listened to...” (L.J.).¹⁶ Crediting the writing of perfumer and blogger Victoria Frolova for bringing the Japanese expression of “listening to incense” to perfumers’ attention, we may witness a shift of registers, whereby fragrances are not to be read like (spoken) language. You cannot read it, that is, your eyes and/or fingers are not much of use, but it requires a different sense. In a different note, we may remind ourselves of the subsequent parts of Roland Barthes’s argument for fashion as a system of signification, or reading fashion as language, where identities and bodies function as signifying surfaces (Bruggeman 2014: 12–44): bodies in our context do have surfaces, and they do signify; the task is, however, to grasp the different terms of signification. To be fair, perfumery has a very elaborate system of signification of its own (the language input system referred to by Turin (2006) is a case in point).

¹⁵ As stated by one *Fragrantica* member, “there is an aspect of both perfume and fashion that is performative, and performance is always critically bound to the present” (L.J.).

¹⁶ Although the community members use aliases, I have changed their names to preserve their relative anonymity.

The “essence” that is contained in the form of liquid is, nevertheless, not identical to it since the liquid acts as a carrier or container of various components to be released as layered (as “tete”, “coeur”, and “fond”) and/or on a finite time scale. As a complementary way of approaching scents, we may have visual cues in terms of advertising as well as packaging, where the original bottles or recipients carry design features. And, one may equally argue for the relevance of the tactile, which may be further enhanced through bottle design, shape, its surface, and labelling. Furthermore, we should also mention the proprioceptive sense that is necessitated to either put on a perfume or lend one’s hand or another body part of choice to be sprayed or splashed upon, as well as subsequently examining the evolution stages of perfumes. Being, as noted before, a common and idiosyncratic practice, we should also emphasise the differing running order of senses, as for some, the passion is not about collecting full bottles (which cannot be used in a lifetime) but the smell itself. This fact then leads to reconsideration, besides perfume wearing, also the phenomenon of collecting fragrances. The extent to which the two aspects may be either uncoupled or differentiated would be, however, the subject of another study.

The visual loses its appeal when perfumes are acquired in smaller quantities: while miniature bottles that still carry the perfume creator design are not a ubiquitous practice, decanted samples or vials, as well as “discovery sets” are the way to go. On the one hand, this practice may serve as evidence for the smell to retain its primacy. On the other hand, acquiring perfume samples is cost-effective and is the necessary step if the subjective interpretation/evaluation of smells is both the goal and the denouement. The term “blind buy” is commonly used in fragrance communities, although it appears as a rather unfortunate expression or misinterpretation of the warning that one should buy a bottle only after having smelled and worn it. If anything, this aspect reinforces the commodity fetishism as emerging through the visual imagery, as it (mis)places the value onto what is seen, or the container, i.e. the perfume bottle. The different strategy of perfume sampling is obviously beneficial

in terms of refining one's olfactory sense by enabling one to compare and wear many fragrances in order of hundreds or thousands.

While bearing resemblance to the sampling practice as celebrated by contemporary cultural and art theorists (e.g. Bourriaud 2002), the practice of sampling in our case has various meanings: it may refer to the layering or wearing of different perfumes at one time or, conversely, having a kind of rotational use which does not suppress wear time (via the aforementioned layering) but dilates it, as a kind of "mixtape" approach in the context of which by wearing different perfumes for different periods of the day, or even envisaging durations, different perfumes follow one another so that specific olfactory notes punctuate different timespans or the passing of time. Needless to say, this aspect could be easily conflated with a person's lifetime as being marked by the use of specific scents, where taking the already mentioned "fragrance journey" from youthful scents to acquired taste becomes a popular metaphor of life experiences. However, I wish to emphasise here the fact that acquaintance with perfumes is very much an issue of (constantly paying) attention, not dissimilar to the fleeting, receding, and coming to the fore instances of awareness or consciousness level. There is an act of "...individuating of ourselves through the act of attention" (McKenzie 2020: 68), but which act, because of the fluidity of its synesthetic object, wants to individuate the object itself.

So, where stimuli and habits or schemas form different concoctions, there emerges an "aesthetics of attention" with its own distinctive "ecology" according to a concept of attention subdivided into alertness, loyalty, projection, and immersion (Citton 2016, quoted by McKenzie 2020, 66–79). While the authors cited seek to deal with the conditions provided by attention economy (in the sense of abundant information and limited capacity of attention), I suggest that by pointing to the "listening phase" as an active engagement of the senses such cognitive endeavours may be viewed as individual reverse-engineering efforts, which also manage, for a brief period of time, the distraction sought by attention economy. Specifically, even one remarkably characteristic feature of the latter – which is attraction – here cannot be conceived in a traditional model of communication anymore (see the sender and

receiver couplet) but has many elements that are not individualized but become as such through transitory processes; e.g., the air needed to transport smell molecules, the heat wave needed to lift off molecules from the skin; then, one should take into account even the folded objects like scented clothing pieces (which have also their own individual histories, as from boutique shelves or wardrobes and then put on, etc.); and, ultimately we even re-individualize the scent molecules, as those play an olfactory mimicry on either various natural resources or (semi-)artificial, man-made materials by lending the impression, for varying periods of time, of enveloping the wearer and thus considered as defining/marketing human bodies (see, e.g., so-called animalic fragrances). Moreover, in this regard, it is to be observed that many seek fragrances that meld with their perceived body odours (see the second-skin feature mentioned earlier). The variations here are like a box of Pandora – so, instead of dwelling on apparently eternal differences, I would return to the issue of attention whereby, instead of the rules set forth by any attention economy standards, the maximum attention is garnered, or remains an effort to be pursued; and, by doing so, the deficiency of information is handled or grasped. Subsequently, the next step is to create/reveal a wealth of data (again, it is debatable as to what reviewers' contributions amount to, generally speaking, in terms of unearthing already existing information about perfumes and their creators or channelling hitherto inexistent perspectives). In a way, voicing/testing a new language, or even the “mechanical” acts of translating existing information, say, for ex., from French or Italian into global English, should be considered as (re-)creating practices. Therefore, asking whether these accounts relate to perfume concepts appears as a path to analytic endeavours leading nowhere. Instead, the key moment is to stress the role of aesthetics as attention, where alertness in the sense of excitement to smells is either exhausted or brought to the limit of fatigue/exhaustion: “What a [good] perfume triggers must be sensory and emotional and intellectual and social. The challenge of processing these experiences is exciting because it involves connecting a non-narrative experience like smells to feelings and perceptions experienced as abstractions back to the body...” (L.J.).

Creating a narrative in connection to perfume experiences in the form of reviews is the overall effect; the acts which involve media usage are acts of projection inherently (for our purpose, we may note acts of the intellect, specifically those of writing and/or reading about perfumes). In other words, if not quite genuine acts of creativity in some cases, these convey self-expressions through reflective practices, whereby “noting down what I smelt has helped me to understand and appreciate the scent better” (as remarked by B.W., another *Fragrantica* member to whom I spoke). Language then, either written or spoken, appears as the most adequate tool of communication whereby, in our context, a different dimensionality of experience appears – despite/or through capturing or referring to fleeting or temporary perfume characteristics: see, for ex., the aura of the wearer, which is not to be confused with the “scent bubble”; the bodily awareness as an olfactory tracing of body movements in space; a heightened sense of body postures, codified between the extremes of work and leisure times, or onto the spectrum thereof. In addition, perfume wearing may bring into focus or give rise to different facets of experience, such as verticality in connection with so-called bold, statement perfumes, as well as one’s shadow superimposed by the phenomenon of “scent trail”.

Thus, in accordance with the typology of attention sketched before, we have an aspect of immersion which is not (and cannot be) a constant, as it alternates with loyalty (i.e., signature scents/favourites) or with the perfume references which serve to “frame one’s writing”, as stated by another *Fragrantica* member (H. F.). In a different ordering, a projection of attention is finally needed to give meaning to one’s perfume experience, which may then harvest its own digital attention when read or up-/downvoted. Ultimately, apart from the *countable* terms related to the forum profiles of either perfume connoisseurs or fragrance entries, what the senses effectuate may be cast to those in-between spaces as connections to be explored (as proposed by McKenzie 2020, 78–79).¹⁷

¹⁷ In this sense, cultural theorists such as Wark Mackenzie argue for the communal, shared feelings that evade being captured by any media form, although such transindividual affects appear to be the ultimate concern of media outlets.

Therefore, with the qualitative aspects being both the burden and the benefits of their respective lenses and situated perspectives, at least such accounts do not reiterate the importance of one specific skill of attention and are wary of the promise of being served feasts for the senses.

So, paying attention to scents may come as an activation of the senses with the priming of the olfactory; it is a conscious practice that should eventually give rise, in the case of perfumers, to “olfactory consciousness” (as proposed by Edmond Roudnitska, one of the most acclaimed perfumers of the past century; see Roudnitska 1991, 38). Therefore, we may sense the intertwining of the olfactory sense and smells (or the “distribution” of the olfactory dimension in terms of sensing organ and pleasant/unpleasant odours). While the historical perspective has identified a reconfiguration from provoking sensation to receiving it (i.e. towards the (aesthetically) pleasing (see Corbin 1986: 81)), a new shift has been reinstated to mark a return to evoking sensation. Not so much a desire to provoke by malodours of past centuries due to lack of personal hygiene, nor in terms of the skunk or various animalic perfume notes. Conversely, sensations are to be elicited both in place of actual smells (and therefore abstract and subject to imagination) *and* also in parallel with those, precisely because, as the historical argument proceeds, the sweet odours could not be distinguished or defined as opposed to strong ones (ibid.). Therefore, any such distinctions are revealing particular perspectives that, falling back to the material background, appear to multiply tastes depending on affordances and popular consumption patterns. By reviewing the connections between fragrances and fashion, I have turned to the media platforms that perfume enthusiasts use along the vein of the more recent trend of perfume criticism. I have suggested a contemporary take on this popular phenomenon of consumption by drawing on the notion of attention as both conditioned by contemporary media and necessary for acts of synaesthesia.

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**“And does not the absence
of odour or coldness often turn
an otherwise disgusting or ugly
place into a beautiful one
to behold?”¹: Post-apocalyptic
Aesthetics Meets Arthouse
in György Pálfi’s *Perpetuity***

Mixed-genre films appeal to diverse audiences; adopting multiple genres entails using a wide array of stylistic tools and has implications for the permeability of genre boundaries. Here, in what follows, by looking at *Perpetuity* (2021, directed by György Pálfi), a Hungarian arthouse film production with a nod to the post-apocalyptic subgenre (of the larger sci-fi or sf genre), the focus will be on the modalities of transgressing the conventional continua of the senses in terms of cinema. Accordingly, the narrative role/function of smells or odours will be of particular interest.

Borrowing from an insight by film theorist Julian Hanich, according to whom the ‘picturesque side of beauty’ may depend on malodours being absent (Hanich 2024, 173),² the aesthetic perspective which I

¹ Hanich 2024, 153.

² Initially, I had in mind enticing (or flattering for some) land- or cityscapes which have been designed by having in mind an aesthetics of devastated natural and/or built

suggest will, conversely, regard the olfactory as either contributing to or constituting a layer of perception – for both the characters on-screen as well as for viewers; in the latter case, of interest will be to more closely explore what is mediated by the film sequences in terms of immersive film experience (it should be noted that cinema-going does have an olfactory dimension that may be regarded primarily as distraction from the narrative by way of olfactory stimuli from outside the screen, such as, e.g. the smell of movie-seats, pop-corn, beverages etc.).

There are several aspects to bear in mind at the outset; first and foremost, the assumption is that the absence of olfactory stimuli in a medium defined by aural and visual parameters does not warrant dismissing the former. Here, we can take into consideration that smell appears essential for survival in post-apocalyptic environments (though survival may not be the exclusive objective for the characters/persons involved; what's more, the sense of smell may be lost in certain cases). Thus, beyond the very few films that explicitly address the role of smell(s) and/or the olfactory realm, we may shift the perspective to the multisensory impressions of *and* about characters and settings. Especially taking into account that, in most cases, the sense of smell is not shut off – for any reason implied either by the narrative *or* by the medium –, close encounters between characters on screen aren't only about words uttered or the significance of verbal interactions. Furthermore, we may observe a more recently emerging trend in filmmaking, which appears or seeks to represent or mediate human embeddedness into sensory environments perceivable outside linguistic referents, wherein stimuli (can) become more than just background noise or stains deliberately messing up otherwise perfect compositions. Although not characteristic of particular

environments. With no way of circumventing aesthetic appeal, the possible alluring qualities of post-apocalyptic media representations appeared to suggest the relevance of the notion of allure, which in psychoanalytic theory implies both conscious and unconscious modes of relations; therefore, we can recall the issue of repression and so veer close to denial, which, on its turn, it has been increasingly used in connection with the state of climate. An (audio-) visual envisioning of post-apocalypse or related landscapes can be subscribed to this logic; this line of thought, however, should be explored elsewhere.

genres and not identifiable by geographical limits, the slower-paced style of arthouse appears to welcome such changes in perspective.

Sense continuum and the cross-modality of the senses

By now, a significant body of research has concluded that there are stimuli dimensions which are not tied to particular senses, but, depending on both specific *and* individual predilections, will cut across to different senses or engender different sense-modalities, with ‘redundantly coded stimulus features’ meaning those that can potentially be perceived through different sensory modalities, i.e. cross-modally (see Spence 2011 and Spence 2020). The argument stands for, on the one hand, the synaesthetic nature of perception in general, and shouldn’t be mistaken for the specific conditions of synesthesia. On the other hand, this has relevance for film perception as it has been tackled by film-phenomenologists ever since Merleau-Ponty; accordingly, it has been postulated the continuous, flowing nature of perception may not be distributed across separate senses because “our senses are not compartmentalised and cut off from each other but part of a holistic bodily sensorium [...] we must not forget that film is a multisensorial medium after all.” (Hanich 2024, 173).

However, whereas it does take into account specific external stimuli (i.e. those of the film as medium) and the internal, bodily organization of the senses, it doesn’t preclude the simultaneity of sense modalities (therefore, it may be still relevant for synesthesia), nor does empirically address why visual or aural stimuli should engender different sense modalities (as it does the perspective on cross-modality).

Therefore, we may draw on insights from the more comprehensive empirical research conducted by cognitive psychologists on the intricacies of multisensory perception. As such, multisensory integration has been identified as the general pattern in everyday perception. The plea for a common, widespread crossmodality, as opposed to synesthesia proper, has encompassed even the “...sometimes surprising associations that people experience between seemingly unrelated features, attributes,

or dimensions of experience in different sensory modalities” (Spence 2020). This has meant that novel crossmodal associations between stimuli can be instantiated even if common sense would match those stimuli with specific sense modalities only; it isn’t a stretch to say that particularly creative media like film and music enable such associations.

Nonetheless, to the extent that the nature of such connections between stimuli may be grasped in terms of (either) cognitive meaning, and/or activity, as well as based on the effect (be it arousing, affective, etc.) that a stimulus has on the observer” (Spence 2011), the interest here will concern both the synaesthetic associations and the “cross-modal correspondences or similarities” (Spence *ibid.*) between senses and the cinematic implications related to (dimensions of) one sense. Thus, even if smell is regarded as secondary from the perspective of the film as a medium, it can be equally triggered by on-screen elements (or even independently of the screen, although individual differences should be noted). In other words, an ordering of the senses in the case of the film means that perception is conditioned largely by the senses primarily engaged by the medium, or according to its elements of composition. For e.g., when viewing scenes depicting smoke or something burning spectators may complete the visual experience or -images with a cross-modal referent like the smell of smoke; or the sweat visible on a character’s body may be associated with various known or unknown body odours and liquids (however, such scenarios may have nothing to do with any apocalypse, as, at this point we may as well be in the realm of perfume advertising).

Therefore, if the olfactory becomes relevant through visual cues which can have smell-related features, we may also add (the film-phenomenological emphasis on) bodily proximities and the tactile dimension (cf. the ‘haptic visibility’ paradigm by Laura Marks, e.g., Kalmár 2017, 63),³ which may add up to the intensity, or the *amodal* character of moving images (i.e. where an aspect of filmic event engenders more than one sense modality; this could be put by and large

³ For a critique of Mark’s approach, see Rutherford 2011.

in the abovementioned emotional effect stimuli may exert).⁴ Particular resonance of smell with moving image is to be noted, in my view, due to the sometimes fleeting, but at other times enduring and/or changing character of smells, particularly if those have been registered as pleasant or unpleasant. A more complicated ‘picture’ may be the case of smells registered in one’s olfactory memory, which, when re-encountered, with the memories thereby unleashed, may obviously have features relevant for other sense modalities (i.e. seeing, hearing, touching). However, this helps explain a perceptual experience grounded in imagination or embodied memory rather than direct perception (Hanich *ibid.*).

Such a coupling across different modalities, as should be the case of post-apocalyptic imagery with post-apocalyptic smells, is, fortunately, an issue of memory depending on previous similar *aesthetic* experiences. Therefore, (any) prior knowledge to set up a connection or a ‘coupling prior’ based on distribution across different sense modalities will have to infer a relevant olfactory palette based on disparate elements coming together in a given cinematic scene as such.⁵

This line of reasoning should be completed with the fact that the highly arranged compositions of sequential images and sounds come with pre-attached cognitive meanings; consequently, the affective powers they may exert constitute, in their turn, individual variations (related to, e.g. film-making styles and instances of aesthetic reception patterns). As a side note, considering film genres may provide further guidelines, as, e.g., blockbuster action movies and comedies depend on the audience receiving the straightforward ‘messages’ as soon as possible. In contrast, in the case of art- and/or mixed-genre films, meanings travel along more cryptic routes. Notwithstanding such

⁴ We may add that the referred research suggested the possibility of pairings between all sense modalities (Spence 2011, 975).

⁵ The strength of crossmodal coupling is a function of our sensory system’s prior knowledge that certain stimuli “go together” crossmodally: such prior knowledge concerning the mapping between sensory signals can be modelled by a coupling prior, representing the expected (i.e., *a priori*) joint distribution of the signal – statistical? crossmodal correspondences that result from the pick-up of statistical correlations in the environment (cf. Spence 2011, 984).

variations and interpretative endeavours, in the case of films, it appears that we have a rather implicit and unitary model (as hinted above).

Olfactory appearances

We may note that, from the diversity of stimuli engendering the senses, odours or smells can be separated with ease, thereby recalled even if not present; such functioning of what has been labelled 'olfactive memory' may also apply in the case of film audiences (since smells obviously cannot be represented directly). Accordingly, visual or aural representations of olfactory stimuli or odor-emitting 'things' function as signs/symbols (for the olfactive memory), therewith adding to the cognitive meaning or understanding of a film sequence or scene (we may also note that memory aspects certainly play a part in terms of the coupling of senses, which, however, should be the topic of a different, perhaps more empirically-oriented and -defined research focus). To put it differently, the journey from stimulus properties to their meaning is essentially an exploration of the extent to which smells function in the cinematic worlds constructed (akin to tracing whether there is any smell of danger).

In *Perpetuity*, smells and odours appear to have occasional importance only; therefore, if the particular focus or scope of attention by film-makers shapes subsequent interpretations or criticisms, exploring scenes which explicitly reference the olfactory might appear as a parallel effort. On closer examination, various smells permeate the film's spaces. It's worth mentioning that *Perpetuity* was awarded for its production-design by stating its authenticity.⁶ therefore we may presume that its war-torn, postapocalyptic set was created with an attention extended to both the stimuli and the senses, which should be relevant for such a context.

Such scenes may not have been overlooked by viewers because, in a way, they appear to be consistent with the universally defined/precise

⁶ Actually, it was the only award it received (see *Black Nights Film Festival* in Tallinn, Estonia, 2021 edition).

role of the senses; therefore, the functional role of smells (both as sense and as odour) is viewed in terms of adding to the intensity of the *mise-en-scene*. Then, I will review, on the one hand, the scenes in which the characters appear to make use of their olfactory capabilities; on the other hand, I will argue that an olfactory aesthetics is relevant to registering character development.

Accordingly, 'good smells' are nothing but a whim, a fact which becomes apparent when the protagonist throws away the perfume bottles found in a luggage at the plane crash site. If they have no use value whatsoever is presumably attributed to their null exchange value at the bar which is the site of local trade, where the ultimate hot currency is hand-made, bad-tasting alcoholic beverage (that people are apparently undisturbed by depraved environments they live in is further cemented by the ubiquitous use of alcohol, which indicates a set-back to the social context of the last decades of the 20th century characterised by an erosion of social and moral values, thereby keeping also consistency with the literary source of the film).⁷

The character of Béres (who will have an important role in terms of the narrative) is introduced as a scavenger on the plane crash site (which the protagonist Ocsenás had discovered and exploited earlier on).⁸

⁷ A blending of the rural, undeveloped, structurally punished village society and the war-trauma inflicted, postapocalyptic, resource-limited, and life-endangering near-future is consistent with the *sf*-genre requirement in the sense of providing a social critique of the present (Burling 2009, 243-244), as well as it may even suggest that such a state of things might go on for an indefinite time (i.e. as in the title of the film). However, the fact that the present in terms of a referent has been confirmed (i.e. the real-world Russian-Ukrainian war) may be regarded as an unfortunate coincidence on the part of the film-makers, since the real-target of their critique appears to touch upon more intimate, personal issues, such as interpersonal relationships, suppression of big emotions, damaged psyches as traumas of war, or the impossibility to feel (big) emotions at all, a spectrum of themes all so familiar for lovers of arthouse films.

⁸ His valence may be read in psychoanalytic terms; his connection with dead bodies is worth mentioning because he appears in the penultimate scene as not being able to let go (of the girl he murdered), while all his actions until then can surely be read as relentless, restless play or challenge with death. However, his valence loses appeal with the departure of Ocsenás; although he presents no target of interest for the sniper, he is brutally beaten by the fellow village men.

Having covered his nose and mouth with a scarf or a piece of clothing, which is rather appropriate when scavenging among the dead bodies and remnants of the plane crash, this is the first time the protagonist Ocsenás (and the viewers) observes him. There's a strange similarity with the position of the spectator, as both are being shut off to smells. And, we may also notice the fixated eyes of the character mirroring the spectatorial gaze. Despite the scene thereby suggesting or facilitating spectatorial immersion, it runs counter to identification or sympathy with the character, to the extent that the protagonist might already fulfil that function. Since he doesn't wear a mask, the appearance of a masked character may elicit olfactory responses in viewers.

Among the very few scenes in which Edit, the nurse is active physically, we witness her within the bodily proximity of Ocsenás after their casual sex; as if juxtaposing the healthy, functioning body of Ocsenás with the wounded patients treated in the desolate hospital where she works (and where they met first), she is smelling the bare skin of her sleeping partner in a prolonged act lasting for a few minutes (until Ocsenás becomes conscious). The scene definitely contributes to the estrangement feeling reminiscent of the SF genre, as it may appear as a scene in which people handle intimacy in awkward, strange ways, in this case bearing an almost animalistic, instinctual aspect, possibly aided by the proximity of the only living creature which is dear to her: the cat.

The sense of smell as it is used/presented here also alludes to a double function whereby the role or function of smell is entwined with cognitive ends: on the one hand, the smell of the other person is to assess whether they are compatible with one another. As an act of intimacy within the closed environment of her home. Therefore, the act remains performative and in the sense subject to interpretation, questioning. In other words, it explicitly draws attention to the olfactory as a performative act...its interpretation does fall into the themes of the film, therefore it isn't an awkward, out-of-place act. Accordingly, it does address the basic human need for social connection; and, on the other hand, we may also hypothesize that the registering of one's smell to keep it, as a remembrance (akin to the male costume held in the wardrobe which

presumably has its olfactory signature and thereby, at the same time, is amenable to contamination by others or their specific odours). The obvious impediment to the scene lies in the viewers' differing reactions, as the smell of Ocsenás is unavailable to them. Only Edit knows how he smells, and the act (in fact, the whole scene) fades away as the nurse is written out of the film's story.

Still, I'd argue that it isn't just an additional, meaning-completing act, but it does express the character of the nurse; it may even be thought of as articulating the perpetual complexity of human relationships, all the while the olfactory becomes a way of knowledge, or another distinct way of knowing the other.

The scarcity of olfactively relevant scenes shouldn't mean that they lose their valence, but rather that olfactive qualities may be considered in an enlarged sense, by the implication of the gustatory realm. The connection between orthonasal and retronasal is made explicit in the last tragic scene where we witness Ocsenás finally enjoying the presumable rich flavours of meal (as opposed to the rough taste of spirits drunk throughout the film) - this appears as a moment of fine taste as it involves the handicapped girl onto whom his attention and affection has wandered (in that microsetting it amounts to blurring any boundary or distinction between sexual appetite and hunger/longing for, and enjoyment of a good meal), with the corollary being the neglect toward his drinking buddy Béres, or apparently forgetting who was the master. It is their last meal, but biblical overtones aside, only the shocking act of killing turns the main character, Ocsenás, into survival mode. Accordingly, as a sobering return to cinematic or narrative reality, we hear him utter soothing words to the shouting Béres; then, quickly, to deflect his cruel, target-hunting attention, he improvises by gifting him a pair of shiny tuxedo shoes.

Whereas hitherto the film has been unfolding through the cut of perceptually- and semantically mediated *scenes*, this single scene (arguably considered as the culmination of events) is nothing short of blending perceptually mediated correspondences with semantically mediated ones. In a different line of argument, other reviews (e.g.,

Berényi 2022) have also focused on acts of character- and scene-building; here, I include olfactive qualities as specific ways to untie the film's stylistic layers.

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Collapse, Agency and Extreme Cinema in Central and Eastern Europe

The essay is set to explore the notion of collapse as it applies to cinematic representation. By focusing on *Perpetuity* (2021, dir. György Pálfi) and *Luzifer* (2021, dir. Peter Brunner), two recent films connected to 'traditions' of both arthouse and extreme cinema, it is acknowledged that such narratives reflect broader discourses related to the Anthropocene and post-socialist transformation. At the same time, the collapses identified across multiple levels—environmental, societal, and psychological—appear useful for interrogating the resilience and agency of the protagonists. Drawing on Joseph Tainter's theory of societal collapse (1988) and affective ecocriticism, the analysis employs a phenomenological perspective to highlight how these films foreground agency in an embodied sense. *Luzifer* navigates spiritual and psychological ruptures amid capitalist exploitation, whereas *Perpetuity* depicts post-apocalyptic desolation shaped by war trauma and survival strategies. By emphasising their multisensory appeal, fragmented narratives, and a destabilised moral order, it is suggested that the ambiguous portrayals of agency are rooted in emotional and physical responses to collapse. The essay seeks to bundle crisis, resilience, and agency as they appear in such cinematic representations; ultimately, it suggests that collapse, as understood in relation to the analysed films, reflects broader anxieties about ecological and societal fragility in contemporary Europe.¹

¹ The study has been developed based on a presentation held at a 2022 conference at the University of Debrecen, Hungary.

There are various approaches to the theme of collapse; the damaging effects of human activities on the natural environment have been forecast as interlocking, recurrent collapse events affecting societies at large (though not equally, a presumption that implies both spatial and temporal aspects concerning the locations of particular collapse events). However, with collapse occurring at grand (i.e., planetary) scales, one is reminded that the term "civilizational collapse" was invoked before any general awareness-raising within the anthropocenic turn. Accordingly, comparative and historical research argued that if societal levels have reached a sufficiently high peak of complexity (in terms of their organisation), their downfall would be inevitable due to not being able to balance the level of complexity reached:

„A society has collapsed when it displays a rapid, significant loss of an established level of sociopolitical complexity. The term ‘established level’ is important. To qualify as an instance of collapse, a society must have been at, or developing toward, a level of complexity... [and] must be considered relative to the size of the society in which it occurs.” (Tainter 1988)²

Tainter’s approach is bent on general principles governing collapse and possible responses to it, as

“Collapse is manifest in such things as: a lower degree of stratification and social differentiation; less economic and occupational specialization, of individuals, groups, and territories; less centralized control; that is, less regulation and integration of diverse economic and political groups by elites; less behavioral control and regimentation; less investment in the epiphenomena of complexity, those elements that define the concept of ‘civilization’: monumental architecture, artistic and literary achievements, and the like; less flow of information between individuals, between political and economic groups, and between a center and its periphery; less sharing, trading, and redistribution of resources; less overall coordination and organization of individuals and groups; a smaller territory integrated within a single political unit.” (Tainter *ibid.*)

² Joseph Tainter on ‘Collapse’ | synthetic zeroØ (syntheticzero.net): <https://syntheticzero.net/2021/10/07/joseph-tainter-on-collapse/>

So, on the one hand, we may learn that collapse refers to an exponentially growing number of events correlated with the ever-growing contemporary complexities in (most) mapped areas of life (we may add that thus the Anthropocene emerges as the most aware perspective on the complexity of life on earth); we can say that, to the extent that we imagine collapse at magnitude above individuals (and/or making connections among apparently disparate events), collective or societal levels are surely implied. On the other hand, going through the above exhaustive list, one would be hard-pressed to find anything remotely beneficial for oneself and one's peers (unless one wants to benefit from specific instances of collapse listed above).

To the extent that we may envisage external collapse events as intruding and fundamentally changing everyday realities, human objectives to document and subsequently mediate collapses appear intrinsic. From a mediational perspective, we may observe a general fascination with collapse, even when informed by an art-historical perspective. Accordingly, we may look at various media of representation in terms of aesthetics attracted to collapse. As such, the art form of film has been amenable to collapse scenarios, whereby, in parallel with spectacular representations, we may list film-making projects whose focus gravitates toward psychological processes considered both as caused by and as separated from 'external' collapse events. This way, on the other hand, if we regard collapses as mediated, we may as well turn to experiences of collapse in mediation, or as mediated by films.

In what follows, I will explore *Perpetuity* (2021, directed by György Pálfi) and *Luzifer* (2021, directed by Peter Brunner). These two feature films appear to be distant from one another, to the extent that their singular stories of loss constitute different filmic realities. However, I suggest that they share similar undertakings, in which the emotional-personal turmoil of their characters is set against the backdrop of large-scale collapses. Nevertheless, the appeal of both films may be explained by their amalgam of cinematic trends to which they partially subscribe (loosely 'art-house' and 'extreme cinema'), as well as their proprietary stylistic trademarks (including directing, acting, photography, and sound).

In the case of the young Austrian director Peter Brunner, we can trace the lineage of contemporary Austrian cinema, labelled 'extreme' primarily due to Michael Haneke and Ulrich Seidl (with the latter Brunner has worked with). Pálfi György has been recognised as the Hungarian representative of extreme cinema (see, for example, Kerner-Knapp 2016). What's more, in the case of *Perpetuity*, the explicit setting of its context to the near-future adheres to science fiction, particularly to its post-apocalyptic subgenre.

I suggest that the notion of collapse can serve as a common denominator for their shared particularities. Given the narratives of post-apocalyptic movies as 'catastrophe fiction' (cf. Mousoutzanis 2009, 458–462), I propose the notion of collapse instead to insist on a differentiation of these films, by way of their stylistic features (characteristic, in their turn, of the above-mentioned genres).³ And, whereas narrative events are bounding the characters, neither 'external' collapse (of the surrounding worlds) nor 'internal' collapse takes centre-stage so that protagonists appear seemingly unaffected. While we may speak of intertwined collapse levels imploding onto themselves, the perspective of collapse may be contrasted with or paralleled by character development, an aspect attended to here through its agential qualities. In other words, if focusing on emotions acted out or presented by actors/actresses in accordance with the filmic plots, those may serve as behavioural cues - whereby we may well be in the familiar space of inspecting *how one does respond* to collapse... Then, if the social worlds are being disrupted, beyond psychologically motivated actions or responses thereby engendered and

³ Obviously, such a proposition depends on the adaptability of the plastic, malleable notion of collapse in the sense that it doesn't appear to have a fixed meaning, particularly if we bear in mind the quantum-physics theoretical understanding of collapse, i.e. as elements coming together, as coagulation of a situation, or becoming localised by way of an external force-effect. As I find such a perspective at least that much fascinating, it is also tempting to think about ultimate resolutions, whereby, for the sake of clarity, we might as well substitute the notion of collapse with destruction. Such a line of thinking is, in my opinion, not contradictory as it requires choosing to postpone real-world collapse until a later time, akin to being in the camp of those optimistic enough or at least able to think and create in parallel with collapse, therewith practising a proximal aesthetics attracted by it.

captured so far in terms of *either* survival-instinctual character-agency *or* depriving agency (i.e. giving up), we may inquire whether there are any other, significantly different options available.⁴

Along these lines, we may examine whether the actions of the protagonists of the two selected films reflect anti-heroic attitudes; by examining the circumstances of their agency, we may find not only collapse emerging in the background but also being observed through internal character perspectives. If desensitised, damaged, and therefore emotionally distant (masculine) character-depictions would fit those very circumstances, such an uncoupling from the felt, or emotional realm would appear to suggest an inverse, but increasing adaptation to the state of external collapse.⁵ I will argue for coupling instances of 'embodied agency' (Davies 2008) with resilience, where resilience is understood not as a defining trait of healthy individuals, but rather as a capacity of a functioning system (Southwick et al. 2014). This makes sense if we think of the default situation of filming scenes in which actors follow a script, or a higher order (or return to it after improvisational episodes). And, with collapse-series punctuating cinematic narratives, such 'barely' human empowerment via (instances of) embodied agency appears then, also amenable to differentiate these film-making/ film-makers' perspectives from both POV-films as well as 'stream of consciousness-films'.

Collapse in Cinematic Context

As noted above, the notion of catastrophe is deeply entrenched in the public imagination. Regardless of whether we opt for collapse or catastrophe, the fascination with the topic is likely to be entwined with

⁴ Given the tenet that environmental crisis provokes a diverse range of affective responses, questions related to survival, or how to live on, are implied most often than not, in this perspective, *collapse* is emerging at various levels (including the personal and also the social).

⁵ In this regard, we may observe that certain features (such as visual depiction, conceptual excess, less focus on narrative) identified as defining elements (global) 'extreme' cinema have also been conducive of an enduring emphasis on the affective realm, but in contradistinction with the emotional one (Bordun 2016; Kerner – Knapp 2016).

either problem-solving (be they individual or social), or, at times, with the acknowledgement of (an) automatic hopelessness inscribed in grand collapse-situations.

There are countless films which have so-called 'environmental narratives'. What these films appear to have in common is the branching of their stories or plots to incorporate character responses, thereby representing bleak alternatives. In this sense, it has been argued that 'films with atmospheres marked by sorrow, melancholy, or exhaustion therefore feature minimal action, and these de-dramatized narratives create a palpable sense of inertia (Uhlin 2018, 288), i.e. or an emerging *collapse*. So, in a way, the term *collapse* could stand for a gravitational force whose function becomes rather transparent in the course of or at the end of various filmic narratives. As argued by film scholar Graig Uhlin, the evidence of resource depletion is linked to feeling depleted; thereby, ecological collapse prefigures emotional collapse (Uhlin *ibid.*, 282). The affective threshold logically necessitates looking beyond; therefore, the argument will be based on particular creations that do not align with the environmentalist media's investment in converting emotional urgency into decisive action. Rather than saving the environment [...] some films depict resigned acts of letting go' (Uhlin *ibid.*, 298). As a consequence, such narratives are deterred from addressing questions of survival or how to live on, so that they appear as affective responses to environmental crises.

Thus, the notion of collapse (not just about fictional feature films) explored in one way or another as the collapse of characters may be considered as an inevitable outcome either due to the characters themselves being affected by the collapse of their environments (i.e. collapse trickled-down), or personal collapses by way of human characters affecting one another, or as consequences of the interactions between them.

Furthermore, the collapse has been replicated in character development across many feature films; at times, character failures may also be understood as their very collapses. Accordingly, for the purpose of mediating internal or psychic lives, we may refer to psychological

realism as a method (e.g., in terms of acting) as well as to so-called 'consciousness-films' (which encompass collective efforts on the part of director(s), actors/actresses involved and subsequently, including the editing/cutting processes).

And, we might be amiss not to mention a circularity of collapse, particularly in the context of the Anthropocene, whereby the erosion of Earth's natural environment as a consequence of human depletion of natural resources amounts to an imbalance which, at human scales, is to be perceived as collapse. This way, the notion of collapse could be applied typologically; what's more, viewing the context of Central and Eastern Europe, we may recall a historically recent but deeply entrenched overtone of collapse, which, according to this understanding, marks the end of communist regimes across the region, or the dismantling of the Eastern Bloc as such (in one country after another as domino-effect), coupled with the almost immediate plunging back of the respective societies into ever-so precarious and vulnerable states, at least in pecuniary terms, and therefore, unleashing social (and filmic) imaginaries about the ability to navigate or adapt to increasingly uncertain realities, wherein the former is measured in terms of individual success, as per request in the ubiquitous context of the neoliberal order. To put it differently, collapse in this perspective, has been at once social, economic, structural, and (even) cultural, thereby enabling differential treatments of these aspects (however, I would be cautious concerning estimates on the magnitude of this 'contextual' collapse in view of cultural bouncing back of Eastern European film-makers vs. an ever-lagging behind in terms of economic indicators; such comparisons may run in parallel and often have diverging lines to the extent that might render correlations among them unfathomable across disciplines).

Luzifer

Viewing *Luzifer* as a contemporary piece of new Austrian cinema provides a safe point of entry for analysis, undergirded by the 'feel-bad' label put on contemporary Austrian cinema (see Dassanowsky – Speck 2011; Frey 2016), as well as by way of the links with the transnational

phenomenon of extreme cinema (Horeck – Kendall 2011 and 2012; Kerner – Knapp 2016). Whereas, in the case of *Luzifer*, we may observe the blending of the above, even venture toward what has been labelled ‘art-horror’, in terms of its script, we have a ‘based on true events’ approach, thereby condensing seemingly disparate topics: illegal land grabbing, addiction and religiosity, as well as cognitive and speech impairment. By way of directing, the apparently recent past event⁶ Set in a contemporary context, the film has been favoured by international reception, as evidenced by its few awards at smaller festivals screening fantasy films and by its nominations at larger, generalist film festivals such as Locarno.⁷

However, as tempting as it might be, I am less interested in any ‘satanic affectations’ implied by the title (see e.g. O’Connor 2021), but rather to explore the agential qualities of the main characters in line with the atmosphere of the film, which is conditioned, on its turn, by certain genre-features (cf. Uhlin *ibid.*, 290).⁸ As such, the photography and sound design of the film (which was composed by acclaimed electronic musician and film score composer Tim Hecker) have been noted by anonymous reviews; their role in building up the dramatic conflict is, however, rarely at the forefront, and they appear to contribute to the rhythm and pacing of the film (especially the musical score). The focus of the camera alternates between the actions of the main characters (Johannes and Maria), *and* the motionless high-mountain landscapes

⁶ If critiquing both present times and that of futures created by deliberate design have been common trajectories for many film-makers, another way of time-management by cinema concerns efforts which project past events into an undefined future.

⁷ It is almost a truism that the combination of art-cinema and extreme cinema, or the recognition of the bidirectional flows or in-between possibilities between them appears as a sure recipe for success and recognition, particularly in the obligatory film festival circuit.

⁸ As film theorist Graig Uhlin remarks, „[...]the main characters (or their actions and represented feelings) become part of the films’ atmospheres, which on their turn, are being rooted in the films’ formal construction” (*ibid.*, 290); the notion of ‘*atmosphere*’, as an aesthetic experience, expresses a perceptible mood that encompasses the emotional state of the characters, the ‘feel’ of the work produced by its formal construction, and ultimately the spectatorial response (*ibid.*, 295).

build up the narrative centred on living „off grid” where life is given meaning by adherence to Christian dogma.⁹ Thus, the hazy, feverishly pious lives of the main characters, or their reality could be regarded as completed by elements invested with symbolic meanings and ultimately having fictional nature (as if positioning, with Žižek, reality as symbolic fiction,), which is shaken by the economic/capitalist exploitation once with the intrusion of the ruthless agents of deforestation/land-grabbing into the hitherto untouched alpine landscape.

The ‘interiorisation of dramatic conflict’ (Neale, quoted in Abbott 2009, 465), as key feature of art films, here it is used to great effect: the difficulty in uttering words (in the case of the protagonist Johannes) counterpointed with the continuous, repetitive and articulated monologue of the mother may function as background noise (for viewers uninterested/untouched by the religious undertones), but still direct the viewers’ aural attention, as if the characters’ utterances stand for our own inner voices.

Their belief in the power of spiritual practices to influence the material world according to human intent, however, is a psychological coping mechanism best understood as a form of denial. Therefore, (both) the archaic cross featuring the figure of the Holy Mother carved from wood (an icon of choice which might appear strange as it used instead of a straightforward crucifix but it has the same function since until the events escalate), as well as the final sequences (which feature the mother put and carried on the cross until the son performs the cremation ritual) constitute strong visual imagery for the filmic reality, wherein they appear to provide a magical protection against both the frightening outside world *and* the monstrous depths of the soul, or the unconscious as Jung (1980) termed it in his analysis about the Christian symbols and his notion of the ‘collective unconscious’.¹⁰ Such an effect of containment

⁹ Gravity is lent through the casting of the two main characters: the German art-house film star Franz Rogowski and Susanne Jensen, an Evangelical Lutheran priestess with no professional acting background, play the leading roles.

¹⁰ To be noted here that protective powers were already declared by Jung as hopeful/promising only:

is but predictable to the extent that the cognitive barriers of Johannes and the dogmatic speech/instructions of Maria weren't conflicting, but paralleling and occasionally intersecting one another until then. In a similar vein, to the extent that the religious component exhausts the relationship between the mother and her son, we can fathom here the functionality of dogma by Jung's subsequent insight in connection with the collective unconscious (however, these aspects deviate from the scope of the analysis; therefore, I won't explore them further).¹¹

Beyond religious affinities and sympathies, what may resonate deeply with our contemporary condition and concerns is, I would argue, the narrative's setting. Although nature is a harsh, cyclically changing environment, it appears to slowly give way to human intervention; only the high rocks and caves appear as inviting shelter. In parallel with the deforestation project, the darkness reigns above but inflicts no harm /is left unexploited, as a mark of the aesthetic of the sublime. Nonetheless, as the plot escalates, the darkness of the savage human mind is disclosed as flashbacks of the main character allude to what he (Johannes) is capable of when meeting other humans (the flashbacks present a scene where he enters into a violent conflict with a man and a young girl in the mountains). Those scenes suggest that his avoidance of confronting the antagonists may be motivated by the outcome of his previous encounter with foreigners (but where, according to the flashbacks, he was the perpetrator). However, instead of character motivations, I would emphasise a rather clear demarcation, whereby we may contour an agency of a distressed mind where a survival route is chosen (since he is

'Mankind has never lacked powerful images to lend magical aid against all the uncanny things that live in the depths of the psyche. Always the figures of the unconscious were expressed in protecting and healing images and in this way were expelled from the psyche into cosmic space.' (Jung 1980, 12).

¹¹ 'Dogma takes the place of the collective unconscious by formulating its contents on a grand scale. The Catholic way of life is completely unaware of psychological problems in this sense. Almost the entire life of the collective unconscious has been channelled into the dogmatic archetypal ideas and flows along like a well-controlled stream in the symbolism of creed and ritual. It manifests itself in the inwardness of the Catholic psyche...' (Jung *ibid.*, 12).

being clearly outnumbered), thereby possibly being held accountable for his incapacity to intervene or act for the sake/well-being of his mother.

The power relations articulated through the main plot leave no doubt: a ruthless, corporate-backed mob takes what it wants and is instructed to do so, thereby making the precarious, fragile existence of those who oppose them obvious (e.g., the seriousness of the matter is signalled by the death of their elderly farmer neighbour). Thus, in *Luzifer*, we have tragedies on two levels, as ultimately there is a presentation of human (bodily) sacrifice next to the tragedy of the landscape. Even though the narrative focus is on individual fates (of the main characters) – since that skitourism invading the untouched alpine land is only part of the backstory –, we may remind ourselves that tragedy concerns the question of *agency*, or that actions can have tragic consequences.

The pertinent issue of agency is obvious in the case of both the mother and the son, to the extent that the plot revolves around what to do when intimidated; in the case of Johannes, even when facing the high mountain landscape, which, given its sublime character, strips the beholder/viewer of agential capacities (if only momentarily).

On the one hand, we may observe his agency increasing proportionately with the incapacity of Maria. If we were to define his agency in terms of a goal, it would be to rid himself of the unnameable evil that possessed or held his mother. His agency is logically channelled, amidst the circumstances, toward what spectators assume; although instead of careful treatment, his actions will have ambiguous or cryptic outcomes (not dissimilar to art-house style films). As part of the denouement (which is partial since it offers a discomforting resolution of the initial triggering conflict), Johannes performs an exorcising ritual on her exhausted mother based on his confused understanding, and thus ultimately killing her, so the boundaries between good and evil are blurred /become superimposed.

On the other hand, the narrative goes to great lengths to capture Johannes's everyday life; in doing so, it reflects his relationship with the natural environment, but a particular aspect may be emphasised, namely Johannes's affectionate relationship with a trained hawk called Arthur.

To the extent that that connection doesn't reflect any mythically or reasoned, objectively-scientifically untenable stance, I'd argue for an acknowledgement of the narrative thread within the perspective of the Anthropocene. Therefore, standing apart from the economic reasoning, if you will – as in Descartes,¹² which, to a great extent, is reflected in the intruders' discourse and actions, a different reasoning is aided by nature's animalic agency, here manifested primarily through the hawk¹³ since the scale of nature's agency is hard to fathom save for time-lapse videoshots.

On the one hand, one would be tempted to give in to 'affective attunement' based on recognition of or coming to terms with the limits of existence, which would animate such a relationship:

'Sympathy with animals – not with animals as abstract ideas but the sort of sympathy – that is grounded in the human body's intuitive sense of kinship? A shared, affectively charged sense of creaturely vulnerability, finitude, and mortality? A sense, moreover, of creaturely interdependence that connects us to a world that sustains life and yet, mysteriously, with no apparent good reason, can imperil and destroy it? A sense of the tragic...' (Deyo 2018, 203)

If not exactly reaching the sense of the tragic built upon the collapse of her mother, such a passage clearly envisions an intellectual trajectory implausible for Johannes as his language skills lacking impede higher order thinking which transcend mundane, everyday living even if dogmatically repeated; rather, the affection toward the hawk, as manifested in terms of anxiety, e.g., upon its temporary disappearance is to be correlated with 'the *repression* of anxieties concerning human

¹² As a sidenote, in Descartes's rhetorical formulations error is equated with unreason, which is to say the realm of the body, of affect — or, in the language of Enlightenment philosophical discourse, the passions; this 'feeling' of error in regard to a character's normal, healthy functioning, or the erroneousness of character is particularly relevant in the case of Johannes. We should add, however, that, considering the sexually affected body, as in the series of episodes wherein Johannes interacts with the veterinarian (and subsequently has intercourse with her), there is no 'right' swinging of the pendulum between unreason/error and reason.

¹³ The animalic view, here represented by a few aerial shots from cameras (apparently equipped onto descending and high-flying birds) is clearly contrasted with the 'vulture-perspective' (Györi 2023) of the buzzing army of drones mapping the land, as a technological intrusion into the off-grid lives of the main characters.

animality, though finitude, and mortality' (Deyo *ibid.*, 196, my emphasis) that would eventually be the significant part of what he actually performs on his mother.

Regardless any ontological distinction between humans and animals, the bonding sought by Johannes with the predatory bird points toward an entanglement; if not exactly an affective attunement based on the recognition of self as ecological being (Deyo *ibid.*), - which, in this case, would need an attunement with Christian dogma -, it reflects a kind of narrative tied with the Anthropocene in the sense of suggesting the erasure of the hitherto categorical boundaries between nature and culture, or between animals and humans (cf. Dürbeck 2018). However, while such an approach would posit agency at mythical levels, the hitherto explored perceptual aspects and the circumstances of the main character don't add up to any salvation but further entrench the collapse as unavoidable, lived, and consequential.

Perpetuity

György Pálfi has been listed among the influential film-makers responsible for the renewal of the Hungarian film; accordingly, from the early 2000's, he and his peers differentiated themselves from the foregoing, established generation by making stylistically different films (Gelencsér 2014 and Varga 2011, quoted in Kalmár 2017, xv). In parallel with stylistic diversity, their preoccupation with identity politics has been regarded as a common thread due to the shared experiences of both political regime change and social contexts; what's more, if the argument by Hungarian film scholar Kalmár concluded the exposure of human subject's ambiguous relation to history, power and ideology in films of New Hungarian Cinema (Kalmár 2017, xvi), one can sense the stakes for real in the case of Pálfi (and for most of his peers). Since he declared having been sensitive to power relations spinning (Hungarian) societal contexts, his views not only have opposed the dominant political and ideological climate in his native country, but have been correlated with the fact that he has been repeatedly rejected when submitting requests for

funding his film projects.¹⁴ As a (in)direct consequence, his filmic output covering roughly the last 20 years has been gradually based on even more fluctuating funds from abroad.

The preference for metaphorical forms/expression – as it has been observed to be the case for the initial leading pack of New Hungarian cinema (cf. Kalmár *ibid.*) – might have prevented such unfortunate closures (whereby official Hungarian cultural/film politics have left him marginalised). From his works chronologically stretching from the 20th century to the present times, with an eye peaking into the near-future states, especially the early ones have entered the canon of contemporary Hungarian film.¹⁵ Nevertheless, my aim here is not to review his career but to concentrate on one of his more recent creations. By acknowledging the relay links opened by some of the reviews/critics, I am probing a conceptual positioning at the intersection of the affective, the mediated and the psychological, therewith further exploring the relationship between collapse and agency in film.

In *Perpetuity*, the spectator is (re-)acquainted with Hungarian filmmaking tradition encompassing social documentaries or docu-dramas from the 1970's, as well as the art-house film tradition paradigmatically represented by Béla Tarr, especially in terms of featuring depraved characters and/ romantic masculine anti-heroes in rural provinces, to which we may add semblances with the contextual destruction of post-communist war films set in the Balkans (cf. Imre 2009; Győri 2022, 154; Berényi 2022).¹⁶ *Perpetuity* mounts evidence about the effects of armed

¹⁴ Cf. Gyürke 2022.

¹⁵ I don't have a keen interest in the connections between the above-hinted structural defavouring and the relative unsuccess of his more recent efforts (for what's worth see for e.g. IMDb ratings of his films), and, I don't want to claim, either, the superiority of artistic-creative potentials against material affordances, as both would drive the analysis to foreseeable conclusions.

¹⁶ Here we should note that *Perpetuity* was based on a literary short story written and published in the 1990's, - which Pálfi re-located in the near-future, kept the plot only partially, and subsequently altered the characters -, a period which coincides with the rise of art-house trendsetter Béla Tarr (and, we may wonder about further cross-influences between Sándor Tar, the writer of the literary short story onto which the script of *Perpetuity* was developed and the literary works of László Krasznahorkai, which the aforementioned director Tarr choose to adapt to the screen).

conflicts, or the trauma of war, to which we may add the post-apocalyptic general depravity which is characteristic of SF films. The protagonist, called Ocsenás, is skimping on one leg because of having been wounded when presumably out in action in the field. While he is recovering throughout the film, he is moving in and out of the hospital, or switching between the roles of patient and nurse, as he is helping out other, more disabled patients (either soldiers or surviving victims). Apart from those patients, most of the characters he is interacting with also show or express symptoms of traumatic experiences (in one scene, we even witness a real-time trauma infliction, as the invisible shooter reigning above the settlement takes out the teenage sister of a little girl). Furthermore, the unexpected inserts alluding to the documentary style feature drunkards from the local bar telling their stories of loss, but the two other episodic characters with whom the protagonist enters into close, intensive relations (the nurse Edit and the drunken man Béres from the bar) also appear as being unable to communicate and subsequently, to connect with any person because of, we might suspect, traumatic experiences they had in their pasts. At least, their actions could be reasoned by an accumulation of their several wounds. In chronological order, Edit, the nurse girlfriend cannot bear Ocsenás taking out and wearing a blazer from the wardrobe of her apartment, with the accidental death of her cat marking the final blow onto their emotionally cold relationship, then the apparently 'acte gratuite' of Béres, whereby he shoots the handicapped, cognitively impaired girl whom he kept in his house. The representation of everyday apocalyptic situations (as noted by reviews such as Berényi *ibid.*), whereby civilians become scavengers and thus survive by chance, gains relevance in terms of lived realities and even worldviews, as in postromantic prose dealing with the Anthropocene (cf. Dürbeck, *ibid.*). In our, as in most films, the lived, or phenomenological reality is saved from the mundane, or the ordinary, by way of such intruding, unexpected (extra-ordinary) events.

If, in the case of Pálfi's first international success (*Hukkle*, 2002) the lack of emotional drama, psychological depth and narrative storytelling was compensated by the evocation of sensuous impressions and memory traces (Kalmár, *ibid.*, 61), we may find that here, in the frame of a

narrative set in a near-future slowly moving forward linearly (with no flashbacks whatsoever), we are consciously pulled again onto the terrain of multisensory experience but with an erasure of any memory trace (in terms of the main characters). The war as trauma appears as a self-evident explanation in the case of the main characters, either as indifference (Ocsenás) or as sad, inarticulate cries (as in the case of supporting characters Edit and Béres).

Then, if collapse is to be viewed as affecting psyches in one way or another, there's a valid claim to insist on trauma as scar or wound inflicted by the weight of collapse/or as its consequence. Depending on our approach, there's a significant overlap between these terms, although they appear to resist substitution: questions like is collapse a trauma/traumatic, and, vice versa, is trauma a collapse, may point to different answers, which are, in my view, due to their different scope. Because, even if trauma may be termed social, or collective, it remains glued to the subconscious, the psychological (in that sense to be extended perhaps to living organisms save a return to Freud), whereas collapse is 'plastic' enough to refer to the physical, lifeless, objective material dimensions as well. It is not by chance that collapse is not a psychological term; however, it is adaptable, particularly as a consequence in terms of the human opening up to the environment. Then, should we suggest an entanglement of things, whereby on the one hand, one is, however, supposedly better off carrying a trauma, even if this way a desire to make sense of it remains unarticulated; on the other hand, the interrelated dimensions involved in the collapse event make perception relevant in terms of its multisensory organisation.

If, in *Hukkle* '[the viewers'] perspective on, distance from and mastery over the images, events and evoked sensuous memories are undermined by the aesthetics of sensuous overload and a peculiar, amusing cinematography [...] that works at each and every turn against the ideology of humanism and generally against human mastery over meaning' (Kalmár *ibid.*, 63), the different angles, distances and movements of the camera achieve a similar albeit estranging effect in *Perpetuity* as well.

This way, if in *Huckle* the multisensorial impressions overshadow symbolic and narrative meaning, or the conceptual approach of 'haptic visuality' reveals a confused sense of orientation (in terms of direction, location, causality, narrative) (Kalmár *ibid.*, 64-65), it also suggests that the spectatorial experience prizes the visual dimension only apparently: as if a directorial instruction, we may paraphrase a common understanding of affect theory's basic tenet, namely that the post-apocalyptic scenario is not only visual, it needs to be felt. Or, if focusing on visual acuity or sharpness, one is confined to the position of the sharpshooter who reigns over life and death.

As the senses are mobilised to make up the atmosphere of the film, or its aesthetic experience, the film-phenomenological perspective insists on the great extent to which film-perception overlaps with everyday multisensory perception. The argument of Marks (and/or Deleuze) in favour of a 'haptic visuality'¹⁷ vs. an optical one has been regarded as key to understanding and analysing viewer immersion. However, it may be completed by focusing on the *processual* nature of perception; the latter is understood and operationalised by way of 'crossmodal correspondences' (Spence 2011);¹⁸ accordingly, there needn't be present stimuli for different senses for a mediation of cognitive structures to occur. To put it differently, film-makers can use visual and aural techniques/means only, but the stimuli thereby created can engender different or other sense modalities (but, e.g. if, in everyday real situations spatial proximity may be processed also through the senses of touch and smell, in the case

¹⁷ „By appealing to one sense in order to represent the experience of another, cinema appeals to the integration and commutation of sensory experience within the body. Each audiovisual image meets a rush of other sensory associations. Audiovisual images call up conscious, unconscious and nonsymbolic associations with touch, taste and smell, which themselves are not experienced as separate. Each image is synthesized by a body that does not necessarily divide perceptions into different sense modalities.” (Marks, reviewed in Kalmár *ibid.*, 63).

¹⁸ The notion refers to a compatibility effect between attributes or dimensions of a stimulus (i.e., an object or event) in different sensory modalities (be they redundant or not), that establishes relationships between stimuli at abstract level; what's more, the converse effect of reducing the complexity of sensory perception (cf. Spence *ibid.*) is particularly relevant for the film.

of the cinema-experience there will always be the distance/space between the viewer and the screen).

To the extent that we may insist on the multisensory conditioning of *Perpetuity*, one argument could be provided by way of auteur cinema-tradition, according to which bold film-makers may be distinguished by way of proprietary or trademark, unique ways of making films, which are recognizable in terms of personal styles, or particular aesthetics to be appreciated as unity of elements defining cinematic works (i.e. narrative, image, acting). Therefore, as Pálfi has been repeatedly mentioned/recognised as partaking in at least two cinema-trends (i.e. New Hungarian cinema *and* (global) extreme cinema, see Kalmár, *ibid.*; Kerner and Knapp, *ibid.*), it is fair to assume that he has developed a style of his own.

Therefore, a codependency of multisensory involvement and aesthetic balance should serve as a second argument, whereby an unrushed, slow pacing, a tilting through close-up shots amidst pervasive awareness of the societal breakdown mediate an overbearing weight to one's experience of a world gone havoc (such weight of 'things' is manifested by the main character limping through the most of the film as well as when he repeatedly carries handicapped bodies, or as when they are carrying all kinds of things as basic survival kits). To this we may add that temporal ambiguities are not helping matters, as we may observe a disjoint between a chronological order of time (signalled by the only collapse event featured in the film, i.e. the planecrash and the occasional voices citing the news from the radio) *and* individual lives which are either carried on as if forever (like the ghosts of the local bar including the character of Béres) or lived from minute to minute with the impending life-danger (as is the case of the local civilians exposed to the whims of the sharpshooter). Thus, the protagonist becomes a temporary resident of the backcountry: he leaves it all behind to land/fill in the position of the sharpshooter, a narrative closure that captures the replaceability of the soldiers (a key aspect of war-machinery) as well as suggests, in my opinion, a question to be answered, or a side to be taken by the spectator, and in doing so, it lays bare that any further agential capacity lies with the spectator: the last sequence provides for this effect to function.

Whereas, in the case of *Perpetuity*, the realism of everyday life (in post-apocalyptic context) has been energised by grotesque scenes in stylistic terms - thereby shaking the careful balance of the film on the imagined fiction-reality spectrum -, the indifference identified as impervious to survival is but an interpretative key to the film, to which I adhere (Berényi, *ibid.*). However, whether the film reflects or grasps a contemporary feeling about the end of the world in foresight (a claim which should be supported by the real-world war conflict in Ukraine envisioned by the director before that actually emerged) remains an enigma; thereby we are locked in a sf paradigm of 'contrasting aesthetic of moral decay and individual, historical, and cultural confusion' (Redmond 2009, 135) - which then makes the issue of agency all the more relevant, whereby agency isn't considered as a proprietary feature of the characters but as manifested in and through action (cf. Barad 2007).

Film and Agencies

There are various levels at which we should examine the connections between agency and film: we have to bear in mind concrete film-making practices, therefore implications of authorship, as well as formal-aesthetic perspectives encompassing narrative/narrational agency, and the spectatorial active agency of the viewer.¹⁹ Furthermore, akin and related to the collapse, the notion of 'agency' ought to be considered as cross-cutting across philosophical and social understandings, particularly if we consider the basic tenet that characters in films may be distinguished by their capacities to act, while films, on their turn, may prompt the viewers to pose questions related to autonomy, free will, responsibility etc. In the

¹⁹ In this last regard videogames might be better suited arguably because of the active component assigned to the player, i.e. he or she does have to respond to a post-apocalyptic collapse-situation, which is the inherent mechanics for any such games. However, we should also observe that even if gameplays replicate narrative plots of films, not to mention the immersive and visually impressive art-worlds created in games in the form of landscapes, cityscapes and compelling characters, they are designed so that endings compensate the resilient, enduring and triumphing human game-players.

cases examined here, the specific actions of the main characters (Ocsenás in *Perpetuity* and Johannes in *Luzifer*) give rise to ambiguities so that we may pose questions about the agential layers to make sense thereof, as if questioning their motivations or accountability for moral reasoning within their diegetic universes. Why do they appear and act in those specific ways? Is there a conventional acceptance of one's fate and a related and limited scope of agency involved?²⁰

We have mentioned earlier a particular trend of certain films (of the 'apocalyptical variety'), which stand in opposition in the sense of ceasing the acting powers of the main characters. Here, a useful distinction can be made by referring to an overview of Terence Malick's cinema, which suggests that, instead of the intentionality in terms of the characters' actions, the focus should be on the circumstances of their agency (Davies 2009). Termed as 'embodied' agency of characters (sensory, bodily, cognition as embodied, and the coupling of perception and action, situational/contextual, and, we cannot help but notice, it is Deleuzian at once!) is at least as intriguing as any intentional psychology or motivations behind characters' actions. As the cinematography of Malick is made unique with such reasoning, I also claim that the films reviewed so far have similar effects, albeit stylistically and audiovisually different from Malick's works. Within contexts of collapse, or the micro- and macro-social worlds in both *Luzifer* and *Perpetuity*, the main characters stand out because of their embodied agency; in other words, lacking, or in contradistinction to, traditional channels of agency, they appear neither cognitively reasonable nor socially acceptable.

²⁰ We could also venture to say that, particularly in the case of *Luzifer*, the ethical responsibility for preserving Earth's resources is also thematized, and even given a twist, whereby the unambiguous role of the capitalist expansion is made as explicit as possible; the film even raises the stakes by telling a story of different parties affected by such decisions. Maria, the mother collapses upon the violent and abusive intervention; the viewers are left to wonder whether it was the forced alcohol intake that caused her body unable to recover (as if her addiction reappeared), or the realization that the land was taken away from them for exploitation purposes with nothing in her power to counter the grim ending.

Equally, their resilience appears contextual (cf. Southwick et al., 2014), and, therewith, I suggest that, on the one hand, resilience may be correlated with both protagonists' modes of acting. And, on the other hand the notion of resilience to be applicable in both cases does not reflect "...a stable trajectory of healthy functioning after a highly adverse event; and much less a „conscious effort to move forward in an insightful and integrated positive manner as a result of lessons learned from an adverse experience“; but more likely an abstracted version, „the capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten the viability, function, and development of that system...”(cf. Southwick et al., *ibid.*).

Significantly, if the hybrid or multigenre labelled 'arthouse sf' draws from the art-film, its preference for psychologically complex characters and narrative ambiguity, by emphasising psychological motivation *over* cause-and-effect plot construction (Abott 2009, 464), such a view may be contrasted by putting both psychological motivation and cause-and-effect plot construction under the same umbrella of resilience. Accordingly, we may focus on psychologically complex characters who fit into supporting roles (notwithstanding the persistence of narrative ambiguity, as we have no clear-cut endings in narrative terms, just as beginnings fall into uncertainties). In the case of *Perpetuity*, the soldier-as-machine in war context is but a tale told once again; in my opinion, however, such a view doesn't quite do justice to the film's overall effort: I suggest that through the notion of resilience, seen not as an inherent capacity (of individuals) but adhering to/viewing from the specific literature and research insights, we may find it as a contextual expression, if we sum up the main character's actions. However, at the same time, resilience as a trait is overshadowed by the larger-than-life features of film protagonists. To this, we may add the difficulties/impossibility of directly representing resilience, as well as the very proximity of such meaning to the actions performed (in other words, a sort of 'bare life' is exposed to the detriment of, or as opposed to, interpretations suggesting friendship or love). In a similar vein, it is precisely this unarticulated resilience, or articulated differently than 'environmental narratives' have

accustomed spectators, that may be viewed as an additional reason why neither of these films resonated with large audiences.

To the extent that intentionality should form the backbone of what they ultimately do/in the end (burning the dead mother on the cross in the case of *Luzifer*, and pointing the telescopic sight of his rifle onto protesters marching on the street in the final scene of *Perpetuity*), they appear to be lost in the growing/thickening universes around them, namely religious fanaticism and insensitivity, numbness related to military instructions. In this perspective, both films continue the 'tradition' of extreme cinema in that they seek to impart/elicit emotional responses in the spectators precisely in correlation with the un-emotional(?) behaviour of the main characters. However, we shouldn't dismiss unevenly distributed psychological responses, as there are several situations where the characters display emotional responses. In this sense, it appears that the directorial instructions and decisions that shape the characters' agential qualities have prevailed. In conclusion, collapse is something that has been lived/experienced *in and through* the narratives. I would say that these contemporary films have already built in a weighing of catastrophic events as well as a sense of reconciliation. This means that societal collapse has already been acknowledged, and the environmental catastrophe leaves no choice but to adopt uncomfortable coping mechanisms.

Further paths to be possibly explored should locate these films within the directors' oeuvre, as well as use the above-identified main threads to diversify approaches to the grave, impending issues affecting humanity at planetary scales, including particular interests as manifested by the parallels of devotional charisma/Christian dogma and borderlands near armed conflict zones.

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City, Film Festival and History

The paper focuses on the intertwined relationship between an international feature film festival from Romania (*Transilvania IFF*) and Cluj-Napoca, its hosting city. By taking a spatial turn, the paper explores the applicability of the 'creative aestheticisation' paradigm in conjunction with a notion of attraction considered doubly at work in the festival context. By examining how local cinema heritage has been incorporated for image and identity purposes, it reveals an essential aspect of majority-minority ethnic relations, which hitherto have been encompassed within the diversity discourse only.

Introduction

Photographs of aerial views of historical downtown squares, densely packed with audiences watching moving images on giant screens, clearly depict how film festival events unfold. The built architecture functioning as a backdrop and the crowd gathering appear as the necessary composing elements, whereby film festivals are sensible in spatial terms. Similarly, the temporal sense indicates that, were it not for festival time, crowds wouldn't gather, and the architecturally defined urban spaces would inevitably be reassigned to their mundane, everyday functions.

Film festivals are eventful contexts, and they relate to the places where they take place. For brief periods, film festivals unfold in various settings, mostly urban ones: regular cinema halls, but also historical downtown squares, parks, and other open-air settings. Thus, one can argue that there are symbiotic relationships between films, film festivals and cities.

The fact that film festivals have historically been named after the cities in which they take place suggests the entanglement between film festivals and cities. Scholarship has linked film festivals' origins to efforts to drive tourism (by attracting visitors to resort towns during off-season, see Stringer 2001; Elsaesser 2005, 84; Hagener 2014). However, should this finding echo the role of cinema as entry-level entertainment of mass culture (cf. Elsaesser, *ibid.*, 94-95), we can also observe that film festivals have been defined and distinguished by exclusive, restricted access to their programs.¹

Thus, if the film festival circuit that has developed since can be regarded as an allegorisation of space and power (Stringer 2003/2013, 65), festival-hosting cities can be viewed through a similar lens, namely as part of the phenomenon of global urbanisation (cf. Stringer 2001, 136).² Whereas such cities have their own parallel, arguably more significant, curves of evolution (in everyday terms), it is in the former aspect that we can identify interest in aesthetically pleasing spaces and related experiences, as a means for the cities to keep up with global phenomena and respond accordingly.

Acknowledging, on the one hand, cultural revitalization efforts across modernizing cities also within the Eastern European region, while on the other hand, observing that film festivals build on the functionalities of existing, architecturally designed spaces has been concluded as a dynamic relationship between cities and film festivals, sealed by the 'creative aestheticization' perspective accounting for contemporary aesthetic concerns that encompass cultural planning, design and consumption (Elsaesser 2005, 86; Reckwitz 2017; Vogel 2022, 58-65). It's worth mentioning that, in the case of Cluj, the iconic central square has been redesigned so that it serves as the main venue for openair cultural events (which are considered high culture enough to be held there); in the case of the Transilvania IFF for both the opening and closing ceremonies, as well as for the largest openair nocturnal screenings (with a capacity of seating audiences over 3000 persons per event). With the

¹ Therefore, just as in the case of resorts, we may invoke the notion of leisure, especially as an issue signalling social division among those who can and cannot afford it.

² In this regard, film festivals have been related to trends of urban development (DeValck and Loist 2009, 193).

large inflatable screen being the unmistakable sign of both cinema, and at the same time, that of the contemporary 'aesthetic complex' (cf. DeMolli et al. 2020), we may acknowledge that the activities of film festivals are generally about aesthetic image production, therefore attuned with the agenda of the contemporary city in terms of enriching the potential for semiotic and sensuous experience 'in the here and now' (Reckwitz *ibid.*, 325).

Among the various festivals held annually in Cluj, film festivals are of central importance. In particular, the Transilvania IFF has stood out since its first edition due to its international scale. It is also reasonable to conclude that the festival has no competitor at the national level. The case of Transilvania IFF is particular in that it wasn't an initiative of authorities but rather a project initiated by Romanian film professionals to establish an international film festival in the country.³

With multiple 'agencies' involved, we may turn to aspects of how cities and film festivals affect each other. Since film festival studies have repeatedly called for examining how film festivals reflect broader sociocultural relationships in relation to cinema (de Valck and Loist 2009; Hagener 2014; Stevens 2018), there is a hint that the sociocultural contexts in which film festivals take place can be viewed in parallel with cinematic concerns.

Context, History and Aesthetics in the Present

Both the Transilvania IFF and the city of Cluj are amenable to being viewed in dual relationships of centre and periphery, yet largely independent of, or indifferent to, each other. And, depending on both the scale of measurement and the elements measured, both can be regarded as either centres or peripheries.⁴ For once, the core of such arguments could be seen as reflecting transdisciplinary concerns, to the extent that

³ Local cultural policy has incorporated the festival ever since; insofar as we can suggest the feeding of art cinema discourse and the paradigm of creative aestheticization into one another, such connection may be supported by further evidence, such as the 'UNESCO city of film' title conferred to the city, where the project program has been included the film experts of the festival.

⁴ About the application of world-systems theory to the film festival network, see Vallejo 2020.

the underlying economic, historical, political, and social conditions are all relevant.⁵ Among these, of closer interest to us here is cinema-related cultural production and consumption. Accordingly, Cluj may be one of the most populous towns in Romania, yet, given its approximately one-quarter the size of Bucharest, it offers a comparable number of cultural programs (at least for the Romanian majority population). At the same time, regional differences associated with relative spatial distance can be correlated with Cluj's status as a regional centre in the domains of education and technology. Although the aforementioned aspects obviously imply (future) film-making and developing film culture, it may still be unable to compete with the lasting effects of historically centralised production (i.e. concentrated in and around the capital city). The festival organisers, as well as the festival itself, play mediating roles between the Romanian (historically) centralised national film industry and the attractive region.

From the perspective of the fragmented, even more agglomerated Romanian capital, traditionally regarded as closer to the southeastern part of the European continent, namely the Balkans, the architectural landscape of Cluj's downtown area appears different. Although it has also become agglomerated and architecturally eclectic, its compact, centrally developed areas recall the late Austro-Hungarian Empire, when Cluj held a similar position to Budapest, the largest Hungarian city that would become the capital of Hungary (Boatcă and Parvulescu 2022, 40).⁶ Indebted to historical circumstances, the architecturally palpable differences are even more visible nowadays as spheres of influence have

⁵ The terms 'center' and 'periphery' help define the post-communist transformation history of the Eastern European region as well; accordingly, if, by the 2010's Romania would rise to be a 'new' periphery, as theorized by economists (Bohle and Greskovits 2012), this may pretty much reflect the market conditions applicable to the creative sectors/film industries as well. Thus, it allows us to grasp entrepreneurial endeavours such as organising film festivals in similar terms.

⁶ It is also worth mentioning the 'creolization paradigm' proposed by Boatcă and Parvulescu (2022) for revising the cultural history and contemporary discrepancies of the Transylvanian region. However, in my view, the cited work doesn't explicitly address the topic under scrutiny here but rather seeks a reappraisal of the cultural politics that affected the different nationalities living within the region in the past centuries.

changed. As always, the power relations within the first half of the 20th century reflected the ethnic distribution of the population so that Hungarians constituted the absolute majority in Cluj until Romanian Communist state policies fully reversed it. Shifting our focus to the present, the Hungarian aristocratic and bourgeois imprint has remained an architectural relic and thus has been subject to conservation efforts by various interested parties. The interest for the past is relevant in the frame of the 'creative city paradigm' which has been embraced at full-speed in Cluj as well, so that commonly held and promoted beliefs align Cluj with the 'creative' contemporary city ideal, as 'a buzz city, a place to be, whether to live in or visit (...) a culturally rich city that constitutes attraction in conjunction with its newly aestheticized central districts' (Reckwitz *ibid.*, 331).

The superimposition of aesthetic experiences involving urban milieux and film festival contexts has been examined by a case study, suggesting viewing it in terms of hybridisation (DeMolli et al. 2020). On the one hand, the observation about audiences navigating festival spaces and locals relating to film festival events is explanatory in general terms about the spatial implications of the film festivals in connection with urban spaces (De Molli et al., *ibid.*). On the other hand, despite shared generic features or the repetitive formula according to which film festival spaces are (re-)created in urban environments, we can certainly argue for experiential differences, not least because of details related to festival programs.

We should observe that film festival programming paints the picture of cinema in the manner of 'pastiche', so that the former may be considered a mix of disparate signs involving various times and spaces, which appear as aesthetic novelties for the consuming audiences (cf. Reckwitz *ibid.*, 329, 373; Vogel *ibid.*, 62, 67). In this sense, establishing several thematic sections to capture global cinema across space and time reflects both sustained curatorial or programming efforts and, at the same time, it appears as a well-rehearsed formula.⁷ Thus including the aesthetic reappropriation of past cultural legacies.

⁷ Most notably, having recognised the similar working conditions amongst the neighbouring film industries, the festival organisers established, in the year after the

On the one hand, this appears similar to claiming that film festivals market global similarity and conceptual difference, often using local attractions to compete in the contemporary global space economy..." (Stringer 2001, 138 quoted in DeValck and Loist 2009, 193; Stringer 2003/2013, 65). Here, we may acknowledge programming practices as reflecting 'conceptual differences' attributed to film festivals. At the same time, film premieres as festival highlights, as well as regionally exclusive projections, including the attendance of film industry professionals and/or public appearances by filmmakers, serve as attractions for local audiences.

Whereas the local can also be a geographically delimited and a culturally constructed space, thus fixed while autonomous, the argument is that the notion of attraction isn't just the aesthetic novelty constituted by a particular piece of cinema, but the festival-event may be viewed as attraction itself. At the same time, 'local' attractions (such as film-making projects or films completed by local filmmakers) are to be understood as having a minor role, particularly next to a global similarity, here understood as a positive feature; we can think of art cinema discourse that globally validates films, but which is efficient depending on the similarities of reception patterns across cultures. We may even trace this view back to the early cinema, as attraction engendered by distant sights, objects, and/or people (cf. cinema historian Tom Gunning's notion; Buckland 2014).

Romanian Film days section, a thematic section called the 'Hungarian day' to showcase both emerging and established Hungarian filmmakers, or new and restored Hungarian movies. This historical proximity, or the 'forced togetherness' of East Central European countries, has been relevant in terms of intense coproductions also during the pre-1989 period (Iordanova 2003, 13, 40), a practice revitalised in our context with the assistance of and mediation by the ethnically Hungarian professionals originating from the Transylvanian region.

Observing the festival participation of ethnically mixed audiences, including the Hungarian minority, aligns with the cultural diversity - perhaps made even more relevant or explicit by the festival's intermittent focus on the Roma/Gypsy minority. Ultimately, we may suggest that such initiatives/subprograms depend on partnerships and/or qualitative and quantitative criteria, i.e. sufficient number of thematically oriented films considered good enough to be included in the festival program.

Updating the notion of attraction is, of course, claimed by new regimes of cinema that entail entirely different spectatorial disciplines and engage viewers in entirely different social experiences (Williams 2000, quoted in Buckland *ibid.*, 48). This is, unsurprisingly, congruent with contemporary presentation of early cinema pieces; in other words, the attraction attributed to early cinema is experienced today in the context of new cinema regimes, which also incorporates desires and actions to recreate ancient cinema, like, for example, screening restored films and/or fragments of early cinema completed with live musical scores.

By examining the different aspects of the local featured in films, we may inquire into the extent to which festival-hosting cities can remain distinct in the contemporary film festival context, and, in parallel, how certain films and policies contribute to making film festival contexts particular.⁸

Cinema as Heritage

In our case, the local space, or the city of Cluj, has been relevant first because of its present-day cinema-going potential; later, its cinema-related past has also been discovered and arguably may be considered as contributing to the cultural diversity, even though the former concerned the ethnically less diverse cultural life of the old town from the silent film era. In parallel, cinema history has also been on the agenda of the film festival by including classic films and honouring aged film-makers.

In this regard, it is also worth detailing that the film festival also incorporated the film-making past of the city, or the flourishing silent film-making efforts which had characterised the 1910's, the period when Cluj and much of the Transylvanian region had belonged to the Austro-

⁸ Of course, if applied to my case study, strict film history periodisations might challenge the use of attraction, particularly because the relevant films were made in the period of 'narrative cinema', i.e. in the course of the decade after the early cinema characterised by Gunning as 'cinema of attraction'. However, as argued above, my perspective is that of the film festival as a sort of attraction, possibly enhanced with a program which presents various kinds of attractions, even some with historical value.

Hungarian Empire, the Eastern part of which was dominated by Hungarians. In this context, the fact that the local silent film-pioneer and ethnic Hungarian Jenő Janovics - esteemed now by the Romanian festival organisers - was the theatre director of the Hungarian theatre company, which initially had used the theatre hall of the Romanian National Theatre, now the venue of the awarding ceremony of the festival, appears, at first glance, as an untraced backstory.

That those early years of silent film-making within the cinema-factory of Janovics (which was called Transylvania for a brief period and involved later Hollywood film-makers Michael Curtiz and Alexander Korda, both ethnic Hungarians originally) would soon enrich the festival image could be viewed along the line of encouraging forms of urban movie spectatorship that promote place and community-bound affiliations (Stringer 2001, 141) - in our case, by making the majority Romanian population acquainted with the particular cinematic history of the town (it is tacitly assumed that the Hungarian minority has been familiarized with the legacy of Janovics).⁹

As of today, the Transylvania IFF has a permanent residence in a large single storey, renovated old building known as 'Casa TIFF' (TIFF House), which functions as a consumption hub, with its basement hosting a self-titled 'museum of cinematography' that displays a collection of bygone film equipment (cameras, props and shooting-related artefacts) and it is accompanied by audiovisual narration by a local historian in Romanian language about the film-making past related to the city. The performance of closing the gap between roughly a hundred years of history and the contemporary context is and will be indebted to film historians and

⁹ As opposed to the Romanian-English bilingualism of the festival, the related event series have been advertised only in Romanian language; it is also worth mentioning that the Romanian official naming of the festival might settle the balance of past conflicts between the majority and minority, while possibly communicating negligence in the light of the international appeal desired and targeted from the beginning; I have treated this aspect elsewhere: see Virginás 2017. That film festivals reflect local power configurations means adapting to contemporary city identities as promoted by city officials, in our case, to discourses emphasising multiculturalism and diversity (cf. Stringer 2001, 135; Stringer 2003/2013, 65).

restoration specialists; however, accuracy of archival work should guide the efforts of mediating cinematic heritage so that a more precise or detailed account is needed at least name those personalities who shaped it, and who had started their international careers in Cluj.¹⁰

Identity matters notwithstanding, in our case, the cultural life created and maintained in Cluj by the abovementioned Janovics, as it has been mediated by, first and foremost, theatre- and cinema historians – irrespective whether they are Hungarians or Romanians, does have certain particularities which, I am suggesting, are instructive when attempting to grasp the intertwining activities of the festival, city and other entities. For example, regarding archival and restorative work, it mentions identities assumed under historical conditions but remains untranslated.¹¹ In this regard, we should add that the minority Hungarians voiced fears that Romanians were reappropriating Hungarian cultural heritage through translation, e.g., by omitting Hungarian-ness or not applying the Hungarian label wherever possible.¹²

¹⁰ Personal visit to the museum on August 21, 2024. For lack of any online data or information about the origins and the collections of the museum it is advised to visit its premises.

¹¹ See the works by Zágoni – Ferenczi 2021 and Kollarik – Zágoni 2022. We should add that there have been 2 Hungarian historical monographs written in the period stretching from the 1960's to 1980, and recent interest within the publishing context of the 21st century has been reflected by a few glossier, educational-informative publications dedicated to the subject (either bilingual or trilingual editions). Academic research output has been unleashed, for e.g., the Film and Theatre Faculty of the reigning Babeş-Bolyai University has not only its research centre named after Janovics but has pursued activities in this regard, independently of the film festival project. See: <https://en.teatrufilm.ubbcluj.ro/jeno-janovics-si-povestile-sale-clujene/>, as well as anniversary/commemorating conference (in Hungarian): <https://hu.teatrufilm.ubbcluj.ro/janovics-jeno-150-emlekkonferencia/>

¹² See the Romanian translation of one of the aforementioned monographs published with support from the festival: <https://www.editura-argonaut.ro/carti/istoria-filmului-mut-si-cinematografelor-din-transilvania-banat-1896-1945>

Related to the abovementioned publication, there has been also an exhibition concerning Janovics and cinema during the 2019 edition of the festival. For an offended Hungarian review about the former event see an article published in a well-regarded Hungarian cultural portal here: <https://foter.ro/kulonvelemen/hogyan-csinaljunk-btudomanyosan-romant-egy-hires-magyar-filmrendezobol>

So while there's evidence to the claim of unrecognition, any resistance to such practices might be put in terms of Hungarians clinging to a distinct history of their own. At the same time, Romanians are interested either in any common roots or ground, or, as suggested at the beginning of the subchapter, the aesthetic conversion of the past. To this date, while the historical relevance of the cinema-related contribution of Jenő Janovics is undisputed (whereas his other passionate activity, namely theatre, has been of interest understandably for Hungarians because of language barriers), any conflicts could be distilled along the question of who is entitled to his legacy? In these circumstances, the national aspect remains relevant.

Generally, art cinema, including festival-awarded works, has been regarded as addressing sensitive issues such as ethnicity and nationalism; this is also true of Romanian films selected at the Transilvania IFF. Each year, a couple of Romanian films become strong contenders and play to sold-out audiences in one of the larger venues, where the shared national identities of the filmmakers and the majoritarian audience contribute to a collective standing ovation and pride. Still, these dynamics are usually not emphasised discursively.¹³ To my knowledge, the festival has tapped only once into national matters, when, instead of screening the preprogrammed film, a decisive game of the Romanian national football team was broadcast on the main square (during the 2024 edition).

We would be remiss not to mention the anchoring of city branding, identity component and contemporary media condition through the Transilvania IFF. (Salcudean 2017); however, the cited work doesn't take an exhaustive approach concerning the urban context and views targeted cultural policies (such as Transilvania IFF) only in terms of their effect on the majoritarian Romanian identities. In parallel, we can witness the acknowledgement of other national identities in our context. Still, which concern not so much the place but those of guests and programs/films of the Hungarian day, As the increasing 'internationalisation' in terms of participation concerns language use, English has become the new lingua

¹³ I have explored this aspect in a different study (under revision, Fall 2025).

franca prevailing in 'live communication contexts', thus we can suggest the diversity discourse assumed by the festival as being subject(ed) to adapting to contemporary conditions.

Conclusions

Both the paradigm of creative aestheticisation and the diversity discourse have been serving as the main venues for interpreting and valorising the various understandings of the local, including the cinematic or film heritage within the examined context. Turning to heritage within the context of the Romanian film festival has led us to the uneasy and often tacitly assumed but unarticulated ethnic relations; their subsumption under an emphasis on the aesthetics of cinema has compelled us to consider ways in which it is completed by diversity discourse. Following up on the thread of 'creative aestheticisation' to its conclusion, while it serves as a functional paradigm for defining the urban milieu, including the film festival event, it reveals its limits when applied to a multi-ethnic context, particularly as local sensibilities may permeate it.

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Hungarian Films at Film Festivals in Romania

By focusing on the presence and participation of Hungarian films at contemporary film festivals in Romania, the study seeks to shed light on the institutionalised reception framework offered by film festivals. Rather than providing a formal, generic, or film-centred analysis, it aims to bring to the surface the shifting aspects of social significance, focusing, on the one hand, on the practices of particular festivals, and, on the other hand, considering the larger circumstances that affect the festival appearances or promotion of Hungarian films.

The presence of Hungarian films at Romanian film festivals can primarily be interpreted through the lenses of identity politics and cultural diversity. On a closer look, both can be revisited in terms of their potential for social critique, insofar as such practice concerns not just filmmakers and their works, but it can be formulated as a legitimate inquiry toward film festivals (cf. Vogel 2022). This is even more so by considering, in conjunction with film festival programs, that ‘pastiche’-like practices dominate community-based festival experiences.¹

The Film Festival Phenomenon and Film Festivals in Romania

First, certain general considerations regarding the relationship between films and film festivals must be outlined. Accordingly, the type of cultural exhibition established by film festivals is particular, thanks to

¹ The study has been developed on the basis of a presentation held at a 2024 conference at the University of Pécs, Hungary.

the values conferred by potential awards that define the visibility and reputation of films (see de Valck 2007; Harbord 2009; Vogel, *ibid.*). In this sense, film festivals become essential outlets for any film product, irrespective of its country of origin, and thus equally relevant for Hungarian films. At the same time, the extent to which film festivals shape cinematic media consumption trends (Vogel, *ibid.*, 55; Vogel and Shipman 2023) can be better understood by examining the significant ways in which the festival phenomenon remains a key feature of contemporary cinema.

Here, we recall the observation that film perception is shaped by the cinematic apparatus (Krauss 2000), indicating that the functional logic of the cinematic space has not fundamentally changed. If cinematic perception is grounded in immersion and cinema itself functions as an immersive apparatus, its relevance persists in the contemporary context, particularly when examining historical perspectives on experiential environments. The qualitative transformations of contemporary media experiences, brought about by the modes of mediation within environments labelled immersive, together with the quantitative stimulation of (film and media) consumption, enable viewing cinema also in terms of attention management. Specifically, film festivals underscore the enduring relevance of selection, expert knowledge, and professional competence. They are taken to function as significant sites of film consumption, where the immersive aspect is completed by affective-aesthetic encounters between artists and audiences (Vogel, *ibid.*). Thus, in parallel with the emphasis on diversity in terms of cinema productions, we may observe the communal dimension of identity as grounded not merely in the media attraction posed by films, but in a(ny) festival's capacity to organise and mobilise audiences as collectives (notwithstanding the otherwise individual aesthetic acts of reception).

My initial assumption was that the festival reception of Hungarian films could be significant for the film culture of the Hungarian minority in Romania. The point of departure for examining the festival presence of Hungarian films was the database of the Hungarian National Film Institute, from which I identified two film festivals in Romania that have

consistently screened Hungarian films for the past twenty years or so. These are *Filmtettfeszt –Transylvanian Hungarian Film Festival –* and *Transilvania International Film Festival (Transilvania IFF)*.

The Transilvania IFF was initially a week-long event series and later extended to ten days, and the dedicated Hungarian thematic section was first included in the 2006 edition.² In contrast, the *Filmtettfeszt* is smaller in scale and shorter in duration. It was organised first in 2001 (as an event celebrating their printed cinema journal with public screenings), and has been evolving as a showcase exclusively for new Hungarian films and restored classics; thus, we should observe considerable overlaps between the film selections of the two festivals.³

Within the cultural diversity framework, if the formerly entrenched majority–minority dichotomy seems, to some extent, to be reconfigured or even dissolvable, such view would be characteristic primarily for the Transilvania IFF; its international reach has been encompassing alterity

² Concerning the Transilvania IFF, it is worth noting that, from the very beginning, the organisers applied the film festival model in a textbook fashion: in the festival's early years, particular emphasis was placed on 'extreme cinema' (a trend whose popularity also corresponds to the period of the festival's first editions), as well as on framing the festival's identity through its association with the new Romanian cinema, which likewise attracted increased attention in those years (Sălcudean 2017, Virginás 2017). According to its classification/accreditation received from the International Federation of Film Producers Associations (FIAPF), Transilvania IFF operates as a competitive festival showcasing first and second feature films (see also subchapters on Romanian cinema and the review about the festival).

³ It is worth noting that *Filmtett* Association is also involved in creating the Hungarian Day program at Transilvania IFF.

We should also mention that both operate as travelling film festivals: while its main events take place in Cluj-Napoca, the largest town within the multiethnic Transylvanian region of Romania, *Filmtettfeszt* organises simultaneous screenings also in other localities within the region (where the proportion of the Hungarian population is significant). Furthermore, *Filmtettfeszt*, which offers screenings with zero-ticket pricing, pursues an inclusive audience policy, including the Romanian subtitling of films. For its part, the *Transilvania IFF* continues to screen films throughout the year, not only in major Romanian towns (ten festival locations were listed on the website as of 2024), but also in the neighbouring Republic of Moldova, which is home to a large Romanian community. In this respect, the festival is aligned with the country's foreign cultural policy objectives.

in terms of the differing – or, at times, convergent – features of the individual film products themselves, and much less its audiences. Still, the festival's focus on contemporary film production in all its global diversity likewise attracts, if not an equally diverse, then at least an open audience, so that Hungarian films may reach audiences whose mother tongue and/or culture differ from Hungarian. While not diminishing the role it has played in shaping the region's cinema cultures, and in addition to the now self-evident cultural recognition (at least at the audience level) of the Hungarian minority living alongside the Romanian majority, we may also point to interests arising from the professional backgrounds of the festival's organisers. These involve film production, whereby the attention to the neighbouring Hungarian film industry can be viewed in the context of interdependence among the countries from the Central and Eastern European region (Iordanova 2003, 43–45).⁴

Furthermore, from among the characteristics of film industries within these countries labelled 'small cinemas' (see Parvulescu and Hanzlik 2022; Virginás 2021), the dependence on state-controlled film funding has always been the most significant aspect. In the case of Hungary (as well), while the aforementioned mechanism underwent several rounds of restructuring in the last two decades, it has remained decisive for domestic film outputs, particularly in the sense that it has constituted a dividing line between state-funded and independent filmmaking, which has had no support whatsoever on the part of the culture-funding mechanism of the state (cf. Konkol 2022).⁵ In this regard, we may claim that, in the case of both Transilvania IFF and Filmtettfeszt, the majority of the films included have been supported by the National Film Institute of Hungary, which warrants, beyond its factuality, inquiring into Hungarian film policies. The making of most Hungarian films depends on domestic production-related conditions, and subsequent international festival presences or participations, while

⁴ As such, the organisers of both festivals also have other film-related activities: production, direction and distribution in the case of Transilvania IFF, and online film journal and distribution in the case of Filmtett (see also subchapter on Romanian cinema).

⁵ For a more detailed and recent overview of Hungarian film policies, see Győri 2025.

subject to curatorial selections and individual routes, still appear as contrived by cultural policies, particularly in cases of bulk programming.

Film festivals and co-productions as filters of quality

We can suggest, however, that foregrounding the quality aspect – on which films are ultimately evaluated – has little to do with the above division. Particularly, we may observe the role of film festivals as entities interlinked in the ‘value chain of cinema’ (Vogel *ibid.*, 182) to select, nominate and/or award films. The intricacies of quality and value are well-known and are worth mentioning insofar as they are reflected by data. Generally, if the human resources invested in the making of a film – primarily those responsible for overall production, the technical crew engaged in shooting and post-production, as well as the actors involved – already serve as indicators of its anticipated quality (Schneider 2018, cited in Konkol 2022, 221), such anticipatory assessments are significant insofar as they frequently determine the range of festivals to which filmmakers may gain access.⁶ Subsequently, the grouping of filmmakers according to prestige and reputation can clearly influence their future projects. In this context, co-production practices may be seen not only as a characteristic feature of global art cinema but also as correlated with quality, as reflected in a higher rate of festival awards.

Therefore, we may observe that the distinction between independent and state-funded productions becomes less meaningful in many film festival contexts. Furthermore, national film funds tend to participate in coproductions for art-related reasons, and independent filmmaking projects can benefit from the film funds of (a) different (nation-)state(s). Similarly, for film-makers, operating outside state funding often means acting within the film festival circuit. In all fairness, however, debut film-makers are disadvantaged in accessing the means to create their films, an aspect which film festivals, for their part, working within the logic of the art-cinema discourse, attempt to circumvent by emphasising the

⁶ Similarly, film festivals are also competing for certain films to screen, particularly premieres (cf. Vogel *ibid.*).

discovery of new talent and works that have not yet acquired prestige. We should also note that, for most debuts, selection at a film festival is already considered a sign of quality.⁷

In our case, according to the Hungarian National Film Institute's online database, between 2020 and 2024, 28 of 36 Hungarian films participated in international film festivals. As previously noted, co-productions are more likely to enter the festival circuit; accordingly, 10 of 11 co-produced films (approximately 91%) have been screened at various festivals. Among non-co-productions, 18 out of 25 films (72%) were selected for festivals. We can reasonably assume that most Hungarian films made within those years have been shown at the Romanian film festivals.⁸

Understandably, the Institute has no data about independent films. Thus, when comparing it with the Transilvania IFF archive, we have found more Hungarian films included in the programme – 44 in total, averaging around 10 per edition, with a slight increase after the Covid pause. Indeed, in 2024, according to sources, the number of independent films was higher than that of films completed with state funding.⁹ Then, as evidence for Transilvania IFF as a benchmark for assessing works emerging from the isomorphic conditions of contemporary Hungarian cinema, we should mention that, after a prolonged period without major distinctions for Hungarian films, the Romanian festival awarded *Kix*, an independent Hungarian documentary (directed by Bálint Révész, 2024).

⁷ Selections for a film festival's competition section constitute a form of qualitative credit – an advance of prestige – that films may either validate or forfeit over the course of their 'festival runs'. While general audience reception at festivals matters, it is the rankings established by the festival juries that confer prestige to films (cf. DeValck *ibid.*, Vogel *ibid.*).

⁸ Film festival literature shows that feature films are more prominently represented at festivals, as they receive a proportionally greater share of funding (see Vogel *ibid.*). While I was aware that aligning with this insight would constitute a limitation of the study – particularly since documentary films have been increasingly present also at festivals specialising in feature films, though typically in separate sections – it was nevertheless clear that feature films would make up the largest segment of the corpus.

⁹ See: <https://filmtett.ro/hirek/jo-eve-volt-a-magyar-fuggetlenfilmnek>

Social Critique and Hungarian Cinema

Since, in the case of Transilvania IFF, debuts and early-career filmmakers can enter the competition section, for Hungarian awards, it is instructive to look back to the first decade of the festival. Those years marked the emergence of New Hungarian cinema, whose representatives, such as György Pálfi, Szabolcs Hajdu and Kornél Mundruczó, have become marginalised by Hungarian film policy (in terms of funding). Still, we may observe that both Filmtettfesztt and Transilvania IFF have been presenting the works of the aforementioned in a regular manner (even if, as of 2025, not yet offering selections from their oeuvre). In this sense, both festivals express solidarity with the filmmakers who have been excluded by the current Hungarian film policy. In this way, both film festivals could be regarded as sites enabling artistic critique; more precisely, any form of critique is effectively delegated to the filmmakers and to their works. If, in the case of the aforementioned Hungarian filmmakers, their disconnection from state film funding correlates with their systemic critique, then the stakes, concrete points, and possibilities of solidarity naturally come into question – for instance, the potential redirection of film-financing resources mediated by international film festivals.

We need to add that the Hungarian day at Transilvania IFF was established and remained significant, according to one of the festival founders, at a time when the restructuring of the Hungarian Motion Picture Public Foundation put film professionals in a precarious situation. In other words, the Transilvania IFF expressed solidarity with Hungarian filmmakers – something that, in a sense, has remained in place ever since. As film-making is an ongoing or periodical preoccupation for many, we can also refer to the everyday concerns of professionals working within the film industry; sometimes explicitly articulated, for instance, in terms of support provided to struggling yet artistically promising film projects, a practice that appears to ease Hungarian–Romanian collaborations, at least in the artistic-filmmaking field. Such was the more recent case of Hungarian filmmaker Ágnes Kocsis, whose

sci-fi feature *Éden* (*Eden*) was completed in 2020 with support from the production company of the Transilvania IFF organisers; the film premiered the same year at the festival. Thus, we can say that, within the international framework of Transilvania IFF, discourses concerning the role of films and the intentions of filmmakers do indeed surface, most visibly in public talks and Q&A sessions.

However, these events inevitably reach a narrower audience than the mass screenings themselves, which tend to dominate the event's public profile and reinforce an event structure that equally relies on spectacle. This imbalance is significant because it underscores that festival attendance and communal viewing practices are shaped by programming policies. At the same time, certain issues may go unnoticed, even obscured by the dense program, and also by the ephemerality that characterises festival phenomena in general.¹⁰ Although several thematic sections recur annually – including the Hungarian Day, with its midweek premieres and dedicated coverage in the daily festival journal *Aperitiff* – public attention is largely steered by the festival's international orientation, which foregrounds variety. Within this context, the clearly delineated pattern of roles – particularly the significance of audiences – remains relevant primarily in the service of viewership metrics.

Therefore, to emphasise our critical view, we should look past individual achievements or cases. In this regard, current research offers a critique of film festival studies, arguing that they foreground artistic discourse at the expense of social critique, which could be practised in varied ways:

“festival scholarship overwhelmingly features elements of the artistic critique while suppressing simultaneously antimodernist social critique as well as passing by core social critique of inequality and lack of solidarity” (Vogel, *ibid.*, 57).

Although the author's critique concerns the *focus* of film festival research rather than the festivals themselves – provided that the former

¹⁰ To my knowledge, within the contexts examined here, detailed or extended debates have not taken place, nor have any formal statements been issued to address any shortcomings of the Hungarian cinema industry in terms of production conditions.

remains faithful to its object of study – its implications are relevant here. The underlying issue is that film festivals (as the objects of film festival research) tend to place primary emphasis on film as an art form, even if they do not exclude socially engaged filmmaking (with a critical edge). In this regard, by analysing independent Hungarian cinema, it has been argued that even successful productions, that is, those achieving festival recognition and operating outside the state film-funding system, remain at the levels of representation and response, rather than engaging in substantive social critique that should draw its fuel from, e.g., independent community film-making (Konkol 2022, 242).¹¹

Therefore, one should be pushing further the accepted view of film festival organisers and curators as having the skillset of an ‘arranger’ that is broader than that of the ‘performer’, as it ought to produce a ‘spatial, atmospheric, and intellectual pattern’ which should ‘spill over’ into the performance’s environment (cf. Vogel, *ibid.*, 74). The argument concerns the embeddedness of international film festivals into the aesthetic economy paradigm, whereby their role has been cemented as ‘experience-makers of observable interventionist capability in art and artistry, as well as art circulation: using the accessible event structure to develop curatorial power and operating, to heighten and arrange art works, within a mode of attention dispersal’ (Vogel, *ibid.*, 75). Accordingly, the curatorial layout’s intellectual patterning is communicated through the now-routine interview format, in which artistic directors and festival managers articulate the festival’s content, current emphases, and principal points of interest.

For this reason, not only is festival selection being regarded as *pastiche*, but one may observe its functioning as a kind of desire-machine

¹¹ On this basis, the filmmaking processes described in detail by the author – and experienced personally – anticipate a particular form of collective practice that contains, in embryonic form, the potential for activities with a broader social reach (although it may equally be the case that the retreat from such wider engagements into the safety of the domestic sphere, and the irresolvable gap between artist and audience, point in the opposite direction, as suggested by the example of the director Szabolcs Hajdu).

that echoes the films' own configurations of desire.¹² The contemporaneity of the notion of pastiche¹³ is given by the social emergence concerning notions of diversity and cultural pluralism: just as pastiche is the major expressive format of creativity, so is postmodernity's 'perpetual celebration of difference' (Vogel, *ibid.*, 67-68). Therefore, with the logic of surprise and the ideal of performativity as permeating festival phenomena, while possibly grounded in group characteristics as a foundation for a social critique (Vogel *ibid.*), the lack of the latter aspect could be countered by dealing with the artistic possibilities of the Hungarian minority, or the situation of 'minority' of film-makers in Hungary.

The substantive, essential aspects of the communal dimension can be understood through the recognition of inequalities – operating as values and as sources of mobilisation within contemporary social critique – and through the fostering of solidarity. On the one hand, the limits of why film festivals may not fulfil (such) radical desires might have to do with festival selection reflecting the effect of pastiche in contemporary terms. On the other hand, one can argue that the imperatives of inequality and solidarity are intelligible beyond the frameworks of thematic (i.e., genre- or cause-oriented) film festivals; examples abound, from subjects appearing in documentaries to constrained artists, and even cases where they contradict one another.

In this respect, both festivals examined here may be subject to criticism. While Transilvania IFF indeed brought both novelty and surprise, in the case of the Hungarian minority, we may infer aesthetic

¹² Given the Hungarian focus, see e.g. the recent films of the aforementioned of Szabolcs Hajdu (*Kálmán-nap – Kalman's day*, 2023, or *Egy százalék indián – Vulture's Wake*, 2024), which, while conceived as parts of a cinematic trilogy on contemporary marital and couple relationships, arguably still operate as pastiches, by recycling earlier images, moods, and creating thematic variations in such ways that sought-after surprises or the sense of novelty can increasingly take place at micro-levels – within individual scenes rather than across the entirety of one film or the trilogy.

¹³ See pastiche as being initially the answer to the avant-gardists 'rhetoric of forgetting, as in pastiche, the past is collated from a vast collection of images – all styles of the past (e.g., black and white images) being potentially 'open to allusion' (Vogel *ibid.*, 67).

novelty and a sense of recognition equally. In the case of Hungarian Day, one can identify, even if at a minimum, an artistic, creator-centred approach, rather than the presence of a clearly defined group which, based on its own characteristics, would articulate social critique. Conversely, concerning Filmtettfeszt, we can obviously see the group background, as well as the enablement of aesthetic encounters.

In the Transylvanian context, the symbolic significance of the local Hungarian minority has been explored by Hungarian film industry representatives. Whereas such exhibition/screening events have been organised independently of both festivals, we can certainly view the relationship between cultural policy and film festivals as having both historical and contemporary significance.¹⁴ If funding should attest to the ongoing importance of cultural production, in our case cinema, political actors act in such a manner that, “[w]ithout having to engage in geopolitical negotiations, the ideational borders of the nation-states are being redrawn through new production, distribution, and screening policies” (Halle 2002, quoted in Vogel *ibid.*, 39). In the case of Filmtettfeszt, being a promotional outlet for Hungarian cinema, the overlap with Hungarian (that is, Hungary-based) cultural-diplomatic efforts should also be noted, however parallel the worlds of propagandistic cinema and various genre films (i.e. social drama, thriller, romantic comedy, and so on, including their countless variations) endorsed by the film festival may be. It should be noted, however, that Filmtettfeszt may likewise screen works that have been “validated” by critical reception and are likely to stir debates afterwards. Conversely, Transilvania IFF

¹⁴ *Most vagy soha* (*Now or Never*, 2024, directed by Balázs Lóth) screened in Transylvanian cities with significant Hungarian population, and *Magyar Menyegző* (*Hungarian Wedding*, 2025, directed by Csaba Káel) premiered in Cluj-Napoca; while the former received extensive support from the Hungarian National Film Institute, in the second case we should mention that the director has been the manager of the Hungarian National Film Institute. Therefore, instead of the film funds of the institute, financing came through various foundations close to the state (such as Új Európa Alapítvány). Both films were accompanied by substantial mobilisation efforts to ensure full-house screenings, and the premiere of the second one also became an occasion for politicians to deliver public speeches.

frequently organises film showcases in the cinemas of various nations, as well as dynamic festival events that resonate with current political issues (e.g., human rights, forced migration, animal rights, and so on). In a sense, then, the two parallel festival series complement one another.

A critique of Transilvania IFF may be formulated in terms of the symbolic significance of the local Hungarian minority, which is present in a predominantly practical sense: traditionally, the festival newspaper's issue coinciding with Hungarian Day includes Hungarian-language content. Yet this does not translate into a consistently articulated presence within the festival discourse. Although we may include here the occasional awarding of both young and accomplished, well-known Hungarian directors from the older generations, the Hungarian dimension is not fully carried through, particularly concerning the material capitalised upon by the festival: the city's cinematic heritage, the historical background of the building serving as the closing venue for the awards ceremony.¹⁵ We can also observe the use of English as a second language/lingua franca, even in contexts related to Hungarian programs, with each contributing to the festival's functioning as and amid a largely creative aestheticisation project.¹⁶

Thus, a contradictory critical stance becomes perceptible. On the one hand, one could reproach the smaller event series organised by Filmtett for not being sufficiently bold or critical. On the other hand, in the case of Transilvania IFF, which professes allegiance to courageous, boundary-pushing filmmaking, we can suggest that the absence of traditional identity markers or references doesn't mean that they have become irrelevant to reckon, either within the festival's own communities or outside its sphere.

¹⁵ See study about the relationship between the festival and its hosting city in this volume.

¹⁶ Both festivals provide the interpretation of post-screening discussions with filmmakers: *Filmtettfeszt* provides translation into Romanian, while *Transilvania IFF* offers interpretation into English or, where relevant, into other international languages spoken by the guests. The printed festival journal *Aperitiff* also has several pages in Hungarian to honour the Hungarian day.

Conclusions

I have examined the presence and reception of contemporary Hungarian films within Romania's festival landscape, focusing on Transilvania IFF and Filmtettfeszt as two structurally distinct yet mutually informing frameworks. While the first operates as a large-scale, internationally oriented event series, the second retains a profile grounded in Hungarian-language film culture and minority cultural visibility. Despite their differing formats, both festivals contribute – albeit unevenly – to the circulation, symbolic valuation, and public positioning of Hungarian cinema within Romania.

The analysis has shown that neither festival fully capitalises on the potential for sustained critical discourse on national identity, minority experiences, or inequalities, which are relevant to issues such as filmmaking. Transilvania IFF's commitment to bold, artistically ambitious filmmaking often coexists with a limited articulation of the Hungarian minority's cultural significance. In contrast, Filmtettfeszt's exclusively Hungarian focus does not consistently translate into thematised critical engagement. However, both festivals also exceed these limitations by occasionally incorporating critically acclaimed works without foregrounding their political implications.

We can conclude that the presence of Hungarian film at festivals cannot be reduced to a single set of factors, such as cultural politics, artistic representation/visions, or identity politics. Rather, the two festivals – through their programming, institutional affordances, and audiences – jointly construct their own heterogeneous spaces in which Hungarian cinema is and remains subject to artistic recognition, cultural negotiation, and community experience.

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Romanian Cinema at the Transilvania International Film Festival: Eventness, Identity and Memory Game

Introduction

It is an accepted understanding that film festival phenomena are condensed series of intensive film-screening events with films-as-objects and participating subjects including film-makers and audiences, By taking 'eventness' (Harbord 2009); see also 'eventization' see Vogel 2022) as an essential feature of film festivals in general, and preoccupations with the past - via engaging memory – being of similar importance for cinema from Central and Eastern Europe (Iordanova 2003; Iordanova 2003, quoted in Salcudean 2017, 206), I am viewing both notions as applicable to the reception of Romanian cinema in the context of *Transilvania International Film Festival* (Transilvania IFF).

Insofar as Romanian cinema has been considered a differentiating factor of the Transilvania IFF within the film festival landscape (Salcudean *ibid.*; Virginás 2017), this is significant not just in terms of the festival identity, but draws attention to the role and function of Romanian cinema, particularly in terms of audience engagement as filtered through a range of identity notions.

In this regard, the mere fact that premieres generally concern the gathering of enthusiastic audiences and creators for the sake of watching together and celebrating completed pieces of cinema (for the first time, at least in the case of audience members) should bear in mind both the

constitution of audiences (including, in terms of diversity film fans, critics, members of film-making crews, and other professionals) and the films themselves. Insofar as, in the case examined here, Romanians constitute the largest part of the audience within the historically multiethnic town of Cluj, serving as the main location of the festival, is the festival context primarily defined by its involvement in the promotion of national identity?

By taking into account the longstanding, annually recurring festival, one can reasonably assume it has a coagulating or strengthening effect on the various involved and/or targeted groups (namely, film industry professionals, audiences, and organising staff members, i.e. volunteers, cf. Salcudean *ibid.*). It appears straightforward that festival work is amenable to involving notions of identity, especially since festival organisations can be reasonably assumed to strive for the integration of newcomers, in accordance with internal rules of operation, as well as enterprise cultures.

Various identities can be positioned along a familiar thread involving prefixes of the word 'national'. Foundational research argued for the post-national aspect of contemporary film festivals that grasps, on the one hand, how cross-border European media policies affect patterns of production and exhibition, and, on the other hand, festival program-based consumption patterns that prevail in art cinema/transnational film festival contexts (Elsaesser 2005 and Elsaesser 2006). Taking into consideration that studies supporting European cultural policies have already observed that festivals communicate ideas of openness, curiosity, cultural diversity, internationalism and critical inquiry, we may reasonably assume contextual diversity; in the case of Transilvania IFF, while such provisions have led to the conclusion of a transnational identity (cf. Salcudean *ibid.*), it didn't address the plurality of identities involved. In fact, the opposite has been emphasised, despite the local, regional, and 'transnational' or international spaces that have been engendered.¹

Thus, we can map film festivals as organisational entities channelling multiple, competing discourses, among which we can include those of

the films, as well as those stemming from curatorial and film-programming activities. Furthermore, it necessitates, in our case, a closer look at Romanian films presented at the Transilvania IFF within the Romanian Film Days thematic section and culminating in the award ceremonies. In other words, I suggest that we can draw inferences about matters of identity by examining Romanian premieres at the festival. That one may conceive (of) festival culture(s) in the above terms or according to the above, is therefore, viewing Romanian cinema in parallel with the promotion of a cosmopolitan, progressive, talent-oriented, foreign-welcoming spirit, thus reflecting also in our context a path long beaten by film festivals.

Festival, films and identity

Notwithstanding the possible cross-cutting/overlapping between audience and festival workers, and also that the above argument (by Salcudean *ibid.*) has been formulated by drawing on insider perspectives gathered at Transilvania IFF, the confluence of Romanians constituting the majority of the audience *and* Romanian films as both defining (the contexts of) related festival events – such as film projections, premieres, public meetings, awarding ceremonies – appear as affective, mediated circumstances. Since particular highlight events within the spatio-temporal configurations of film festival programs, (collective-)prestige-inducing film premieres encompass and emphasise, at the same time, cinematic affects - i.e., aesthetic qualities of the films - and production aspects. Probing collective experience for such evidence may then be proposed to address more traditional identity issues discussed in relation to film, e.g., those concerning filmic realities, in terms of their effects on protagonists (i.e., at the representational level) or on audience identification with the protagonists.

By focusing on the Romanian film festival, I question not so much the extent of the involvement of Romanian national identity, but whether such efforts are sustained to claim a *strengthening* of national identity for the participants. Therefore, it appears reasonable to turn to dramatic,

thoughtful treatments, instead of a playful, aesthetic distancing as per most films/cinematic efforts (or, for that matter, the film festival's own, repeated visual recycling of the Romanian national flag).

On the one hand, it has been observed that contemporary Romanian cinema-makers have been dealing with national identity, either explicitly or implicitly (cf. Țuțui and Iacob 2019; Pop 2019). On the other hand, that we can delimit identities in specific circumstances or under particular conditions may precisely be why an event series such as a film festival can be singled out. The claim that national identity can be grasped only in specific circumstances is drawn from a philosophical understanding of circumstances that reveal the constraints on identity as principle, such as simultaneity and sequence (Serres 2008, 283-285). By focusing on particular circumstances in which Romanian cinema is manifested, we can examine notions of identity that shape reception. Insofar as identities harken back to the most general projects of modernity, we can fathom their relevance as perhaps drivers of community-building, including film festivals. At the same time, considering their usefulness for naming, identifying, or categorising things, 'cultural identity' may be suggested as a more adequate term. The approach is heavily dependent, first, on how one conceives of national identity, and second, on whether the processes explored or emphasised in this regard qualify as such.

In the first instance, by taking the evidence that the majority of the audience is Romanian, a notion of identity based on the *feeling* of belonging to the same population group that can be recognised by its shared language, thereby making it possible to communicate a fairly large array of cultural traits, is very likely. In the same vein, if we bear in mind that (communitarian) identity-based festivals have been considered as outlets for rights-based claims (cf. DeValck and Loist 2009), we can safely assume that identity-discourses, in our case, may be exhausted at the level of cultural identity. Second, it appears logical that, among participating actors, individual senses of shared identity components can vary in magnitude, i.e., oscillating between extremes, strengthening or weakening.

Insofar as we can bypass behaviour-related cues, I suggest that a focus on mental processing related to identities treated within discursive frames or represented on screen is significant because it decouples from approaches that emphasise the emotional component; this enables us to avoid identity-related projects wedded to nationalism that usually operate through emotional play. At the same time, we can acknowledge that the Transilvania IFF is invested in the 'national' project by awarding not just current film productions made within its nation-state context (and also coproductions), but also the rarer past accomplishments of Romanian cinema. The positive input of the festival-composing main elements (i.e., films and audiences) has been captured through the notion and function of prestige (see awarding as prestige, as well as the reciprocity of prestige between films and festivals; De Valck 2007). However, if awarding Romanian films contributes to a sense of collective well-being and prestige that emerges at the film festival and/or is mediated by it, this doesn't necessarily apply to the films themselves, insofar as they can elicit various emotions and memories in audiences. By having selected and observed the premiere of a contemporary Romanian feature film addressing a recent episode of national history, the aforementioned mental processing may be examined in terms of the uses and types of memory related to identity and historical events.

Romanian cinema at Transilvania IFF

Film festival genealogies have observed that film festivals have always been outlets for centralised, (national) state-funded filmmaking (Elsaesser 2005; de Valck *ibid.*, 53; Hagener 2014). In our contextual, historically more limited case-study, we may envisage the cultural importance of Transilvania IFF in showcasing Romanian cinema to fairly large audiences, particularly since, as a travelling film festival, its smaller local editions held in other significant Romanian cities within the Transylvanian region (and also the capital) have been featuring Romanian cinema pieces as well. Maintaining prosperous festival

settings, such as the longstanding initial location, i.e., the historical multiethnic town of Cluj (and selected heritage tourist sites in its surroundings), is concurrent with its regional significance as a venue for contemporary cinema. Insofar as film festivals may be characterised by regionalist discourses (Iordanova 2003, 2, quoted in Salcudean 2017, 197), we can suggest that the name and scope of the festival stand (in) for a national reference.

In turn, contemporary Romanian cinema has been considered symptomatic in its ways of representing and commenting upon Romanian society, and, by doing so, supplying constructions of Romanian national identity (see, e.g., Pop 2019). In parallel, it has been argued that the Transilvania IFF itself has had a similar effect on (Romanian) audiences convening at the festival (Salcudean *ibid.*).

Although the Transilvania IFF presents a constellation of Romanian films, a largely Romanian organisational framework, and a predominantly Romanian audience – features that might suggest it as an ideal site to examine national identity formation – it remains highly uncertain which elements would meaningfully contribute to such effects. Different identity registers, such as the discursive and the affective, may further complicate any straightforward assessment; it is unclear whether audience responses would be shaped by the films themselves, by the festival's institutional and social framing, or by interactions between these factors. Moreover, any observed identity effects may be contingent on broader social, cultural, and media contexts outside the festival, which may have both greater and smaller impacts. In what follows, I will focus on the premiere of a historical film, a genre particularly relevant for testing the above claims. First, however, I will review Romanian cinema in conjunction with the festival to support my chosen case study.

We may suggest that the success of Romanian films - by and large attributed to the directors who initiated and shaped the Romanian New Wave - resulted first in considerable symbolic capital that would have been harvested by the Romanian Film days thematic section set up at Transilvania IFF in the year of international Romanian breakthrough at industry-leading, 'A-list film festivals' (2005). Notwithstanding the

stylistically distinct routes taken by Romanian film-makers ever since, the festival's showcase of new and recent Romanian film productions, as well as the separate competition and prizes set up for them, has attracted Romanian film professionals in large numbers. As such, it has become an important element of the festival image, and arguably has secured its status as 'premiere festival' (cf. Vogel, *ibid.*) for Romanian films. The festival has also offered private screenings of Romanian films during the festival period; thus, we may observe an ideal of becoming a 'business festival' (in a different film festival typology, cf. De Valck, *ibid.*).

The festival's references to attendance as a metric correlate success with the number of people it draws. At least two or three sold-out 'national premieres' each year reflect strong interest in Romanian films (e.g., *Siera Nevada*, 2016, and *Malmkrog*, 2020, both directed by Romanian New Wave icon Cristi Puiu, who has been a significant supporter of the Transilvania IFF early on). Considering the Romanian film as the (artistic) tissue connected to the identity component, while it is contributing to the image building of the festival (Salcudean, *ibid.*, 207, Virginas 2017), we may tap into a renewed significance of the national component, but which is now obviously different from the nationalist period that marked the first two and half decades after the Communist regime change. In the case of Romanian society, there have been significant trends of outbound migration, with an obvious corollary being the redefinition of identities through lifestyle and consumption, including the kinds of (cinematic) media preferred and the heterogeneous composition of audiences.

From a historical perspective, we may observe that film festivals that adhere to cosmopolitanism have downplayed nationalist discourses (de Valck and Loist, *ibid.*). With such alternation of discourses in mind, we may suggest that, insofar as Romanian films have been a significant part of the festival program, a sense of collective well-being and prestige is kept and mediated. If not exactly marking a post-national phase in festival reception (Elsaesser 2006), it is perhaps worth recalling that reception practices (at film festivals in general) are still being modelled by the art cinema discourse.

In parallel, we should mention the relatively small Romanian film industry (which was the case especially more than 20 years ago, when the festival was established, a period therefore more prone to identity projects).² The concerning 'small cinema status' has been productively explored (see e.g. Parvulescu and Hanzlík 2022; Virginás 2020); accordingly, in the case of the Transilvania IFF, it is important to the extent that its model is very much dependent on both the network of film festivals and that of the film industry-output at the country level. With the above in mind, the festival founders' film-production activities appear significant in terms of their focus on the festival's overall appeal, particularly when the festival occasionally serves as an outlet for their own artistic and production output. First, however, the claim that the festival enterprise has been used for individual artistic laurels could be countered by noting that the aforementioned events were out-of-competition. Second, since research observed that various film-production related activities are characteristic of contemporary Romanian film-makers, including also Giurgiu (Parvulescu and Hanzlík *ibid.*, 8), the entanglement of informal and formal(ized) relations appears as a contextual issue.³

Freedom: a case-study

The 2023 festival edition included two films directed by festival-founder Tudor Giurgiu (*Nasty*, a documentary portrait about a Romanian successful tennis player and national celebrity, and *Libertate (Freedom)*, his fictional feature film about two opposing groups of policemen and military personnel involved in an armed conflict during the 1989 Romanian regime change.⁴ Although both had been out-of-competition events, at the end of the festival edition, they were listed among the stand-out events of the festival; and, despite having been screened only once, *Freedom* was praised as the most popular film.

Freedom engaged with a significant moment in national history, albeit in a contemporary, action-packed, gritty, and realistic cinematic style, rather than in analogue, on-the-spot television documentaries, which

have largely shaped the imagery of the events of 1989. By enabling different meanings of the title (collective, group freedom in the face of a totalitarian regime, or individual freedom), the dramatic undertones were fitted into a general project of 'rebooting history' (Elsaesser 2006).

Creating an atmosphere entwined with the aesthetics conveyed and mediated by way of the cinematic treatment of the historical subject matter, the premiere of *Freedom* prompted the celebration of the film's completion, where viewing the individual and collective efforts on a formal, technical level of accomplishments interrelated with self-celebration of the large cast who were present and had been involved in the production of the film. Insofar as valuation dynamics related to reception appeared directly proportional to personal networks and interests, this reflected the effect of positive networks on the domestic audience (Vogel, *ibid.*, 164). The possibility of testing audience reactions directly, on-site, was all the more interesting as the majority of the audience in the packed theatre hall had no direct personal experience of the tumultuous times depicted in the film. Therefore, insofar as the indirect memory transmission or creation via the film might be superimposed upon collective memories shaped by the context of the premiere, we may speak of a coming-together of different aspects, such as the 'time compression' effected by film festivals (Harbord 2009, 133). Both 'real' and 'imagined' communities (Anderson 1991) can be implied through historical projects, while the role of the protagonists may be read as reflecting personal stakes in the intersection of identity questions and personal memory.

Therefore, the distinction between having personal memories of the historical period and only 'fabricated' memories as mediated and inflected by the film (for a large part of the audience present at the premiere) appeared useful in tilting the balance toward the (aesthetic) experiences inevitably becoming episodic memories, which are subject, in their turn, on the one hand, to (memory) retrieval, and, on the other hand, entwined with knowledge models or 'schemata' (to make sense of the film). A longstanding tool, or weapon of choice of Eastern European

cinema (Iordanova in Salcudean *ibid.*), the highly plastic notion of memory has been relevant, in a cross-section of individual and collective levels, by observing collective engagement while lacking direct memory of the historical context.

Implications of memory have been explored mostly from the creative, film-making side: the tension between the personal *and* the historical and the social that kept the game of identity open under the Socialist period (Iordanova 2003, 44) has become a stamp for contemporary film-makers revisiting the past decades, as a way of intervening into historical remembrance. As a counterargument to re-acknowledging interest in discursive constructions of national identities, we can observe that most contemporary films and film-makers, including Romanian ones, aim for both international and country-level national recognition in terms of reception aesthetics, translatability, and so on (cf. Parvulescu and Hanzlik, *ibid.*; Pop *ibid.*); the film explored here is a case in point. In other words, highly fragmented film festival contexts appear to be the first choice of promotion channels because being selected and possibly awarded at festivals can help mitigate production costs or justify future filmmaking applications (Elsaesser 2005; DeValck, *ibid.*). This is not to say that production aspects always prevail over creative ones, but that they also define the Eastern European context.

Furthermore, in addition to the space-time encapsulations of such cinema practices, the diversity of the analysed film festival – at programmatic, discursive and experiential levels – provides evidence not just for the fragmented nature of identities in contemporary conditions, but also appears as a challenge to consider (Romanian) national identity to be a direct, singular effect. We can conclude that although aesthetic events (such as the above explored film reception) engender spatial circumstances as well as open temporal relays, which can be alternatively put as collective and individual experiences, this view implies an equally context-dependent approach to notions of national identity, and therefore is not suitable to claim either strengthening or weakening an inherent, context-free variant thereof.

Conclusions

The emphasis on national identities is challenged by the film festival's kaleidoscopic view of cinema, particularly by considering film reception practices as modelled by the art cinema discourse.

Art cinema discourse isn't merely about artistic recognition: the examined festival context encompasses various interests, including both material, pecuniary considerations and pragmatic ones, such as audience-building efforts. We can think, in (film) festival context, of self-celebration or self-performance of audiences driven by the logic of unique novelty as repetitive renewal (Elsaesser *ibid.*, 102, 104-5; Reckwitz *ibid.*, 355-397; Vogel *ibid.*, 64). Thus, implications for identity in conjunction with festival space hinge on (a) sociality endowed with particular aesthetics and politics (Amin and Thrift 2002, 158; Reckwitz *ibid.*; Vogel *ibid.*) – such as the Romanian Film Days explored above.

In parallel with a focus on aesthetics (of cinema), the festival context needs to be updated via a larger understanding of participation that is permeating contemporary public spaces of consumption, which may not be articulated through symbolic matters while still amenable to collective interests, even if not quite constituting social 'praxis' geared toward bringing change to everyday lives in a Lefebvrian manner.

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Romanian and Hungarian Film Cultures at the Transilvania International Film Festival¹

An arguably late arrival in the film festival circuit (first organised in 2002), the Transilvania International Film Festival² has been a significant date on the FIAPF calendar since 2011. The medium-sized and competitive Romanian film festival focuses on first- and second-feature films by filmmakers from virtually all around the globe, while also paying homage to acclaimed personalities of European cinema. Furthermore, it serves as a hub for all things related to Romanian cinema and as such has become a staple in the Central and Eastern European region for both local audiences and interested film professionals.³

A confusion surrounding its acronymic abbreviation is rather telling: at the regional or country level, most people refer to it as 'TIFF', irrespective of the language they speak, though this acronym by and large is reserved for the Toronto International Film Festival. Therefore, in this essay, 'Transilvania IFF' will be used. Another linguistic issue relates to its official naming, where instead of 'Transylvania' the Romanian spelling of the region has been preferred – reminiscent of a national (i.e. Romanian) component which reasserts, in my view, its country-affiliation

¹ First appearance: 2017. *NECSUS. European Journal of Media Studies* 6 (1), 219–225. <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/3386>.

² www.tiff.ro

³ A fact also mentioned by Benoît Ginisty, general director of FIAPF (International Federation of Film Producers Associations). <http://tiff.ro/en/tiff/stiri/transilvania-iff-accredited-fiapf>.

and thereby denigrating any confusion related to both the historical region and the festival concept as well.

Transilvania IFF takes place in Cluj, now a regional university/education and business centre. Being the second biggest city in Romania, with a population of around 350.000 consisting of a Romanian majority and a significant Hungarian minority, the festival organisers chose Cluj as the main festival location largely because of its relatively well-maintained movie theatres in operation since the beginning of the 2000s and the fact that the town has had the highest audience numbers at the country level. The festival prides itself on ever-increasing attendance and sold-out screenings – the post-festival press release mentioned over 79.000 tickets sold at the 2016 edition, which took place between 27 May and 5 June and featured almost 250 films. Festival venues include, in addition to the three refurbished traditional movie theatres located in downtown Cluj, a neighbourhood movie theatre and a few multiplex cinema halls. It is worth mentioning that each year after the festival, free screenings of a selection of films are organised in Bucharest (the Romanian capital) and also in other cities across the country.

In terms of curatorial selections/programming, Transilvania IFF offers a plethora of events: films are screened in various sections and other art forms loosely related to cinema are also part of the programme, such as concerts, fine arts and photo exhibitions, and theatre performances. In a sense, it has been acknowledged that the festival crowd is not only constituted by avid cinephiles and, at the same time, that cultural consumption preferences may extend beyond cinema. However, at the local level, the festival's biggest appeal lies in the evening open-air screenings held in the town's largest historical square. Moreover, historical castles under restoration in villages nearby serve occasionally as festival locations. Here, the participation of many hundreds of foreign guests is to be noted, ranging from journalists to professionals involved in festival entrepreneurship and filmmaking or talent accompanying their creations to the festival. Further daytime points of interest are the Romanian Film Days section, which offers a compact selection of new Romanian films. The festival's Industry Days serve as a platform for various film industry

initiatives in which the festival organising entity or its members have been involved both at the national level and abroad. Those in the know and sponsors are also lured by other entertainment events or parties held in various exclusive locations.

Ahead of any conclusion, there are two observations to be made which, in a way, counter simplistic reviews. Although the Romanian Film Days section may be overshadowing other yearly shifting focuses on distinctive (small) national cinemas (Switzerland, Lithuania, Libya to name a few, with the neighbouring Hungary being a stable guest), it might be just as relevant for certain audiences. What I want to emphasise is not just that festival experiences are ultimately contingent upon the attended festival programs, but also that most film festivals consist of events that run in parallel and cater to different audience categories. So the task remains to untangle various festival events in order to determine what makes Transilvania IFF stand out.

By drawing on participant observation and festival politics in the context of the 2016 edition, I suggest that we cannot quite do away with so-called festival highlights. An obligatory ingredient or a stand-alone pillar of the festival is the Special Gala Screening, an event in which, each year, a well-known actress or director is given a lifetime achievement award. Previous editions of the festival had been attended by the likes of Nastassja Kinski, Jiří Menzel, Geraldine Chaplin, Wim Wenders, Jacqueline Bisset, Catherine Deneuve, Udo Kier, and Vanessa Redgrave; last year's anniversary edition (the 15th) was honoured by Italian actress Sophia Loren. We may note that Jameson Cinefest, a smaller festival taking place in Hungary, also has such an award. For film festival research, it is significant that the well-aged oeuvres of European cinema's accomplished personalities are deployed to confer 'added-value' to relatively young festivals within the Central and Eastern European region.

Focusing on the Romanian film festival's acknowledged success/popularity in terms of festival highlights or events requires first paying attention to the *mediation effects* within the film festival circuit,⁴ leading us

⁴ On the practice of mediation within the film festival context (see DeValck 2007, 125-160).

to consider the significance of certain filmmakers and creations of the Romanian New Wave for the festival itself. Finally, as an attempt to place the festival in its manifold localities I will refer to another added element – the smaller thematic block called Hungarian Day which, although having a lesser impact on the festival image, may shed light on both an interdependence in terms of film production and film consumption within the larger or extra-national Central and Eastern European region and also on the ways to individuate the festival.

Although one may take specific festivals as points on the circuit, research on the topic has observed the primordial role of underlying mechanisms activating that circuit.⁵ While positing any film festival's own ecosystem, we should recall that the film festival hierarchy is still setting the backdrop. It can be noted that the already recognised Romanian New Wave directors target A-list festivals where they are usually selected for the competition and usually receive awards; eventually, most have their Romanian premieres later at Transilvania IFF. Both Cannes and Berlin bear luck to Romanian New Wave films, and the historical origins of such practices are certainly relevant. The festival circuit has been acknowledged as setting current interests for particular auteurs, styles, or trends,⁶ so that the rise of the Romanian New Wave is closely linked to festival recognition – Cristi Puiu's *Moartea domnului Izarescu* (*The Death of Mr. Izarescu*, 2005) and Cristian Mungiu's *4 luni, 3 săptămâni și 2 zile* (*4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*, 2007) are to be noted here.

Both of these filmmakers remained protagonists within the unfolding of the 2016 festival calendar – at least in terms of Romanian references. Moreover, the specific timing of Transilvania IFF – it begins every year during the week following Cannes (from the end of May until early June) – means that the 2016 edition was not immune to the happenings in Cannes either. First, there was the premiere of *Sieranevada* (2016), a three-hour melodrama by Puiu. His new work was praised by critics in Cannes and was featured in the competition for the Palme d'Or. Eventually,

⁵ In this regard DeValck points to the 'relational interdependence' between film festivals (see DeValck 2007, 40).

⁶ Elsaesser 2005, 82-107.

Mungiu was honoured with an award for directing *Bacalaureat* (*Graduation*, 2016). Puiu returned somewhat disappointed from Cannes. In an interview, he likened his Cannes performance to the unfair second place won by Brazil at the 1982 World Cup.⁷ In parallel, *Câinii* (*Dogs*, 2016), a noir thriller by young Romanian director Bogdan Mirică, received the FIPRESCI award at Cannes and was included in the main competition of the Transilvania IFF, where it was awarded the main festival prize (the Transilvania Trophy). *Sieranevada* did not fit the award profile (as Transilvania IFF prizes debut or second works), but during the ceremony, the festival organisers came up with a sort of sympathy/surprise award for Puiu as a recognition of his artistic values and his general support of the festival. Both awards were in sync with how the audience reacted to and received these films, with both also appearing in the post-festival press release among the festival's outstanding sold-out events.

We may note that the cultural columns of Romanian mainstream media reported about how well Romanian films performed in Cannes, so a domestic celebration was imminent. Ultimately, the anticipation 'at home' for the Romanian movies was partly indebted to the buzz generated by their reception in Cannes. It needs to be mentioned that Transilvania IFF has become an audience festival which also attracts most Romanian film industry professionals from the country's capital. Thus the recent festival successes earned by Romanian filmmakers resulted in an appeal en masse among the festival audience (not irrespective of the fact that most of them were of Romanian ethnicity) which led to a somewhat overt celebration of both individual and collective national accomplishment beyond the 'trickle down-effect', meaning that what goes on at major festivals exerts significant influence on how films are received.⁸

Although different from each other in most aspects both films have been acclaimed as Romanian New Wave creations, and by looking

⁷ *Aperitif* festival journal, 4 June 2016.

⁸ More recently, Cristi Puiu's *Sieranevada* was submitted as Romania's nominee in the best foreign language film category for the 2017 Oscars.

diachronically it can be observed that the festival has awarded the internationally distinguished new Romanian works almost each year since its first edition – either the main award was offered to a film bearing the Romanian New Wave label or the award for the best director went to a young Romanian filmmaker. Thus, we may posit the festival's involuted relationship with the particular trend known as the Romanian New Wave: (regional) art cinema defined by a specific visual aesthetic and narrative choices, mostly minimalism and realism.⁹ However, my interest lies not so much in the poetics of either a specific way of filmmaking or those of singular films but in seeking out the role of the festival vis-à-vis the Romanian New Wave.

The fact that the evolution of the festival has been attuned to acknowledging and prizing films of the Romanian New Wave as well stems from the small(er) size of the Romanian film industry, which in the last decade saw the emergence of both transition-era and post-transition generations of filmmakers, among them the organisers of Transilvania IFF and those recognised by critics as Romanian New Wave auteurs. The entity behind Transilvania IFF – the Association for Romanian Film Promotion – was established and has been managed by Tudor and Oana Giurgiu, who are active as producers (including the production of *Sieranevada*). They have also directed a few documentaries and feature films as well. Former film critic Mihai Chirilov has been credited with programming the festival; the Romanian Film Days section was only later introduced, in 2005, which coincided with the breakthrough and critical acclaim of the Romanian New Wave. While the festival circuit does single out certain filmmakers and works displaying alleged features of Romanian New Wave, obviously not each film made currently in Romania/by Romanians could be classified as belonging to that specific trend. The festival context is both translating 'national' success obtained on the festival circuit and grabbing a hold of Romanian film content in general as its primary currency. In terms of awards, the position of Transilvania IFF is also strengthened by the fact that although the

⁹ For scholarly overviews on the emergence of the Romanian New Wave see, e.g. Nasta 2013 and Pop 2014.

Romanian film industry has its own awarding event called Premiile Gopo (Gopo Awards), the latter's retroactive awarding procedure and domestic context lack the international appeal in the 'now' which characterises the sphere of film festivals.

If location matters, we should recall that choosing an area is also significant for film festival entrepreneurship. Regarding the Hungarian Day, including screenings of recent Hungarian films as well as Q&A sessions and public meetings, this thematic section highlights significant aspects concerning the film cultures within the larger region. It serves to acknowledge the Hungarian minority living within the Transylvanian town as part of the audience. However, the redressed majority-minority relationship comes with a slight twist because it features mainly films and filmmakers from the neighbouring country of Hungary, since the minority filmic output is rather scarce. While Romanian Film Days is also popular among local Hungarian cinephiles, the Hungarian Day remains for many a conceptual oddity, as the town's Hungarian cultural and architectural legacy is rather unknown for the majority and non-Hungarian audiences. Furthermore, restrictions related to international distribution and the uneven film content of the Hungarian Day, in spite of the fact that each festival edition features an awarded Hungarian film, make it less appealing to foreign audiences. Also, the relevance of the Hungarian Day is given by the transnational dimension of film projects involving professionals from both countries and/or ethnicities, to which Transilvania IFF provides a significant context.

As of today, the festival is engaged in the cinematic education of the increasingly cosmopolitan film culture(s) in the region; an awareness of its positioning on the festival circuit also favours the enduring presence of new Romanian cinema in the international film market – though the precise outcomes of such endeavours may reveal varying interests. The multiplicity in terms of both programme and participation is being filtered by a politics focused on securing a positive festival experience for everyone, thereby confirming a tendency for caring how people and things relate to each other.

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Film Festivals as Aesthetic Experiences.Theories of Affect and the Collective¹

Introduction

As sociocultural phenomena, film festivals may be distinguished by virtue of their collectively felt atmospheres, where their mood-inducing effects are related to an intense schedule of film projections. Tracing the elements which make up their fleeting atmospheres, a phenomenologically defined perspective is useful both when arguing for particularities of given film festivals and describing our experience thereof. By taking film festivals as space-time complexes (deValck and Loist 2009, 179-2015), scholarship has been drawing attention to the processes underpinning film festival events, as well as to the composite nature and manifold functions of film festivals. As such, to the extent that aesthetic experiences remain an essential aspect of participation at film festivals, we may draw an initial parallel with art exhibitions.

Specifically, as socially constructed settings, film festivals appear similar to large-scale art exhibitions that feature or present a variety of artistic works. Such dynamics, it is argued, engender modes of experience to capture artworks' inherent, autonomous significations, while the frame of the collective exhibition, or curatorial concepts, constitute further layers of coding (Osborne 2013, 162). To be sure, medium-specific usages of the film are tempting as a conceptual shortcut to contemporary forms of art (as approached by art theorist Peter Osborne). However,

¹ First appearance: *Art Style, Art & Culture International Magazine*, no. 12 (September 6, 2023): 155–66. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8310023>.

apart from homologous recombination, such a view appears to reiterate the function of art exhibitions as being dedicated to the forms of art. So, by presenting and validating films *as works of art* or as objects with aesthetic values, a prime functionality of film festivals appears to be that of supporting film as a form of art.

Not only do festival phenomena appear as aesthetic milieus in connection with films as works of art, but it has also been suggested that film festivals enable common, shared aesthetic experiences (cf. Harbord 2009, 43; Harbord 2016, 72). The fact that film festival programs constitute objects which are experienced in crowded settings may be rather obvious. Spectators' aesthetic experiences are part and parcel of the 'film festival complexity' triggered by mediatedness, especially when taking into consideration the enhancement of the cinematic by way of meeting and celebrating film-makers. Moreover, films carry the subjective imprints of their makers, while film festival programs are, in effect, emulating related festival- and film-viewing experiences of the festival programmers themselves. Specifically, discursive efforts to repackaging the world or worlds thrive on experiences of others, that is, on projections of subjectivities, which in our case are already mediated since film frames are constructed and appear through subjective lenses. Film festivals contextualise everyday, mundane film screenings and represent the world in its diversity (provided we conceive the world as diversity or in its diversity). By taking into consideration the aforementioned, curatorially blended festival programs whereby connections established among individual films are established and being operated 'quasi-synchronously' by diligent festivalgoers, we may provisionally contour a collective dimension of experience.

To the extent that ineffable and transient qualities bumping and sliding into one another on the border of experience may be traced back to a Jamesian pure experience, an interlinking of the social component of the festival event with the film—both as a medium and form of art—, is to be viewed in terms of the pre— and transindividual levels and—occurrence. Similarly, moving from the aesthetic object of the film toward body studies diverges from representation. Notwithstanding a

comforting relevance of the discourse of the unrepresentable, in what follows, an approach from affect theory is useful, I suggest, to break from aesthetic receptivity so that the experience of film festivals would complete that which is an unavoidable benchmark in film studies, namely the notion of ‘spectatorship.’

Embodiment, Performance and Perception

The fact that we sense the world with our bodies is a straightforward claim after Merleau-Ponty; the perspective of the body as experience builds upon the everydayness of embodiment, but any essential feature of bodyness should raise further issues (since it includes also that which we aren’t aware or conscious of). Accordingly, one can refer here to the relationship between the mental and the somatic, as well as to that between the conscious and less conscious features of perception; those, on their turn, engender different levels of experience while re-emphasizing not so much the agential role of affects, but imbuing the emergence of the social and the individual in a simultaneous manner (see e.g. Massumi 2002; Massumi 2015; Blackman et al. 2008). In our case, we may refer to the fact that (engaged, or undistracted) film viewing means one is having cognitive appraisals and bodily reactions; such considerations extend also to investigating the causality of emotions (Plantinga 2009), while it also reassures one’s path of analysis toward the issue of perception in film studies (see e.g. Elsaesser and Hagener 2010). Accordingly, perception is eventually grasped not just as arising from or within a body but also as simultaneously creating (different) ‘bodies,’ or meanings.

Concerning cinema, an initial starting point was provided by Adorno, according to whom a spectator’s eyes fixated onto the movie-screen perform the same movements as the eyes of the other viewers; it joins the ‘current’ of all those who are attracted to the spectacle (Adorno 1991, 183–184). Similarly, we can also refer to the illusory nature of film characters’ perspectives to the extent that those

betray the subjective handling of the movie camera, or they come to exist as depending on or enabled by the latter (see, e.g. Sobchack 2009). The perception of the movie image is based on mimicry, and the (function of the) film becomes ideologically infused, whereby we can refer to a joining of the aesthetic and sociological aspects of the film, which at the same time designates the spectatorial subject created by the film. Notwithstanding the notion of spectatorship, the film, according to the perspective put forth by the critique of ideology, falls short of its (aesthetic) potentials because of its uninhibited mass-appeal and production-enabled seriality. Consequently, collective subjectification by mass or popular media has been widely criticized ever since; a cultural studies approach notwithstanding, the performative aspect of art forms, or their performative modalities are significant, especially if we consider specific forms of art as being conducive to expressions or enactments of what is possible, and

thereby contributing to a 'diversification' of the previously de-individuated/ de- differentiated common body of the audience (Guattari 1995, 91). In a somewhat similar manner, audience – or spectators' participation that comes to be regarded as performative in terms of its active potentials may be opposed to aesthetic experience defined by habit and recognition, or being organised by anticipations and retentions, and therefore considered as having passive potential only.

The spectator appears in the Guattarian paradigm as a set of elements of subjectivity, or as a psycho-structure with multiple components, which is dependent on a sort of openness, with any perspective of the self appearing only at the starting points and endpoints of aesthetic experience. On the one hand, the outcome constitutes a token of repetition; the unrepeatable (an instance which marks artistic performances and which permeates the spatiotemporal contraction of the film festival-event) and the repetition are being constituted through their inter-relationship. While this may suggest a dialectical move, or even a thinking in accordance, it also conveys a flexibility of its own, much in the same way as the performative aspect comprises both a repeating occurrence and an unrepeatable, unique event. The relationship with the

artwork can be thought of as an activity implying reception, transformation and return, all of which pass through countless points and variations, where the efforts of understanding and interpretation on the part of the spectator will always be to some degree a referential repetition, since he or she recreates the film frames while mentally processing it, thinking about, or re-imagining it. Here, we may observe a concentration of many perspectives: any claim to an

The essence of the movie performance, as it comes into being in the specific setting, rests on multiple objectifications; the film as production targets the ideal spectator, or the impersonal, and therefore a collective. And, a similar claim of objectification marks the perceptual act of the spectator, as well as aspects of desire (even if such concerning desire has been mutated or modified so that it isn't obvious anymore who or what constitutes its object, or whether it has any object at all...). Here, the 'deterritorializing' and 'reterritorializing' processes applied to grasp the effect of the artwork serve to revisit the idea of perception as being the starting point (therefore, the spectator should remain neither starting point nor endpoint for analysis).

Aesthetic Affects

Spectators captivated by the screen or captured by it is another way of saying that the movie performance bears affects and intensities; what is bound to settle the contradiction between its impersonal focusing on multiple poles and the active participation as being part of the aesthetic event concerns both the unusual, habit-disrupting quality as well as a playing into subjective experiences (cf. Guattari 2007, 258–64). The superimposition of subjective becoming and of 'being positioned' may not be so obvious: within the discursive mode of filmic representation, the ultimate stake is world-creation, that is, worlding, where we become 'worlds' as stipulated by Deleuze and Guattari (2011) to grasp the inner transformation through reception of artworks. As the change induced by aesthetic sensation is also inducing a becoming into someone or something else, the appearance of percepts in the filmic context means

the human becoming is relaying the former; therefore, considering the differentiated relationship of films and spectators, the qualities which are felt (and therefore personal and contextual) may coexist with the affects and percepts beyond subjective experiences. In other words, we can think of the context as being initially constituted by a film, but the actual (visual or audio) content of which arrives from outside of that context by virtue of being recorded elsewhere and/or previously – a fact which means that it will be actualized in the form of percepts and, by the way of mediation, their effect will be exerted as affects or will create affects.

The perspective of ‘presentification’² emphasises the fact that cognition is after the act of sensory perception which is, to a degree, always a past event (Manning in Massumi 2015, 149); therefore, being both retroactive and forced to be directed toward the future, perception and the perceivers’ subjectivity are coupled as a follow-up (we may add that such a perspective lays bare the contemporary significance attributed to immersive environments as the Deleuzian ‘power of the false’). As visual perception proceeds with proprioceptive input, movie watching in communal spaces, among a crowd of people, moulds the experience of one’s body and other human and non-human bodies.³ The underlying claim is that bodies stay or ‘hang’ together due to the affects, or forces and processes organising them and which may be recognised as such only partially.

Based on one of the most echoed starting points of Deleuzian film philosophy, the characteristic images of contemporary cultures of consumption exert such affective, suggestive influence that they uncouple from what is visually present and directly conveyed by the components of images. The emphasis on or the turning to what lies outside the picture

² Further evidence for a spectatorship operating based on hypotheses could be provided by neuroscientific findings on perceptual best-guessing (see e.g. Seth 2021).

³ It should be noted that ‘bodies’ which are not considered works of art are also configured along their affecting capacities since they are shaped by planes of composition. Nonetheless, viewing the human as expressive, or an artistic expression, shouldn’t be regarded as an instant claim for affects, but rather as suggesting a step back to conceive percepts as organising the human frame of perception, and only thereby turning to affective contours and tonalities which are endowed with aesthetic qualities.

frame concerns the not givens of perception, or the components that aren't (yet) visual or representable; ultimately, the plane of representation won't capture the affect-percept couplet. With cinema itself being enmeshed with visibility and spectacle while spatially conditioned, the experiential domain finds its escape route (or its necessary 'lines of flight') via unrepresentable, affective capacities. Aesthetic sensations not only evidence the intertwining of physiological and mental states, but enable a correspondingly intensive becoming which doubles the performative event effected by a work of art. Taking into consideration the emergence of aesthetic sensation, the aesthetic dimension enfolds the corporeal, material and the incorporeal, immaterial, all of which are palpable as different levels of experience but connectable and sliding into one another by way of blocks of affects and percepts.

Similarly, if media images, thanks to their affective charges and intensities, do become body-images, they depend on 'bodies-without-image', or a condition whereby the mental image of the body becomes problematic precisely because of the inherent mirror-image content (cf. Blackman 2012, 15, 177). In other words, the notion of 'mirror vision' views bodies as static entities; the aspect of being 'without-image' goes against a representational view of the world and refers to a fundamentally affective mode of existence. With change as a consequence of intensities and force effects, movement is eventually exposed, which, in its turn, requires 'movement vision' (cf. Massumi 2002, 48–57). Obviously, a model is provided here by the diachronical organisation of the Deleuzian 'cinema image' (i.e. the seriality of movie images, the interval between them, and the cut as synthesis). And, for the same reason, the aforementioned different registers (i.e. the body-image and the body-without-image, 'mirror vision' and 'movement vision', affect and emotion, subject and object, as well as the dynamics between visceral and proprioceptive intensities) while remaining grouped under a sort of conceptual multiplicity, they denote the 'doubling' of the body-subject (Blackman 2012, 16), or bring about cleavages in subjectively felt experiences.

Festival-Body and the Collective

Film screenings and film-viewing experiences, as well as social interactions between and public meetings with film-makers, mean the communal context of film festival-events. Thereby, we may acknowledge the intertwining of various registers which encompass the particular and the plural, individual 'body-subjects' and the 'festival-body', where spectator-bodies carry tension. First, it can be easily acknowledged that the above-listed appear relevant in the case of events and experiences involving a multitude of participants. The affect theorist Lisa Blackman has proposed the conceptual variant of 'body subjects' to account for a particular condition designating human bodies as being involved in communication in affective terms. Accordingly, the embodiment of the psychological subject has been envisaged as overlapping planes of the intersubjective and the intercorporeal; thereby, experiences appear as mediated through connections with other human and non-human bodies (Blackman 2012, 9, 12-13). Here, we may also observe that a default mediation of experience means being embodied within the process of mediation. Amidst a temporally fixed organisation of film images and living bodies (spectators, actors and so on), we may advance from a representational level of film festivals.

The Deleuzian concept of the body concerns relationships among bodies in terms of intensities, degrees and fluxes; as such, it is relevant for both 'body-subjects' and the unity conferred to community, or as a form of the collective. On the one hand, any forces meeting each other bring about or create bodies, a claim which hits the composition of bodies of (m)any kind(s). Bodies coming together multiply such relations and create additional bodies (Brown and Stenner 2009, 186). Therefore, an emerging sense of collectivity is considered as doubling the multitude coming together: similarly to the Deleuzian assemblage, such an understanding of the collectivity becomes a potential, which is open, pure, with 'every body connecting to every other such that their very difference becomes indiscernible' (Brown and Stenner 2009, 194).

A cognitive perspective makes it clear that within the process of perception, there is an extraction from the film image so that the latter is

transformed subsequently and projected back onto its object; therefore, the processual events encompass both the presently unfolding acts of perception and the corresponding changes of states. Thus, on the other hand, sensations register both objects and tendencies which differ from one another in the sense that objects refer to countable, separable and spatially defined elements, while tendencies are being grasped in an inherent multiplicity denoting spatial and temporal inseparability. Here, as the affect theorist Paul Massumi argues, it is about a qualitatively different aspect which is 'tendential' to the extent that, while encompassing an activation of tendencies together at once, it sets the stage for the actual unfolding of a single tendency; thereby, it accounts for pluralities which fill the moment of experience ultimately making it unitary (for the moment) but only to disappear (Massumi 2015, 185-189). This logic of operation underscores the virtual multiplicity as qualitatively different perspective which accounts for 'becomings' and the collective in qualitative terms; it also draws attention to the transient character of unity based on pluralities. The notion of the collective can have a tendential character because the unity of its elements may appear only virtually, i.e. in the light of the multiplicity. Tendency, on its turn, may refer to the common movement and encounter of bodies within the event whereby the intensity of affects are indicative as their attractive force, or as the folding out of oneself and thus generating belonging, in parallel with the notion of 'becoming' understood in the sense of change or transformation; such belonging is to be conceived as not yet bodily felt, but enveloped within the relational setting of the event; in other words, an opening that is set free from any relationship of the participating elements.

The eventness of gathering a multitude of people carries 'bodies' in several understandings so that we may go beyond the crowd-essence in spite of its Adornonian relevance for matters of culture. Notwithstanding mass-psychology, or the obviousness of the crowd-effect, 'bodyness' is sought not in terms of physical bodies within and creating the multitude, and neither referring to body as extensity, but rather taking affective, incorporeal and transcorporeal transitions as carriers. Considered in such terms, if (any) collective determination is considered necessary also for the production of the subjectivity, then the collectivity cannot be reduced

to the experience of the communal 'we'. Therefore, community ideas generally derived from the necessities of social coexistence also imply that a collectivity is formed as an effect, or will be organised around something in a Durkheimian way, and thereby is endowed with or differentiated through a force of its own (such as, e.g. cohesion). Here, one may remind the notion of the 'quasi-object' as introduced by Michel Serres (1982) in order to serve as a common focus for the dispersed multiplicity to emerge as a collective (Brown and Stenner, *ibid.*). Similarly to the insight that the collective may have multiple appearances, the multiplicity is applied both beyond/above the individual, i.e. on the social level, and before the emergence of the personal, on the side of pre-verbal intensities; in other words, it follows the logic of affects rather than those of designated sets (Guattari 1995, 9). In this way, the 'transversal' character of the collective appears as valid for communal and individual or personal levels, while simultaneously enabling speaking about subjectivity as both emerging in a shared manner (and so applicable at group levels), while also having multiple components on the level of a single individual. Accordingly, due to how it is produced, we may also refer to a collective determination of subjectivity, where the Guattarian insight could be regarded as a double-edged word with regard to exposing both the workings of the discursive and the limited potential to subvert power positions in active, that is, discursive ways. And, as a consequence, one may rightly cut through the notion of the bounded and walled psychological subject, as well as re-assess its causal determination (so far captured by crowd- or mass psychology, which, on its turn correlates the affective overspill of the individual with a de-differentiating melt into a group, or the multitude, see Massumi 2015, 206). Instead, the common embeddedness of subjects and objects is a point of entry having ceased to be static, and which means that situated, and thereby individuated contents and the 'transindividual' dimension (the latter understood as 'correlated differentiation,' see Massumi *ibid.*) may simultaneously be grasped.

While taking interpersonal relations, or separation into individuals or groups is helpful to designate a functional sociality, when viewed through the lens of transindividual becoming, the processes of formation

of cultural or social forms entail a 'pure' sociality which refers to the potential to formation, or the potential as power that enables the 'becoming' of any sociality whatsoever (Massumi *ibid.*). Thus, the Deleuzo-Guattarian thought of a 'community to come' is bound to appear, but it shouldn't be mistaken for a ready-formed collective consisting of particular components or individuals, or with empirical variants of the social (cf. Massumi 2002, 253). We need to carefully observe that we are always at the beginning of that activity in the course of which the 'incoming' can be thought; this openness is not to be conflated with a specific quality of the collective. Likewise, it doesn't draw the temporal plane where the collective will eventually become resilient to change. The openness, as correlated with the undefinable, enables the relation to emerge into existence, but which, in turn, will determine the elements of the relation.

In accordance with the above, the concept of the 'time event' in relation to film festival phenomena (Harbord 2009, 2016) underlines a qualitative change also in the sense of organising experience and subsequently creating subjectivities. The emergence and disappearance of references, or 'anchoring points', can be interpreted and approximated through differential movements and sensations. As such, differential relationships might as well be interpenetrating, though they shouldn't be confused with the subjective dimension of the experience of change. We may remind that film festivals bring about changes by virtue of their well-versed functionalities (like, for e.g., the mediation of films as works of art), and such changes concern spectatorship and cinephilia, to the extent that those are ingrained structures developed and maintained by the film festivals themselves.

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