

## Expanding Cinema

### *A Conversation with Péter Forgács*

Péter Forgács is a Hungarian media artist who focuses on recomposing archival materials and home movies into experimental found footage films and multimedia installations. Since 1976 Forgács been active in the Hungarian art scene. In the late 1970s and 1980s, he collaborated with the contemporary music ensemble Group 180; at the same time, he started to work in the Béla Balázs Studio. In 1983 Forgács founded the Private Photo & Film Archives Foundation, a unique collection of amateur film footage. Using archival found footage materials from Hungary, he has prepared 17 works within the “Private Hungary” series (1987–) and developed his career internationally. In the following interview conducted in April 2017 in his studio in Budapest, Forgács provides an insight into his multi-screen installation *Danube Exodus*, designed to involve visitors in narratives that incorporate found footage of two historic voyages along the Danube River in the Second World War. This project was created in collaboration with the Labyrinth Project in Getty Museum Research Center (2000–2002) in Los Angeles. Furthermore, Forgács sheds new light on his artistic collaborations at home and abroad and on his views on the relationship between film, philosophy, and history.

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*Could you elaborate on how your collaborations at in the United States started? What were the main difficulties?*

I was traveling a lot after the Berlin Wall had fallen. I was invited with my first film of the “Private Hungary” series to several special film festivals. One took place at the American Film Institute in 1990 in Los Angeles. Afterwards I was invited to lecture and screen at the Pacific Film Archive in San Francisco, and I also had some classes at the Department of Film in San Francisco. This made my way through 1999, when I had several lecture tours in different parts of the USA. Notably, I was invited to a conference on the Japanese segregation in found footage that was held at the Getty Museum. And I was invited as one of the experts and filmmakers who were dealing with this subject. Then I met a Vice-Director of the Getty Research Institute, Michael Renov, who was really fond of my films. Istvan Rev, a Hungarian historian, draws his attention to my work as a way of looking at history through the intersections of private and public spheres, using film as a means of ethnographic research. After the conference, I was invited to the Getty and applied for a 10-month scholarship with the films *Wittgenstein Tractatus* (1992) and *Danube Exodus* (1998), the latter of which I wanted to turn into an installation.



Fig.1: Interface of the *Danube Exodus* installation. Image courtesy of Péter Forgács

The Getty doesn't have a film production or anything, but they give fantastic support: for example, I had two assistants, one for research, and one for technical issues. I also had a very good work connection with Michael Renov. The first time we met, I told him I want to make a CD-Rom. I had previous experience with CD-Rom installations from Hungary — I've learned that this digital technology allows us to combine visual, scriptural, and auditive materials in a new way. In turn, he introduced me to the artist's interactive lab — the Labyrinth Project — which was working in parallel to USC, the biggest film school in southern California, in Los Angeles. Luckily, the people from the Labyrinth Project, particularly Marsha Kinder and the Dean of the USC film school, knew my works and wanted to collaborate with me and the Getty. These people and institutions provided excellent support for the *Danube Exodus* installation.

We worked on the project from November 2000 to June 2001; only then could we establish a financing background. The most important thing was that the Getty Museum liked my project so much that they wanted to have it for another two years. For this reason, they invited me once again. Overall, we were working from November 2000 until August 2002 to expand *Danube Exodus*. From that starting point, I could broaden *Danube Exodus* to different files. I also had the opportunity for deepening the historical research. Immediately, it became extremely important to make interviews with the passengers of the German Exodus and those who survived the Jewish Exodus. I could have gone to Stuttgart later and the Bessarabian German Museum, gather other books and films on Bessarabian repatriation. I was able to make new interviews in the USA, Israel, Germany, Hungary — wherever the



Fig. 2: Multi-screen environment. Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona, Barcelona.  
Image Courtesy of Péter Forgács

passengers have been. We could also have done our research in the British Archives and in the Imperial War Museum, and in the Colonial Office, at Kew Gardens in the big archive in London, where all the documentation is deposited. This made it possible to deepen our knowledge of the Captain, the Germans, the Eastern Central European Jews, and all the historical background, the whole picture. Then came another six months when I could edit and compose with a new sound engineer, with all materials that have been obtained. This was the beginning with the Getty, and it was unheard that as a visiting artist and scholar you could also make an exhibition there. When I was at the Getty, I had a very important relationship with scholars. Michael Renov and Bill Nichols later decided to publish a book dedicated to my work,<sup>1)</sup> which was also very crucial for me.

*Could you tell us who has helped you in advancing your expanded project? Could you explain briefly what are the advantages of preparing this interface?*

The interface was constructed by the Labyrinth Project team. The Labyrinth Project brought together five fantastic guys — artists, animators, editors — who made the interface. It's very important because artists who don't know how to program, like myself, can't make an interface on their own. I'm a very good editor, but I'm "zero" in computing. This meant that I could learn it from the inside. It's

1 Bill Nichols – Michael Renov (eds.), *Cinema's Alchemist: The Films of Péter Forgács* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).



Fig. 3: Future Cinema, ZKM/Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe. Image courtesy of Péter Forgács

comparable to the “Group 180”, where I could have learned what the music is from the inside, what is the structure of time-based arts, what is the structure of music. The work-in-progress is the best learning situation for me. As I learned music and musical thinking with “Group 180”, this was an interactive art. I could learn how it is built up.

This also opened up my view on split-screen and multiple screens to expand. The nature of *Danube Exodus* poses a challenge to our notions of the archive. What is an archive? How can we use it? What is the policy of archives? What is the meaning of archives? Derrida taught us a lot about that. Not only this, but also how these different elements opened up a perspective, a vision of this new age, the age of Facebook, Wikipedia, and Google. These were my intros coming from classical art such as graphic arts and photography. Suddenly, I found myself understanding that this is an open channel where we can find a place for human contemplation of the past and those techniques that make a certain structure not only interactive but also create parallels between facts and figures, and pictures and images. Now we are getting much nearer to my way of thinking. In all my found footage films there is micro-history and remnants of film avant-garde. However, certain elements in the film are structured linearly, because it starts somewhere. When you are working with an interface, you have parallel time planes that enable you, as in a book, to go back and forth, turn around and look at the subject, theme, or fact from different angles.

*To pursue this subject a little further, do you agree that the possibilities of storytelling created within multi-media installations broaden the media landscape? Would you find parallels between the design of your*

*Team and the nonlinear, branching narrative described by Jorge Luis Borges in his famous story “The Garden of Forking Paths”? Can you see the difference?*

Yes. Definitely, it is expanding. My way of learning and thinking tells me that processes such as re-contextualizing, interpreting, footnoting, comparing different pictorial, verbal, or written elements are not definite but constantly in flux. What I mean to say by this is that my work is not limited in terms of ideology, pedagogy, or entertainment. I tried to avoid dogmas or fixing interpretations. What I have learned from Wittgenstein’s way of thinking is that one has to understand the relative status of truth; where and how you meet it? It’s like the word; what is beauty? What is red? What is pain? Let us argue that it is not only a matter of language games but also a matter of relativity, which is neither absolute nor functional.

*Let’s return to the changes that took place after the Berlin Wall had fallen. In 1994, you started a great collaboration project “An Unknown War”. It was a collection of short, archival movies. Could you explain us how this project began and how your European collaboration has developed up to now?*

It started with professional contacts with film festivals, academics, and found-footage filmmakers, just like in the USA. I met the authors of Inédits [European association with the aim to encourage the collection, the conservation, the study and the valorization of amateur films], and through them, I met some European artists, archivists, and theorists who were also interested in this topic. We made “An Unknown War” series of five episodes based on private films and archival footage made from 1936 to 1946 in different European countries. Conducting research in Eastern Europe and in the Balkans and Russia taught me how to work with archives. That’s very important because I was not coming from the humanities. Also, through the Inédits association, I got to know people such as André Huet or Michael Kuball, who, along with the German filmmaker Alfred Behrens, had been making home movie-based, found-footage films at approximately the same time in the 1980s when we were just starting. They were assisted and financed by significant film archives in their countries: Kuball collaborated with the NDR (Norddeutscher Rundfunk) and André Huet collected his home movies with the help of RTBF (Radio Télévision Belge de la Communauté Française), which is the Belgian-French Radio-television. I eventually found a community, let’s call it that way, the televisions and the archives and the same way of doing things based on found footage history documentaries. That immediately opened up a lot of possibilities for me, and this collaboration, along with the aforementioned *Danube Exodus* project, laid the groundwork for all of my endeavours until now.

*One may notice that your connections with the Netherlands are particularly developed and long-lasting throughout your career. I’ve heard you are preparing another collaborative project. Could you tell us something about it?*

There is one project I’ve been preparing for five years. I’m working on it with my friend, producer and writer Cezar Messemaker, who I collaborated with on films such as *Danube Exodus*, *Angelo’s Film* (2001), or *El Perro Negro* (2005). We also did this Dutch East Indies film production, *Looming Fire* (2013), but he was the initiator of this project. Now I’m working with him hoping that we could raise money to do this film which would show the history of Holland from the 1900s to 1990s through found footage, home movies, and photographs.

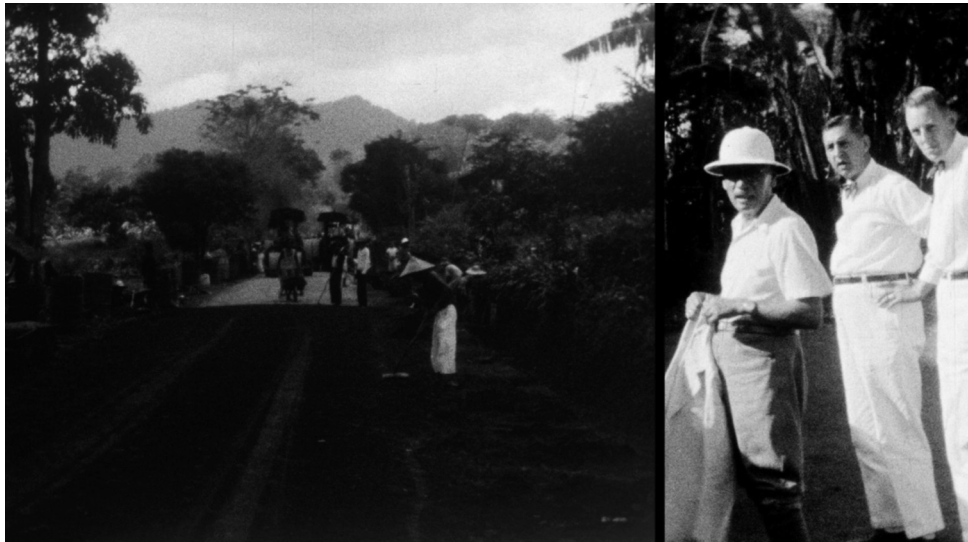


Fig. 4: Press materials. *Looming Fire — Stories from the Dutch East Indies* (2013). Image courtesy of Péter Forgács

*I wonder if you currently collaborate with anyone from Hungary. Could you point out who was the most important collaborator for you in Hungary? Who had a major impact on you?*

Tibor Szemző, a music composer, and also my brother, who is a writer and playwright. The latter helped me a lot to think about my projects and also the avant-garde community defined my identity — if there is a community. Szemző was extremely important: he was the number one for 20 years. He was a major influence on me, and it was mutual, as he is making new installations, not only concerts. I have inspired him through visual language, and he inspired me through musical performing and edition. However, from 1997 he went a separate way because at a certain moment he felt that he was giving everything to these films and didn't have his space. For this reason, Szemző started to work separately, and it was also good for me because I worked with other fantastic composers.

Throughout my career, I've had a chance to work with many brilliant artists such as editors, composers, and playwrights. Because filmmaking is always teamwork, it was always a minimum of three, a maximum of seven guys working in the film. These are the most important things, not the production part. As in production, you have to be lucky to find "one white elephant"; somebody who understands this kind of art and even makes good efforts, such as Gábor Kovács and his films partners who financed 50 percent from their pocket money or private money of my film *Hunky Blues* (2009). From time to time, I was lucky to find important production collaborators on television when it was something new and interesting in the times of Béla Balázs Studio. The production side always has a double face. I was lucky because we've been working in a very low-budget mode. Although it was a minimalist budget, we could do it as we had freedom. In short, technical collaboration, financial collaboration, and artistic collaboration are separate.

*As we discussed earlier, you have accomplished many projects internationally; however, series such as “Private Hungary” are deeply rooted in the Hungarian context. How is this collaboration developing currently in Hungary?*

This story is just ending, due to Mr. Orbán and his party. Until now, there was a kind of possibility due to my foreign international success, even if there were always cuts in the departments. Now, the television system has become a state television, a propaganda television, and they dropped this kind of work. This documentary genre has vanished completely from the Hungarian media. My platform is basically finished as well. The “Private Photo & Film Archives Foundation” came under fire from the Ministry of Human Resources, because there is no Ministry of Cultural Education, as they want to take it away and dissolve this foundation — and they will succeed. Moreover, they are now closing down CEU [Central European University] where I have a great collaboration, for 10 years with the Open Society Archives, which helped my work as well, through George Soros. Not only did he support Fidesz leaders in the early 1990s, but he also helped hundreds of artists, philosophers, researchers, etc. In Hungary, I was collaborating a lot with the Film Archive, with certain different media, televisions, nowadays only with museums and galleries. Last year I completed with the Hungarian Film Fund one documentary, *Picturesque Epochs* (2017); however, I think that all the gates have been closed for me. It was fruitful 30 years till now from 1987 when I received the first grant to make “Private Hungary”. That was the decline of the Soviet type of Hungarian regime. Exactly in 1987–1988 the things have been melting — we could have felt it. Now it is closing once again. The big cycles are, here again, historic cycles. Oppression and freedom.

#### **Acknowledgments**

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**Kamil Lipiński**