

**Bori Máté**  <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-4684-2210>  
(University of Applied Arts Vienna, Austria)

# Ritualization and *Táltos* Procedures in Péter Lichter's *Nutrition Fugue* (2018)

## Abstract

In his film *Nutrition Fugue* (2018), Hungarian experimental filmmaker Péter Lichter appropriates remnants of discarded film strips from a socialist grocery advertisement (*közért*, literally, “for the community”), featuring images of processed meat dishes. As an exemplary case of geographically specific materialist film practice, the film functions as both a historical artifact — documenting East Central Europe under the socialist regime — and as a disruptive rupture, bringing past and present materialities into dialogue. This paper argues that Lichter's process of cutting, decaying, and reassembling the film stock enacts a form of material self-dismemberment that contests dominant (visual and narrative) representational regimes. This ritual undoing of cinematic form resonates deeply with the logic of the ancient Hungarian *táltos* tradition. The verb *tált*, meaning “to open wide,” is connected to shamanistic procedures of ecstatic dismemberment, renewal, and revelation, serving as a tool for transmutation and perceptual expansion. This ritualistic transformation constitutes a strategy of cultural re-appropriation. By subjecting embedded cultural images to this process, Lichter dislodges and re-contextualizes official image regimes and contested symbols of national identity, working toward the liberation of human perception against repressive and arbitrary systems. Lichter does this by creating a sensorial field that disorients and expands perception through visual and auditory haptics, facilitating an affective and trance-like encounter and positioning itself as a ritual site where perception is “opened (*tált*)” and the viewer enters a space of transformation.

## Keywords

Hungarian experimental cinema, process cinema, shamanic procedure, visual and auditory haptics

## Introduction

At the beginning, there is thick blackness, the keeper of all possibilities; then, bright colors and the almost deafening sound of cicadas signal a passageway through which we slip into another realm. The cicadas' song, which evokes late-summer rural afternoons, merges into the glorified music of transubstantiation as the film is buried, then unearthed. Once again, the vividly pulsating body bursts into an ecstatic dance with foods that are soft and hard, juicy and dry, solid and liquid — caught in the very state of (trans)formation. Everything recalls the disintegration and reformation of matter and its intricate web of relations, through which something new — a strange familiarity of sensory experiences, a kind of aberrant (multi)sensoriality — comes into being. *Nutrition Fugue* (2018) is a four-minute, twenty-three-second short film made of found footage by Hungarian experimental filmmaker Péter Lichter.<sup>1)</sup> He uses excerpts from a socialist grocery advertisement (in Hungarian: *közért* [grocery store], literally “for the community”) saved from the Hungarian National Film Archive's trash bin, featuring images of luncheon meat, aspic, and other processed meat dishes posed against vivid red, green, and yellow backdrops.

Throughout this article, I will look at how Lichter's material practices in *Nutrition Fugue* constitute a geographically specific ritual of transformation. Through my argument, I aim to show that the film functions as a material-discursive phenomenon<sup>2)</sup> in which physical processes and encounters operate as rituals rooted in Hungarian culture. This involves re-positioning the handling of found footage — cutting and reassembling images both physically and digitally during editing, as well as burying and excavating the raw material — as a cultural strategy. These rituals transform situated matter and memory through affect, emphasizing embodied and lived experience. By thinking ritual and material practice together, I will examine the film through the lens of Hungarian *táltos* procedures, which resonate with the ritualization of material degradation, transformation, and reassembly. *Tált* is an ancient Hungarian verb linked to shamanistic traditions, meaning “to open wide,” and it serves as a tool for transmutation and perceptual expansion. The *táltos* tradition itself follows a logic of ecstatic dismemberment, renewal, and revelation. This ritualistic undoing of cinematic form and matter creates a sensorial field that disorients and

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- 1) Most of Péter Lichter's films are available on his YouTube channel. The object of my analysis is the digital video of *Nutrition Fugue* accessible there, which I viewed at home on my computer using headphones. I specify these viewing conditions because haptics, affect, and phenomenological aspects of film viewing experience are central to this article, and such circumstances significantly shape perception and engagement.
- 2) While it falls outside the scope of this article to elaborate on new materialist theories in detail, the text will employ some concepts and terms — primarily derived from Karen Barad's agential realism — that aptly capture the performative materiality and relationality of film. These include the notion of (1) *material-discursive phenomena*, defined as dynamic sites where diverse bodies, histories, and times intra-act, thus emerging events of becoming in which meaning and matter are mutually co-constituted through entanglement; (2) *intra-action*, a neologism developed by Barad that challenges individualist metaphysics by describing the mutual co-constitution of entangled agencies and entities through their relational engagement rather than through interaction between pre-existing, independent beings; and (3) *things-in-phenomena*, which, in Barad's agential realist ontology, replace the notion of “things-in-themselves” and are understood as entangled material agencies that emerge as the conditions of things through experience and within a web of intra-acting components. (See Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007)).

expands perception. *Nutrition Fugue* facilitates an affective encounter between the viewer and the relations manifested in the film through visual and auditory haptics. Viewers enter a trance-like mode of knowing, where historical sediment and sensory agitation collide.

This article positions its analysis of Lichter's *Nutrition Fugue* within a theoretical framework that aims to contribute, on the one hand, to debates on materialism and cinema, specifically focusing on photochemical and hybrid film practices as discussed by scholars such as Kim Knowles, Tess Takahashi, Scott MacKenzie, and Janine Marchessault, among others, and on the other hand, to discussions of film phenomenology and the embodiment of perception, drawing on the phenomenological and haptic approaches of Laura U. Marks, Jennifer M. Barker, and Lisa Coulthard. The paper also wishes to engage the underexplored discourse of Hungarian experimental cinema, situating Lichter's film as a materialist practice within the East-Central European context. Finally, in framing Lichter's methods as a ritualistic cultural re-appropriation that resonates with the Hungarian *táltos* tradition, the article draws on Catherine Bell's theorization of ritual practice and aims to dialogue with Colectivo Los Ingrávidos' discussion of shamanic materialism and shamanic procedures in relation to Mexican experimental cinema, in order to outline the possibilities of what a shamanic matter might be in an East-Central European framework.

In this article, I will first provide some context for Lichter's filmmaking practice. Then I will describe and analyze *Nutrition Fugue* while situating it within the ideas of ritualization and cultural re-appropriation. The following section will demonstrate the affective and haptic strategies that Lichter's film deploys, while in the last part of the paper, I will discuss its specific shamanistic procedures and rituals of transformation.

## Contexts

### *Visibility and Institutional Position of Experimental Cinema in Hungary*

Both Péter Lichter and scholar Dorottya Szalay emphasize the systemic and discursive challenges facing experimental cinema in Hungary and the wider East-Central European region.<sup>3)</sup> They describe a landscape marked by a lack of critical discourse and institutional support, where avant-garde, abstract, or lyrical documentary film traditions remain largely marginalized. Historically, the Balázs Béla Stúdió (1959–2000) provided a crucial state-funded space for early-career filmmakers and artists to experiment with the audio-visual medium, often producing low-budget, socially critical short films.<sup>4)</sup> Following its dissolution, however, experimental film lost its primary institutional home and entered what Szalay calls a “transit zone” (*tranzitzóna*)<sup>5)</sup>: a peripheral and ambiguous space suspended between defunct traditions and unrealized opportunities. In this specific context,

3) See László Csuja, “A Balázs Béla Stúdió vonzáskörzete: ‘Irányított véletlenek’ — Lichter Péter,” *Balkon*, no. 1 (2013), 40–43; Dorottya Szalay, “Konceptualizmus egy kortárs magyar kísérleti filmben: Lichter Péter: Non-Places: Beyond the Infinite,” *Alföld*, (2016), 88–95.

4) For more on the Balázs Béla Stúdió, see Gábor Gelencsér, ed., *bbs 50: A Balázs Béla Stúdió 50 éve* (Budapest: Műcsarnok, 2009); Sonja Simonyi, “The Man Behind the Curtain: Gábor Bódy, Experimental Film Culture and Networks of State Control in Late Socialist Hungary,” *Third Text* 32, no. 4 (2018), 519–529.

5) Szalay, “Konceptualizmus egy kortárs magyar kísérleti filmben,” 91.

the term “experimental film” (*kísérleti film*) itself is considered problematic, reflecting a broader definitional crisis and “loss of forum” (*fórumvesztés*).<sup>6)</sup> The collapse of infrastructure has also deepened the divide between film and fine art: many works once conceived for the cinema are now exhibited in galleries and museums, where they are framed as video or visual art rather than film. Within the Hungarian film ecosystem, a strong bias toward feature filmmaking further exacerbates this marginalization, as funding and recognition primarily flow toward conventional narrative forms. Lichter points out that while this fragility is visible worldwide, in a smaller national context like Hungary, the system’s instability becomes especially apparent.<sup>7)</sup>

Despite these systemic challenges, Lichter’s work is shaped by both local and international influences. He has been inspired by filmmakers such as Stan Brakhage, Peter Tscherkassky, and Len Lye,<sup>8)</sup> while also continuing the legacy of the Balázs Béla Stúdió, whose spirit of experimentation still resonates in his practice. Yet with the disappearance of the studio and the institutional frameworks that once supported such work, Lichter — and the few other Hungarian filmmakers pursuing experimental cinema — find themselves in relative isolation, operating on what might be described as creative islands within a fragmented landscape.<sup>9)</sup> The lack of infrastructure and discursive forums makes sustaining a community of experimental film practice particularly difficult. At the same time, however, the internet has opened unprecedented avenues for connection and visibility, allowing Lichter to engage with an international network of experimental filmmakers and audiences. His films have been screened at major festivals including International Film Festival Rotterdam, Tribeca Film Festival, Jihlava International Documentary Film Festival, and Berlin Critics’ Week, attesting to his recognition and integration within the broader global avant-garde scene even as he continues to work from within a locally constrained context.

### **Péter Lichter’s Creative Practice**

Péter Lichter has been making films since 2002. As he points out in an interview with László Csuja, his filmmaking practice emerged from intuitive experimentation and was characterized by an awareness of, and a willingness to work with, his own limitations, while explorative methods were grounded in what he calls the “security of not knowing”<sup>10)</sup> a sort of lack of technical expertise. In an interview, the filmmaker gives voice to his fascination with so-called “documentary elements”<sup>11)</sup> in found footage cinema and to his desire

6) Ibid., 89.

7) Personal conversation with Péter Lichter, Budapest, October 12, 2025.

8) Ibid.

9) Currently, only a small number of contemporary Hungarian experimental filmmakers remain continuously active and visible. Among them are Péter Lichter, the Buharov Brothers, and Péter Forgács, whose work has also received significant international attention.

10) It also refers to his initial unfamiliarity with avant-garde cinematic traditions. His time at ELTE Film Studies proved inspirational, as it helped him to conceive of film history as a network and led to his discovery of the Balázs Béla Stúdió as well as the French and U.S. avant-garde, through which he recognized that his films fit naturally into this world. A significant later realization was the existence of a vast, global community of experimental filmmakers accessible via the internet. See Csuja, “A Balázs Béla Stúdió vonzáskörzete,” 40–43.

11) Ibid., 42.

to capture something that occurs in the moment of creation yet remains free from excessive construction. As Lichter puts it, on the one hand, the original footage always contains a certain truth that the filmmaker cannot manipulate, giving the film a documentary quality. On the other hand, during the process of manipulation, there arise moments — “directed accidents,”<sup>12)</sup> as he calls them — that draw attention to the presence and dynamism of matter itself and, in turn, become records or documentary traces of that presence and dynamism.<sup>13)</sup>

Beyond the overarching practice of found footage filmmaking, Lichter’s body of work is notably diverse: he produces both short and feature-length films, working with 8mm, 16mm, and 35mm film, which he often subjects to both chemical and digital manipulation — such as painting, bleaching, rotting the emulsion with fruits or milk, burying it in soil, scratching, cutting, or re-filming it through multiple cameras after digitizing the film strip frame by frame. He also frequently incorporates material found on the internet, which he later blends with the physical footage after digitization. Examples of this hybrid methodology include *The Rub* (2018, with Bori Máté), *The Philosophy of Horror* (2020, with Bori Máté), *Barokk Femina* (2020), *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (2022), and *The Grey Machine* (2025), among others. In many of his works, Lichter also experiments with the tension between narrative and radically experimental form, as seen in *The Rub*, *Empty Horses* (2019), and *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*.

Thematically, *Nutrition Fugue* belongs to a smaller group within Lichter’s oeuvre that engages with cultural-political issues, alongside works such as *8th October 2016* (2016, with Bori Máté), *George’s Poem* (2018), and *Barokk Femina*. In the case of *8th October 2016*, the film takes its title from the day when the entire editorial staff of Hungary’s largest opposition newspaper, *Népszabadság*, was abruptly dismissed without warning. Through its material and structural choices (using the pieces of the last issue, cut, glued, and painted on a 35mm clear filmstrip), the film reflects on censorship, silencing, and the erosion of democratic discourse in contemporary Hungary. *George’s Poem*, on the other hand, is described on the webpage of his works’ distributor, Light Cone as “paranoid poetry exploring a galactic conspiracy, futuristic politics, and concealed meanings,”<sup>14)</sup> using a 35mm print of George Lucas’s *Star Wars* (1977) rolling opening text and a magic marker. This “Hungarofuturist”<sup>15)</sup> film deconstructs the political narratives and conspiratorial rhetoric regarding George Soros propagated by Hungary’s current right-wing populist re-

12) Ibid.

13) Although his oeuvre largely consists of found-footage films, several of his works feature material recorded by either the filmmaker himself or a director of photography, as in the case of *Non-Places: Beyond the Infinite* (2016) and *Frozen May* (2017).

14) See the film and the description on the webpage of the filmmaker’s distributor, Light Cone: “George’s Poem,” *Light Cone*, accessed September 30, 2025, <https://lightcone.org/en/film-11944-george-s-poem>.

15) Hungarofuturism (HUF) is a mythofictional and aesthetic strategy that conditions the cultural imagination, conceived by the aesthetic theorist Márk Nemes Z., while Lichter’s *George’s Poem* serves as its programmatic film. The movement’s aim is to reclaim national and historical myths from the nationalist ideologies that have occupied them, and to reconstruct progressive ways of thinking about Hungarian identity. The aesthetic and narrative strategies of HUF are often satirical and Dadaist in nature. See the HUF Manifesto: Miklós-völgyi Zsolt and Nemes Z. Márk, “Hungarofuturista Kiáltvány” *litera*, January 10, 2018, accessed September 30, 2025, <https://litera.hu/irodalom/elszo-kozles/hungarofuturista-kialtvany.html>.

gime, blending speculative poetics with critical satire. Lastly, *Barokk Femina* is based on Márió Nemes Z.'s visionary poetic diary; the film offers a hallucinatory archaeological portrait of the 2006 autumn protests in Hungary, sparked by the leaked "Őszöd speech" of then Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány.<sup>16)</sup> Lichter's collage film translates this text into an experimental audiovisual excavation of collective memory and political trauma.

As mentioned above, I likewise consider *Nutrition Fugue* an example of a geographically specific materialist film practice. On the one hand, the film functions as a historical artifact documenting a geographically specific space (East-Central Europe) and a historical period (the socialist regime). On the other hand, it embodies a rupture by bringing materialities (past and present) that span space and time into dialogue through replaying, rearranging, and transforming systems of relations. This materialist practice is situated within the specific tradition of Hungarian experimental cinema, exemplified by the Balázs Béla Stúdió, which fostered works dealing with social and political issues through formal deconstruction.<sup>17)</sup> *Nutrition Fugue* is a material-discursive phenomenon, where the different human and nonhuman agents — including the filmmaker's embodied gestures, the materiality of soil, the decaying emulsion, and the viewer's sensory engagement — coalesce within an entangled web of relations. This entanglement is further shaped by situated knowledge and affective memories — personal, cultural, and political — that traverse temporal and spatial boundaries, becoming inseparable from the film's material and experiential unfolding.

### **The Crumpled Ballet of Luncheon Meat: The Description and Production of *Nutrition Fugue***

The film begins with a black screen lasting no more than a second, accompanied by silence. Then, the sound of cicadas gradually drifts in, and the title appears — white, slender letters centered against the black backdrop. As the cicadas grow louder, the title lingers for four more seconds. The first image appears abruptly: a blue frame stretching between shades of indigo and ink. The perforations of the 35mm film are clearly visible on the left, while the optical sound strip — originally recorded on the film — is visible on the right. The frame is not parallel but oddly warped. For the creation of *Nutrition Fugue*, Lichter used found footage acquired from the Hungarian National Film Archive, which provided him with several boxes of film strips designated for disposal. While sorting through the material at home, he discovered fragments of a socialist advertising film — these would later appear in *Nutrition Fugue*. Although the footage had decayed and had been cut, dismantled, and rearranged multiple times, with the help of Mihály G. Horváth (who works

16) The "Őszöd speech" (*Őszödi beszéd*) was the closing address delivered by then-Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány on May 26, 2006, one month after his party's parliamentary election victory, during a closed meeting of the Socialist Party (MSZP) faction in Balatonőszöd. The speech became controversial in Hungarian politics because of Gyurcsány's admission that his government had not been truthful about the state of the economy before the elections ("we lied in the morning, in the evening, and at night"). When the recording was leaked later that year, it triggered mass protests and a significant political crisis, leading to a sharp decline in public trust toward the ruling Socialist Party.

17) Ádám Nagy, "A peremvidék kavalkádja: A Balázs Béla Stúdió vázlatos története és irányzatai," *FilmTett*, March 3, 2010, accessed September 30, 2025, <https://filmtett.ro/cikk/a-balazs-bela-studio-vazlatos-tortenete-es-iranyzatai>.

at the National Film Archive), it was possible to deduce that the film stock was most likely an ORWO color, sound, safety acetate print used for television in Hungary during the 1970s or 1980s, with a duplex variable area optical soundtrack.

Neatly arranged piles of gelatinous food appear, and through a technique that produces a visual effect similar to stop motion, they begin to triple, then quintuplicate. The images, once recorded to attract the socialist buying public, are now complemented by the dynamic presence of the film's physicality: its grain, its flaws, the dirt and filaments clinging to the strip. The sound of cicadas continues, but the visuals shift — the earlier blue background gives way to a bright yellow one, revealing a bowl of minced meat. The composition of the reconstructed image is slightly off-kilter. Once meant to appear appetizing, the minced meat now seems tremulous and awkward. Next, a split screen presents blue and red backgrounds, displaying a half-sliced meatloaf baked in one piece. Against a blood-red backdrop, ham cream rolls with mustard on a bed of salad are stacked on a plate. The film works with the visual and material residue of the “planned economy's” failures, positioning the food imagery subjected to decay as an artifact of the socialist regime's management of production and consumption (see Figs. 1–2).

Here, the illusion of prosperity and economic reality collide; the film can be seen as a critique of socialist economic conditions, where the government projected success despite internal failures and shortages, which was central to maintaining the system's legitimacy. This visually awkward and unappetizing presentation of processed meats is expressive of how the problem of material shortages led to the use of substitutes and low-quality goods (e.g., more water, less meat in products like cold cuts). In quick succession, various meat creams, aspic meats, and egg dishes appear. Around the twenty-eight-second mark, a studio kitchen enters the frame, featuring a bright purple counter covered with unprocessed vegetables — onions, mushrooms, cucumbers, potatoes, salad leaves — standing in stark contrast to the highly processed meat dishes shown before. Images of food and brightly colored backgrounds continue to alternate, but movement begins to emerge within the images themselves.

We see an industrial slicing machine cutting luncheon meat, with the slices cascading down. Simultaneously, the soundtrack shifts. Alongside the cicadas, a majestic electronic score — reminiscent of space science fiction films — floats in. It accompanies the now even more rapidly changing images, and in one moment, the falling slices of freshly cut meat suddenly evoke a sense of flight. The images become stroboscopic, with many zoomed in to reveal extreme close-ups of the meat and the very materiality of the film stock. Earlier images of meat dishes reappear, disappear, and rotate at high speed, yet smoothly and effortlessly. The rumbling visuals, seemingly coming at us from all directions, become a rich cavalcade of colors, textures, and movements. Merged in a flux of constant motion, they transform into a psychedelic vision as the decayed images begin to surface. The rot appears in layered hues that seem to contain the full spectrum of a rainbow: blues and purples, greens, yellows, and even pinks appear.

The production of *Nutrition Fugue* is grounded in both the materiality and physicality of photochemical film, which provides the foundation for the cinematic work and digital possibilities, making this film a hybrid. In the summer of 2018, in a once marshy, swampy area of Budapest, where the reeds growing at the base of the panel houses in many loca-

Figs. 1–2: Stills from *Nutrition Fugue* (Péter Lichter, 2018)

tions still evoke the marshland of earlier times, Lichter buried the film stock for approximately two weeks, allowing the soil, time, and natural decay to inscribe their marks on the emulsion. Once he had unearthed and cleaned the film strips, Lichter digitized the decayed material using his characteristic gear: a Canon photo camera and an old duplicator lens from the 1970s. He photographed each frame individually and uploaded the images to his computer. As a third step, he returned to the physical film, cut certain sections, and glued them onto a clean 35mm strip. He then digitized this material using the same technique. After uploading all the stills to his computer, he imported them into an editing program and created a series of sequences. These were merged, assembled, zoomed in, and

superimposed on each other, highlighting the textures, surfaces, and qualities of the rephotographed photochemical film. They were repeatedly reconfigured until the cinematic work reached its final form.<sup>18)</sup> This meticulous handling of the material foregrounds the hybridity of the work: the decayed analog film and the reconfigured digital image co-exist in a non-hierarchical, participatory process.

As Kim Knowles points out, “artists who are invested in photochemical film have shown that creative dialogues can take place between both media and that hybrid practice may open other exciting avenues of experimentation.”<sup>19)</sup> Lichter’s practice provides a pertinent example of her observation. Furthermore, as Jihoon Kim observes in his article on film-digital hybrids, they “bring into relief the materiality of both mediums.”<sup>20)</sup> *Nutrition Fugue* is a testament to how the film grain, the decaying layers of the organic emulsion, the dirt, and the physicality of the cut and glued pieces of film stock, using Knowles’s phrasing, “speak” to the digital pixel creating a new kind of image that hovers somewhere between the two.<sup>21)</sup> Lichter’s “process-driven methodology” treats the material and discursive encounters through which experience emerges not as fixed but as continual “change and movement in a process of becoming.”<sup>22)</sup> In *Nutrition Fugue*, Lichter’s active participation in the physical and digital production procedures creates a participatory and improvisational process, which is complemented by the dynamic mattering of nonhuman participants such as the soil, the decaying emulsion, the glue, and even the repeatedly cut and assembled film stock. To a large degree, Lichter’s manipulation of both photochemical and digital materials, through actions such as burying and unearthing decayed film stock, digitizing it, and reconfiguring it, embodies the idea of the multiplicity inherent in all forms of perception, where the distinct materialities of film grain and digital pixel interact in a non-hierarchical, dynamic relationship. The emphasis on hybrid textures, materiality, and movement activates the viewer’s sensorium and opens haptic and trance-like ways of perceiving, seeing, and knowing.

Regarding the film’s soundtrack, the sound of cicadas gradually fades. Only the electronic music and accompanying noise remain — still majestic and triumphant. However, as the images begin to disintegrate more noticeably, the noise intensifies, gradually overshadowing the music. An electric guitar emerges, first striking a single note, then oscillating between two or three. Suddenly, a church bell rings, marking the time. The noise recedes for a fleeting moment, only to return with renewed force. The images are now cut into bits and fragments — intact and decayed pieces of various meat dishes swirl before our eyes at an impossible speed. Then, the first notes of a melody played on an electric guitar begin to surface — one that every Hungarian knows by heart from childhood. It starts hesitantly, repeating the first few beats over and over, but eventually finds its rhythm: the

18) Personal conversation with Péter Lichter, Budapest, April 23, 2025.

19) Kim Knowles, “Self-Skilling and Home Brewing: Some Reflections on Photochemical Film Culture,” in *Process Cinema: Handmade Film in the Digital Age*, eds. Scott MacKenzie and Janine Marchessault (Montreal, Kingston, London, and Chicago: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2019), 81.

20) Jihoon Kim, “Bruce Elder’s Film-Digital Hybrids and Materialist Historiography,” *Millennium Film Journal*, no. 56 (2012), 30.

21) Knowles, “Self-Skilling and Home Brewing,” 82.

22) Scott MacKenzie and Janine Marchessault, eds., *Process Cinema: Handmade Film in the Digital Age* (Montreal, Kingston, London, and Chicago: MacGill Queen’s University Press, 2019), 3.

Kossuth Song, an emblematic march of the 1848–49 Hungarian Revolution and War of Independence, becomes clearly distinguishable amid the noise. What we hear is the recurring refrain of the song, which does not appear here in words but only melody, that proclaims: “*Long live Hungarian freedom! Long live the homeland!*” At around three minutes and forty-six seconds, a still image of all the dishes on display appears, accompanied by the melody, this time in the version that used to serve as Kossuth Radio’s intro, and the returning sound of cicadas. The film concludes with the cicadas and an upward tilt revealing the word: KÖZÉRT (“for the community”).

Lichter served as the sound designer but asked his long-time friend and collaborator, Ádám Márton Horváth, to compose the musical score. Reaching the final form of the soundtrack was a gradual process that involved several discussions between the filmmaker and the composer. Although Horváth had a high degree of artistic freedom, Lichter indicated that the score should escalate in a fugue-like fashion, paralleling the film’s progression. He also suggested incorporating the Kossuth Song. The first time we hear the song’s melody, played on an electric guitar, it is performed by Horváth. In contrast, Lichter added it to the soundtrack when it appears again toward the end in its traditional form. To a large degree, the filmmaker uses the score according to his wit, mixing it with the sounds of cicadas and bells, which he acquired from the BBC Sound Effects Library.<sup>23)</sup> This interplay of organic, analog, and digital sound mirrors the visual materiality of the film: the cut, glued, decayed, and digitized images interact dynamically with the electronic and acoustic sounds, producing a holistic hybrid experience.

### **Cultural Re-appropriation through Ritualization, Haptic Strategies, and *Táltos* Procedures**

What broader function does this invocation of a holistic hybrid experience have, though? This section will explore how Lichter’s filmmaking practice, defined as process-oriented and rooted in photochemical and digital manipulation, operates as a specific ritualization strategy. This involves critiquing official image regimes (like the socialist grocery ad that projected an illusion of prosperity) and symbols of national identity (the Kossuth Song), and using the act of re-appropriation to dislodge and re-contextualize them in an attempt at liberation. The film performs a material self-dismemberment (cutting, decaying, reassembling the film stock) that resonates with shamanic procedures of death and rebirth, and more specifically, the *táltos* tradition’s logic of ecstatic dismemberment, renewal, and revelation. This material process is a key feature of the film’s geographically specific critique and cultural re-appropriation. Ritualization allows the film for the deconstruction and reconstruction of cultural memory.

#### ***Ritualization***

As Catherine Bell suggests in her seminal work, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, ritual “exhibits and exaggerates real conflicts in order to release tensions and afford a type of social

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23) “BBC Sound Effects,” accessed September 30, 2025, <https://sound-effects.bbcrewind.co.uk/>.

catharsis.<sup>24)</sup> This idea has helped foster a performative approach to ritual in ritual studies. However, Bell criticizes earlier theories of ritual that reify it and strictly differentiate it from quotidian practices, thereby rendering ritualistic activities sacred. She argues that there is no sharp difference between ritual and non-ritual practices; this distinction itself is socially constructed and produced performatively. For Bell, the most important question is what people do when they develop rituals, or in other words, how they ritualize. In Lichter's case of ritualization, a cultural re-appropriation and liberation of the senses occur through the aforementioned ecstatic dismemberment, renewal, and revelation, which resonate with Hungarian shamanistic procedures. To give a little context to these local phenomena, the ideological and temporal contrast between the *táltos* tradition and the Kossuth Song provides a historical anchor for analyzing *Nutrition Fugue* as a cultural re-appropriation of contested symbols of freedom from different periods of Hungarian history.

These elements originate from vastly different eras: the *táltos* is a pre-Christian figure whose traditions were systematically erased by Prince Géza — who first embraced Christianity for strategic reasons — and later his son, King Stephen I, who consolidated Hungary as a Christian nation.<sup>25)</sup> In contrast, the Kossuth Song composed in honor of Lajos Kossuth at the beginning of the 1848–49 Revolution and War of Independence, became an emblem of the revolution, when nationalist ideologies inspired a struggle for greater autonomy within the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Kossuth is regarded as one of the greatest figures of the 19th-century struggle for national independence, the abolition of feudal privileges, and the establishment of civil liberties.<sup>26)</sup> Both, however, share a symbolic association with freedom — the *táltos* with pre-Christian Hungarian spiritual autonomy, and the Kossuth Song with revolutionary patriotism. In contemporary Hungary, both have been appropriated by the right-wing populist regime, albeit in different ways, and both now often carry ambivalent or negative connotations. These heavily loaded symbols of Hungarian national identity, along with the contradictions they embody, also reflect the limbo politics of the current regime: a desire to present itself as an autonomous, Christian, European state (recalling the prosperous decades of reconciliation after the 1848–49 rev-

24) Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 71.

25) The early Hungarians' conversion to Christianity must be understood against the background of their shamanistic, pagan belief system. As Hungarian historian Ignác Romsics notes, their religion was rooted in animistic and shamanistic practices, and although they encountered monotheistic faiths early on, none exerted a significant influence. This changed in the 10th century, when the Hungarian tribes, now settled in the Carpathian Basin and seeking stability, faced increasing geopolitical pressure. Caught between the Byzantine Empire and the Holy Roman Empire, their room for manoeuvre narrowed. In this context, Prince Géza adopted Christianity primarily for political and strategic reasons, reinforced by marriage alliances, while continuing to offer sacrifices to the old gods. His son, Stephen I, by contrast, envisioned Christianity as a tool for state-building: he established Hungary's ecclesiastical structures and enforced both the abandonment of pagan cults and the dismantling of older social forms. For more see Ignác Romsics, *Magyarország története* (Budapest: Kossuth Kiadó, 2017), 7–58.

26) Lajos Kossuth was a Hungarian statesman, Minister of Finance in the Batthyány government, President of the National Defence Committee, and later Governor-President of Hungary. To this day, he remains one of the most emblematic figures of the 1848–1849 Revolution and War of Independence in the collective memory of the Hungarian people. March 15, commemorated as the day the revolution broke out, is a national holiday.

olution) while continually aligning itself with Russia and China. At the same time, the regime has constructed narratives of grandeur around Hungarians' Central Asian ancestry (at least with regard to the original Magyar population, as the country's inhabitants were several times nearly wiped out — a fact rarely acknowledged in such narratives), selectively appropriating their belief systems and rituals to feed myths of Hungarian exceptionalism.<sup>27)</sup>

By mobilizing *táltos* procedures in its processes, *Nutrition Fugue*, made from discarded socialist-era found footage, functions simultaneously as a historical artifact and as a rupture, bringing past and present into dialogue on material, spiritual, and mnemonic levels. By incorporating symbols of Hungarian national identity such as the Kossuth Song, socialist historical objects, and shamanistic rituals, the film stages a layered critique of both past imperial and dictatorial structures and the contemporary "neoliberal present." All of these regimes, in different ways, have built on the eradication of whatever was construed as a threat, tampering with history, and creating only the illusion of prosperity — feeding people ideologies instead of actual nourishment (see Figs. 3–4).

The *táltos* procedures serve as a foundation for transformation and perceptual expansion in Lichter's film. Historically, this figure functioned as a mediator between the human and the cosmic, entering trance states — *révülés*, or "sleep-dream" — to access knowledge. This suppressed tradition, incorporated into Lichter's production process, resonates directly with the *táltos* initiation motif, which often involves symbolic death and rebirth, described as dismemberment and reconstitution. As mentioned earlier, the Hungarian verb *tált* literally means "to open wide," and Lichter's film embodies this transmutation, fostering perceptual expansion and liberating embodied ways of knowing. The Kossuth Song, in turn, embodies a historical push for freedom and a break with earlier political alignments. As a key recruiting song during the 1848–49 fight for independence, it carries echoes of resistance, now overlaid by the traces of its wanton appropriation for political and ideological ends.<sup>28)</sup> Lichter's use of the song is both critical and affectively charged. Its effect is grounded in the convergence of symbolism, memory, and the sound's materiality, enabling *tált* to take place through three entangled elements. (1) The song itself is both emblematic and a heavily loaded national symbol. (2) The song's presentation is non-tradi-

27) This is supported by social scientist Rita Hornok, who talks about Turanism within the context of Hungarian politics of memory, specifically focusing on Fidesz's Turanist narratives between 2010 and 2022. For more see Rita Hornok, "Turanism as a political myth in the context of the Hungarian politics of memory," *SOCIETY REGISTER* 9, no. 3 (2025), 77–100.

28) According to historian András Gerő, during the 1848–1949 Revolution and War of Independence, Kossuth became the unyielding representative of a free and independent homeland. By 1948, the Kossuth cult had assumed a central role, as the Communist regime sought to legitimize its power through the symbolic capital of the 1848 tradition. The revolution was reframed within both sacralized and secularized narratives that identified national heroes such as Kossuth, Petőfi, and Táncsics with the "people's" struggle for liberation under socialism. The political instrumentalization of the Kossuth cult thus became a means of redefining national identity. Although the topic is complex and cannot be reduced to a single explanatory frame, a similar mechanism can be detected in contemporary Hungary: the Orbán government's appropriation of national heroes and symbols — such as the figure of Kossuth and, in extension the Kossuth Song — serves to delineate the boundaries of "true" Hungarianness and to construct both current and perennial enemies both within and beyond the country's borders. See András Gerő, "A Kossuth kultusz," *Mozgó világ* 29, no. 4 (2004), accessed September 30, 2025, <https://epa.oszk.hu/01300/01326/00038/08gero.html>.



Figs. 3–4: Stills from *Nutrition Fugue* (Péter Lichter, 2018)

tional and re-appropriative: it first emerges hesitantly, played on an electric guitar amid intensifying noise, contrasting sharply with its traditional form used later in the film. The contemporary timbre also introduces subtle countercultural layers, operating as a critical re-contextualization (temporal, ideological) of the song. (3) This unique sound design focuses on the texture and grain of the sound to produce a visceral response, which allows the sound to bypass cognitive processing and unlock the memory of the senses. Thus, here, sound mediates an expansive perceptual state in which memory (cultural and individual) and sensation collide, echoing the *táltos*'s capacity to access other temporalities and layers of knowledge.

Along these lines, I argue that Lichter's practice can be understood as a form of ritualization, in the sense that Catherine Bell defines the term. Based on her reasoning, ritualization is always situated and strategic: it always treats, rearranges, or reinforces a situation. It does not mirror the context but strategically re-creates it. Ritual is an act that creates difference and order: it rearranges the world. It is not communication but incorporation; humans incorporate cultural schemes and memories. The body and embodied knowledge are key in the act of ritualization. The ritualized body is both the tool and the result of ritualization.<sup>29)</sup> Thus, the filmmaker's ritualization functions as the mechanism for cultural re-appropriation. I argue that Lichter reactivates symbols of freedom through ritualized filmic practice. Drawing on the concept of ritual as a strategic practice for generating embodied power, he employs a "Burial-Exhumation dialectic," which is "the iconoclastic and materialist contradiction of appropriation cinema."<sup>30)</sup> In this case, it involves the literal burial and exhumation of the film stock, its deconstruction and reconstruction in a process that transforms symbols, such as *táltos* procedures (and other practices historically cast as pagan) and the Kossuth Song (and all it carries) into sensorial, bodily memories rather than fixed political tokens.

### ***Embodiment and Haptic Strategies***

Lichter's ritualization strategy, culminating in the Burial-Exhumation dialectic, transforms abstract political symbols into visceral sensory knowledge, foregrounding embodiment as the point of interception where ritualization meets — and necessitates — haptic strategies, as the material process of ritualization produces an embodied result that can only be activated and experienced through specific sensory tools (haptics). In ritualization, bodies carry and express implicit knowledge; they are simultaneously the producers and the products of ritualized practices. This process is embodied and implicit rather than primarily verbal or representational. Lichter generates haptic images and sounds that act as tools of ritualization. These activate the viewers' bodies and the memory of their senses. On the one hand, this opens a space for acknowledging and dwelling with multiple temporalities, memories, feelings, and ideas — often at the cost of facing and experiencing dissenting-within. On the other hand, it creates the possibility of liberating and expanding the senses through the transformative powers of trance.

Thus, haptic visuality and haptic aurality are key elements to the above mentioned affective encounters that *Nutrition Fugue* enables through Lichter's gestures of ritualization. As Laura U. Marks, one of the central figures of haptic theory, puts it, haptic images demand an active, caressing gaze. The quality of these tactile images allows us to fuse with the material by moving on the object's surface, almost touching and scanning it with our eyes. However, haptic images encourage and invite a bodily relationship between the viewer and the image by being multisensory.<sup>31)</sup> Jennifer Barker in *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (2009) also stresses that tactile experiences extend beyond the sense

29) Bell, *Ritual Theory*.

30) Colectivo Los Ingrávidos, "Thesis on the Audiovisual," *Non-Fiction*, no. 3 (2021), accessed September 30, 2025, <https://opencltylondon.com/non-fiction/issue-3-space/thesis-on-the-audiovisual/>.

31) Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

of touch: they create a multiplicity of sensory experiences involving the elements of smell, taste, and hearing as well. Barker suggests that a film's texture and material quality are not simply presented to viewers but constitute intra-actions (my terminology based on Karen Barad)<sup>32)</sup> between film and viewer. Complexities otherwise hidden under the skin may arise out of this entanglement.

While often discussed concerning visuality, haptics has also been extended into sonic studies, highlighting its multifaceted role in shaping sensory engagement.<sup>33)</sup> Within this film-phenomenological context, through the tactile qualities of the image, visuality invites a kind of touch, a sense of physical intimacy between viewer and screen. Similarly, haptic sound refers to auditory experiences that resonate with the body, creating a visceral connection that bypasses conventional narrative or traditional representational modes. Lisa Coulthard, who first introduced the term "haptic aurality"<sup>34)</sup> — based on Marks's notion of haptic visuality — in cinema, proposes the idea of "listening as an act that moves beyond simply understanding what one hears."<sup>35)</sup> Focusing on sounds' texture, grain, and proximity, she examines how certain film soundtracks produce a visceral response, evoking physical and embodied sensations.

Coulthard explores how sound design can provoke an affective response through its intensity, rhythm, and texture, making the sound feel "close" and intimate, producing a haptic experience. This approach highlights sound's ability to bypass cognitive processing, engaging the body directly. Listening in this way accentuates the tactile and the experiential and is based on the felt, the corporeal, and the vibratory. Listening involves stretching toward meaning that is "not immediately accessible," positioning oneself "on the edge of meaning," and being susceptible to "the resonance of being, or being as resonance."<sup>36)</sup> However, *Nutrition Fugue* does more than produce the necessary circumstances for resonant listening by forgoing spoken language and using recordings of the song of cicadas, electronic music, noise, and the Kossuth Song. The film's haptic aurality, together with its haptic images, are tools of transmutation: they immerse the viewer in the terrain of the sensuous to induce trance-states where the sensorium may be liberated from the power of repressive and arbitrary systems.

Regarding the use of haptic images, *Nutrition Fugue* achieves them by various means; on the one hand, through literal contact (touch) between human and nonhuman agents (contact between the soil, moist and the film strip, as well as the film strip and the filmmaker), which accentuates "surface materiality" or, in other words, the "texturality"<sup>37)</sup> of

32) Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 2007.

33) Other authors discussing haptics and materiality in sonic studies include Andy Birtwistle, Irina Leimbacher and Miguel Mera among others.

34) In relation to sound, haptics manifests — much like visuality — on two levels: we can talk about haptic sound, which refers to the making of the sounds and the characteristics that arise from the specificities of the production of those sounds, and haptic listening, which concerns the reception and phenomenological aspects of haptic sounds.

35) Lisa Coulthard, "Haptic Aurality: Listening to the Films of Michael Haneke," *Film-Philosophy* 16, no. 1 (2012), 16.

36) Coulthard, "Haptic Aurality," *ibid.*, quoting Jean-Luc Nancy.

37) Gabriele Jutz, "Striking Textures, Sensuous Surfaces in Photography and Film," *Open Arts Journal*, no. 7 (2019), 11–25.

the medium as Gabriele Jutz puts it. In her 2019 article, "Striking Textures, Sensuous Surfaces in Photography and Film," Jutz discusses photographic and filmic works whose surface materiality — produced by the combination of hardware (camera/projector), software (support), and the filmmaker's mode of operation — goes beyond traditional modes of representation that in the case of *Nutrition Fugue* have become unreliable and propagandistic. She distinguishes between two procedural modes that can be strong markers of texturality. One of them is related to the different processes of camera-less filmmaking such as scratching the film, directly painting or applying different materials on the film stock; in sum, any kind of manipulation of the film by "hand or with the support of other exterior agents such as chemistry, and biological or thermic processes."<sup>38)</sup> On the other hand, Lichter also achieves haptic visuality by digitally zooming in on the images, superimposing them, or utilizing fast editing that lends the sequences dynamic movements. Jutz considers this the problem of image resolution, which may result from downloading, copying, transferring, enlarging, and even reducing or distorting, in addition to other interventions that affect the quality of the film.<sup>39)</sup>

Although *Nutrition Fugue* features recognizable images that could be seen as representational — since we can identify different kinds of meat dishes, vegetables, the machine that cuts the luncheon meat, etc. — Lichter's treatment of the material itself (throughout the film, the images gradually disintegrate) casts a critical light on the images and sounds, questioning their representational status. Indeed, as Tess Takahashi argues, contemporary avant-garde cinema focuses less on film's ability to create recognizable iconic images of the natural world (where each dish stands for itself and signifies no more than the product desired to be sold) than on its capacity to physically record the effects of the material world on its celluloid body.<sup>40)</sup> The traces of the encounter between the filmmaker, the natural world, the glue, as well as the effects of digital manipulation layered over the original material, point toward a multiplicity of experiences, temporalities, contexts, and meanings, lifting the still-recognizable images beyond their primary signification and into a space of sensorial and conceptual resonance, opening the door to understanding representation as an effect of material-discursive entanglements.

*Nutrition Fugue*, as a haptic and sensorial work, foregrounds encounters that generate embodied knowledge; as a result, Marks points out, we "hold knowledge in our body and memory in our senses."<sup>41)</sup> Inspired by her argument about intercultural cinema, I propose that in the case of *Nutrition Fugue*, bodies are active constituents of the phenomena within the material-discursive space the film creates. These bodies include the nonhuman bodies in the images — such as the meat, the vegetables, the remnants of the soil, and the glue — as well as the elements that comprise the film stock and whose presence becomes evident through decay, like cellulose, acetic anhydride, acetic acid, gelatin, and light-sen-

38) Ibid., 13.

39) Ibid.

40) Tess Takahashi, "After the Death of Film: Writing the Natural World in the Digital Age," *Visible Language* 42, no. 1 (2008), 44–69.

41) Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), xiii.

sitive silver halide crystals. They also include the body of the filmmaker and the body of the viewer.

As a specific example of individual memory, my affective encounter with Lichter's film has evoked a multitude of visceral, physical reactions, which are intricately connected to memories I believed long forgotten — memories stored in my senses. Thus, the visual and auditory haptics produced by the filmmaker, immediately reactivate culturally and geographically specific sensory memories. They include family gatherings in the mid-90s of rural Hungary that span the tactile (a waxed tablecloth, or the grip of a plastic clip keeping the tablecloth at its place), the olfactory (the scent of grilled meat or the sour smell of cheap jug wine), and the aural (the chirping of crickets conjuring a rural summer, the melody of the *Kossuth Song* evoking the memory of March 15th school celebrations) — all manifesting as a spectrum of visceral and emotional responses.

These affective responses are facilitated by the fact that the viewer's engagement constitutes a situated encounter, affirming the culturally trained body as a crucial site of knowledge production. In this context, my perception is fundamentally shaped by the same geographic and cultural milieu as the cinematic work, reinforcing the finding that knowledge is always produced within specific contexts and through dynamic intra-actions. Acknowledging this situatedness is vital, as it necessitates the understanding that each encounter with the film is unique, a situated enactment defined by each viewer's own embodied histories, cultural inscriptions, and discursive frameworks.

However, the bodies participating in these encounters are sources not only of individual but also of cultural memory. Thus, these entangled bodies not only operate on the level of sensorial perception or material intra-action, but also carry cultural and historical weight. For instance, in the context of post-socialist Hungary, the imagery of processed meat, the aesthetics of decay, and the physical disintegration of the acetate stock itself evoke not just personal but collective memories shaped by the conditions of late socialism — its infrastructures of food production, its visual regimes, and its everyday materialities.

The degradation of the filmic surface parallels the erosion of ideological structures, while simultaneously preserving their residues. Lichter transforms the archival detritus designed to manufacture a sanitized illusion of prosperity into a material that bears the traces of peripheral modernity and state socialist history. During the socialist era in Hungary, the state sought to create an image of material well-being and stability. Store shelves appeared stocked, yet this "abundance" was often deceptive — many products were of poor quality, limited variety, or only intermittently available, while first-rate products were exported to other socialist countries. The state maintained this illusion through artificial price controls and imports, masking structural inefficiencies and shortages.<sup>42)</sup> This tendency, in part, however, continues to this day. Everyday experience suggests that supermarket shelves are increasingly filled with imported goods — mostly highly processed, additive-laden products of questionable quality. Premium Hungarian goods, such as organic or artisanal foods, are less visible and significantly more expensive. Because foreign

42) For more information see János Kornai, *Economics of Shortage* (Amsterdam and New York: North-Holland, 1980); Iván T. Berend and György Ránki, *The Hungarian Economy in the Twentieth Century* (London: Croom Helm, 1985).

markets offer higher prices, many Hungarian producers choose to export their best products abroad. This tendency is partly supported by smaller studies and industry reports.<sup>43)</sup>

The film positions the problems of the socialist regime and the present system in continuation. Through his cinematic practice, Lichter performs a geographically specific ritual, an act of cultural re-appropriation through which he transmutes conflicted cultural memory. In this sense, *Nutrition Fugue* becomes a site where the past persists materially and affectively, inviting viewers to confront how history is sedimented not only in narrative or symbol, but in the very stuff of film and flesh. Multiple temporalities converge within the film. These include the deep geological time inscribed in the soil where the film was buried, evoking *táltos* procedures and through that, eras before the founding of the Hungarian state; and the echoes of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy carried through the Kosuth Song; the textures of socialist Hungary embedded in the footage itself. They also include the immediate past articulated through the filmmaker's embodied gestures and practices; and the present moment of viewing, charged with my own affective and sensory responses that open the door to personal histories besides national history. Lichter's montage logic, driven by rupture and temporal dissonance, collapses these distinct historical and personal layers into a hallucinatory simultaneity. These temporal and material layers do not merely coexist — they clash, resonate, and reconfigure one another in the spacetime of the viewing experience.

Thus, the film mediates between bodily, material, and cultural memory, reactivating historical and contemporary experience through haptic and temporal entanglements. In sum, it is through haptic strategies — here the tools of ritualization — that the film emphasizes or rather induces a trance-like perceptive expansion, where seeing, listening, and knowing take place in a “transformative space of betweenness.”<sup>44)</sup>

### *The Figure of the Táltos, Shamanistic Procedures, and Cinematic Materiality*

After the discussion of ritualization, haptic perception, and the importance of embodied knowledge, I turn again to the *táltos* tradition to articulate what kind of transformation the film enacts. The *táltos* — linked to Hungarian shamanism — provides a framework for understanding the work's investment in decay, renewal, and bodily dissolution as a material procedure rather than metaphor. In Lichter's film, decomposition, abrasion, and re-assemblage function like *táltos* practices of dismemberment and reconstitution: the image is broken apart and re-made, its textures becoming the site of perceptual initiation. Situating the film within this geographically specific shamanistic lineage clarifies how its material surface acts as the medium of transformation itself, not merely the carrier of representa-

43) For more statistical data see “A Nébih ismét felmérte a magyar élelmiszerek arányát a kiskereskedelmi láncok kínálatában,” *Nébih*, March 17, 2021, accessed September 30, 2025, <https://portal.nebih.gov.hu/-/anebih-ismet-felmerte-a-magyar-elelmiszerek-aranyat-a-kiskereskedelmi-lancok-kinalataban>; “Magyar eredetű élelmiszerek részaránya a belföldi kiskereskedelmi láncok kínálatában,” *UNIVET*, March 25, 2024, accessed September 30, 2025, <https://univet.hu/hu/2024/03/magyar-eredetu-elelmiszerek-reszaranya-a-belfoldi-kiskereskedelmi-lancok-kinalataban>.

44) Jennifer M. Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 15.

tion. What emerges is a filmic practice that works like a ritual transmuting historical visual and aural residues and opening the viewer to a widened sensorium grounded in place-based, *táltos*-derived materiality.

Some form of shamanism was practiced on most continents throughout history. While in certain regions we can speak of traditions that are still alive today, in others, such as the Hungarian context, shamanistic practices gradually receded and were largely erased from cultural and religious life with the establishment of Christianity as a state religion. In turning to Lichter's filmmaking through this lens, I understand *táltos* procedures not as ethnographic survivals but as material strategies capable of re-appropriating cultural memory and expanding perception beyond dominant representational regimes. This is where the conceptual framework of Colectivo Los Ingrávidos becomes essential. Their "Thesis on the Audiovisual"<sup>45)</sup> repositions experimental filmmaking as a shamanic materialism — a practice of burial and exhumation, of destroying images in order to transmute them into new forms of knowledge. While their work emerges from a Mexican cosmology, I draw on their terminology because it offers a precise vocabulary for processes I see locally embodied in Lichter's *táltos*-derived procedures: material dismemberment, ritual re-bonding, and perceptual rebirth. The value of Colectivo Los Ingrávidos, then, is not to impose a foreign model, but to situate *táltos* practice within the field of filmic shamanic materiality — a form of *táltos*-inflected shamanic matter where the film-body undergoes ritual breaking and rebinding. In this shared field, geographically specific rituals (Hungarian/Mexican) operate through analogous logics of decomposition and transformation, while retaining culturally distinct inflections.

Regarding shamanistic traditions, as Mircea Eliade's foundational study on shamanism demonstrates, the ecstatic techniques central to shamanic practice — such as soul-flight, spiritual dismemberment and reintegration, and communication with spirits — appear across Siberian, Central Asian, and Indigenous American cultures, among others. Eliade emphasizes that shamanism is not merely a system of belief but a "technique of ecstasy" through which the practitioner voluntarily enters altered states of consciousness to access cosmic realms, heal, or gain knowledge. These altered states are marked by out-of-body travel, often to the Upper or Lower Worlds, and by visionary encounters with spirits or ancestors.<sup>46)</sup>

Such shamanic tradition was also present in pre-Christian East-Central Europe. In Hungarian tradition, the *táltos* occupies a similar mediatory role: one chosen from birth or by fate as a conduit between the human and the cosmic. As I already mentioned, the *táltos* entered trance states — *révülés* — through which they accessed celestial knowledge, healed, and warned the nation of danger. The *táltos*'s ecstatic journey often involved the symbolic death and rebirth of the self, akin to the initiatory visions of dismemberment and reconstitution described by Eliade in his accounts of Yakut shamans. Both figures undergo visionary metamorphosis that aligns them with a sacred temporality — what Mar-

45) In the Mexican context, the relationship between shamanic practices and experimental film has a longer history; nonetheless, the collective re-introduced this line of thought into contemporary experimental film discourse.

46) Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. Willard R. Trask (London: Arkana, 1989).

garet Stutley, a scholar of religion and folklore, calls a state in which “primordial time” is accessed and linear temporality is suspended. This experience, often accompanied by enhanced sensory perception and the symbolic collapse of temporal sequence, allows shamans to “see in darkness” and make contact with an otherwise hidden order of reality.<sup>47)</sup> As ethnographer Éva Pócs notes, the initiation motif of the *táltos*, echoing other Eurasian shamanic procedures, includes “*dismemberment–bone removal–re-assembly/resurrection, and the cooking, ingesting and vomiting up of the candidate*” (italics in original).<sup>48)</sup> Similarly, ethnographer Ildikó Kríza describes the *táltos* — who may appear in human or animal form — as one who “can see the future, change its shape, and, more rarely, is able to be reborn.”<sup>49)</sup> Margit Tóth, a researcher of religions and folklore, also describes the figure of the *táltos* (whether male or female) as someone capable of traveling across realms and communicating with spirits of nature, animals, weather, and ancestors. The *táltos* could interpret dreams and heal illnesses. They often experienced visions and were therefore also called *látók* (“those who see”) or watchers. Through their journeys between realms, they were able to gain sacred knowledge or receive prophecies.<sup>50)</sup>

In connecting *táltos* procedures to Lichter’s film, I will evoke Los Ingrávidos’ proposal. The collective argues that experimental cinema can operate as a form of shamanistic practice inasmuch as it may open liminal spaces, reconfigure perceptions, and guide viewers through altered states of awareness.<sup>51)</sup> Lichter’s practice, as I mentioned earlier, guides the viewers through and toward altered states of awareness akin to the *táltos*’s travels across realms and time planes to obtain knowledge that otherwise would not be accessible. *Nutrition Fugue* guides the viewers across these realms through its ritualizing treatment of the film strip, which echoes the *táltos*’s death and rebirth through which, ultimately, this hidden knowledge might be acquired and the perception liberated. Regarding Lichter’s methodology, I also find it useful to evoke the collective’s formulation of the “three shamanic procedures,” namely “*perspectivist possession, transformational conversion and speculative bonding*”<sup>52)</sup> (italics in original).

The collective criticizes how official image regimes — such as in this case, the Hungarian socialist state’s visual regime — construct seemingly coherent and overdetermined representations that suppress antagonism and ambiguity.<sup>53)</sup> They advocate for a “cinema of

47) Margaret Stutley, *An Introduction to Shamanism* (London: Routledge, 2003), 29–30.

48) Éva Pócs, “The Hungarian Táltos and the Shamanism of Pagan Hungarians: Questions and Hypotheses,” *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica* 63, no. 1 (2018), 173.

49) Ildikó Kríza, “Táltos as a Supernatural Being in Hungarian Tales and Legends,” *Ethnographica et Folkloristica Carpathica*, no. 5–6 (1988), 257.

50) Margit Tóth, *Mágia: Hungarian Myth, Magic and Folklore* (Woodbury: Lewellyn Worldwide, 2024).

51) Colectivo Los Ingrávidos, “Thesis on the Audiovisual.”

52) *Ibid.*

53) It is important to note that Los Ingrávidos’ discourse is, in many respects, sympathetic to socialist thought, and their concept of “shamanic materialism” is explicitly informed by Marxist theory. At the same time, the application and lived realities of Marxist, socialist, or communist principles have varied significantly across distinct cultural and historical contexts. The present analysis therefore refers to a specific manifestation of socialism — namely, the state-socialist framework of late-1970s to mid-1980s Hungary — rather than to Marxism as a philosophical tradition or to socialism in general. This distinction is not intended to contest the positive or transformative dimensions of these intellectual lineages. It should also be acknowledged that Los Ingrávidos’ critique of “official image regimes” is shaped by their own geopolitical and cultural context,

appropriation" (a form of the political cinema of agitation) that entails an "aberrant sensory practice."<sup>54)</sup> Although I have argued that in Licher's case his gesture culminates in a ritualistic form of cultural re-appropriation, his cinematic ritualization does entail an aberrant sensory practice, which manifests in the literal act of burial; a "funerary trance," as Los Ingrávidos put it. In *Nutrition Fugue*, the reused footage — originally a socialist-era television advertisement showcasing an abundance of food products available in grocery stores (*közért*), creating the illusion of having a wide range of choices — exemplifies such a strategy. These images sought to produce not a sense of collective agency, but a managed impression of prosperity, sufficiency, and satisfaction. These images are dislodged from their original function through Licher's embodied gestures of literal burying, decaying, and exhumation, which physically alter the film material.

As Los Ingrávidos state, the act of burying images and sounds constitutes the kinetic trance state inherent to the appropriated audiovisual document. Every gesture of appropriation sets into motion and affirms the document's opacity. This opacity, as a sensory attribute, initiates the Burial-Exhumation dialectic. That dialectic embodies the materialist and iconoclastic tension at the core of appropriation cinema. Within it, the Burial and Exhumation dialectic also expresses the testimonial aspect of the appropriative act.<sup>55)</sup> This rupture inherent in appropriation is what they determine as shamanic possession, conversion, and bonding.

The material undergoes a kind of shamanic, perspectivist *possession* described by Los Ingrávidos as a "sensory outburst," in which the filmmaker reclaims the footage as unstable, affective matter in constant becoming. This affective and performative process culminates in the shamanic *conversion* explained as a "hyperkinetic stasis."<sup>56)</sup> Indeed, in Licher's film, the material goes through a deep transformation and opens up to other temporalities, meanings, and other modes of perceiving and knowing, holding the explosive energy of motion in tension, almost frozen in its own intensity in a trans-like suspension.

In these shamanistic procedures, the body and its processes play a key role. The repeatable biological cycle of life, decay, and renewal is mirrored in the ritual logic of the *táltos*. During the initiation process, the symbolic act of ingesting and vomiting up the candidate enacts a ritualized version of the biological cycle of metabolism and transformation. The initiate undergoes a simulated material death — often represented through dismemberment or cooking — followed by rebirth through reassembly or expulsion. This chaotic and transformative procedure reflects the fundamental necessity of breaking down and reconstituting matter to sustain life. Licher's *Nutrition Fugue* performs a parallel process on the material level of film.

The work focuses on images of food, particularly processed meat, which themselves belong to the nutrient cycle of life sustenance. The filmmaker subjects the celluloid mate-

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and such regimes may differ considerably from one context to another. In the Hungarian case, the relevant "official image regime" was produced by the socialist state leadership, which constructed the "seemingly coherent and overdetermined visual representations that suppress antagonism and ambiguity" — precisely the conditions described in the collective's thesis.

54) Ibid.

55) Ibid.

56) Ibid.

rial — an archive of these images — to decay through burial and renewal through exhumation and reconstitution. The decomposing film emulsion thus stages the return of organic matter, both the celluloid and the depicted food, to the soil's continuous process of mattering, affirming that “it is impossible to make a distinction in any absolute sense between creation and renewal, beginning and returning, continuity and discontinuity, here and there, past and future.”<sup>57)</sup> This logic of cyclical transformation also resonates with Hungarian burial customs that incorporate food, linking the linear human life cycle (birth and death) to a non-linear, ongoing cycle of sustenance and remembrance.<sup>58)</sup>

Los Ingrávidos' term, speculative *bonding*, “involves the vindication of the irrational character of testimony as well as its supernatural drift.”<sup>59)</sup> *Nutrition Fugue* affirms the value of testimony in its most expansive sense: one that emerges through the encounters between the appropriated material, the soil that holds its burial and exhumation, the filmmaker's embodied intent, and the viewer's situated experience. *Nutrition Fugue* operates within an “Aesthetics of Trance,”<sup>60)</sup> recognizing that truth may reside in affective intensities, sensory impressions, and irrational or visionary states rather than concrete fact. This allows testimony to slip beyond ordinary perception, becoming a living, shifting presence. The film achieves this through formal techniques, including the dense layering of superimposed materials, haptic textures, halting rhythms, and hypnotic repetition of the appropriated footage. These elements generate a perceptual agitation and a tactile visual field that unsettles the original advertisement's neutrality, drawing the viewer into mediate states of perception where sensation blurs into trance. In this altered mode of encounter, appropriation becomes a ritualistic and affectively charged practice, where memory and emotional residue cling to the visual surfaces. By inhabiting this aesthetic zone, the film stages a collision between materialist critique and shamanic drift, mobilizing the buried histories within the image while affirming the film's capacity to transmit meanings that exceed rational comprehension (see Figs. 5–6).

The film affirms the testimonial value of the encounter itself, allowing a broad spectrum of responses — emotions, visions, tactile and auditory resonances — to emerge as carriers of meaning. The sonic and visual agitation induced by its fragmentary but texturally dense montage and flickering rhythm disturbs perception, guiding it into mediate states in which memory and sensation collide. The document becomes a trance-inducing medium of exhumed fragments, irrational truths, and spectral presences. *Nutrition Fugue* thus enacts an appropriation practice that is at once materialist and shamanic, drawing on the sedimented weight of cultural and personal history while drifting toward otherworldly perceptual zones.

This dynamic can also be situated in East-Central Europe's post-socialist and post-imperial context, a region whose entangled historical condition, as both a self-identified Eu-

57) Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, ix.

58) For instance, in a Transdanubian village, the practice of placing food and drink into the mouth of the deceased explicitly aims to sustain the dead through the liminal passage of transition, binding the continuity of nourishment to death. See Tekla Dömötör, *Hungarian Folk Beliefs* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 262.

59) Colectivo Los Ingrávidos, “Thesis on the Audiovisual.”

60) *Ibid.*



Figs. 5–6: Stills from *Nutrition Fugue* (Péter Lichter, 2018)

ropean subject and a repeatedly subordinated periphery, haunts its cultural productions. As I already pointed out, scholars like Dorota Kołodziejczyk and Siegfried Huigen argue, East-Central Europe is marked by an “inherently contradictory in-betweenness,”<sup>61)</sup> shaped by the simultaneous aspiration to belong to Europe and the internalized perception of not quite measuring up to its normative ideals. The spectral qualities of *Nutrition Fugue*’s im-

61) Siegfried Huigen and Dorota Kołodziejczyk, “Introduction,” in *East-Central Europe between the Colonial and the Postcolonial in the Twentieth Century*, eds. Siegfried Huigen and Dorota Kołodziejczyk (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 1.

agery can thus be read as symptomatic of this liminal geography — a kind of sensory palimpsest where the residues of interrupted modernities and suspended promises of progress become affectively available through cinematic trance. The archival detritus repurposed in the film (advertising fragments once designed to manufacture desire and project a sanitized vision of socialist prosperity) returns here as haunted material, bearing traces of a peripheral modernity shaped less by colonial expansion than by a persistent anxiety of exclusion from it. In this light, the film's invocation of ritual, repetition, and altered perception may be understood not only as an aesthetic strategy, but also as a post-secular attempt to metabolize the region's fractured modernities — its state socialist past, neoliberal present, and the long shadow of a Europe that remains both an object of longing and a site of alienation.

In short, through *táltos* practices, Lichter invokes a cosmology in which fragmentation and trance function as thresholds of transformation and renewal. This visceral reworking enacts a ritual unmaking of cinematic form, opening perceptual states where memory, trauma, and myth coexist as affective rather than narrative knowledge. *Nutrition Fugue* does not depict; it performs knowledge. The film becomes a vehicle for ecstatic encounters, a trance-apparatus through which otherwise inaccessible truths may surface. Here lies the film's contribution to the discourse on contemporary experimental cinema, particularly in terms of geographic specificity and shamanic materiality: *Nutrition Fugue* articulates a distinctly Hungarian variant of filmic shamanic materiality. In Lichter's work, the *táltos* paradigm reveals how cinema itself may operate as *táltos matter* — a transformative medium of testimony, trance, and historical exhumation. The shamanic here is methodological, enacted at the level of cinematic material where burial, dismemberment, and rebirth unfold.

## Conclusion

Péter Lichter's experimental film, *Nutrition Fugue*, emerges as a performative event, a material-discursive phenomenon that resists linear interpretation and instead invites situated, affective participation. The film operates at the intersection of process-oriented filmmaking practice that is founded in a participatory view of cinema, which resonates with the idea of ritualistic transformation, mobilizing cinema's potential to reconfigure not just meaning, but the very fabric of matter, space, and time. Through the burial and exhumation of socialist-era footage, the filmmaker does not simply repurpose archival material — he entangles it with soil, gesture, decay, and sensory affect, through which new configurations of the world come into being.

The gesture of performative ritualization extends to the viewer's embodied engagement. Through haptics, the film fosters an affective and performative encounter with the viewer, shaping the conditions of things as they emerge in experience. Watching *Nutrition Fugue* becomes a situated encounter, a trance-like mode of knowing in which historical sediment, personal and cultural memory, and sensory agitation collide. In this way, the film participates in shamanic possession, transformational conversion, and speculative bonding — cinematic procedures that rupture representational regimes and open liminal

spaces for affective and epistemological transformation. The film thus blurs the boundary between political critique and visionary experience, grounding its radical gesture in materialist aesthetics.

In this respect, Lichter's film aligns with the shamanic practice of the *táltos*-like gesture — opening, transmuting, surrendering — which emerges as both a formal and spiritual strategy: the film becomes a ritual site where dead images are reanimated, their vibrations disturbing dominant histories and narratives and opening viewers to trance-like, cosmic ways of knowing. In this trance-state, a collective dreaming may take place with the past that is not fixed, but alive and polytemporal. In excavating buried matter and conjuring aberrant sensorialities, *Nutrition Fugue* enacts a filmic ritualization: a cultural re-appropriation of historical narratives, aesthetics, and the senses.

Situated within the post-imperial and post-socialist conditions of East-Central Europe, *Nutrition Fugue* performs a regional testimony grounded in the geographically specific ritualization strategy of *táltos* procedures. It dislodges the visual residues of a once-regimented social order, and through haptic strategies, revealing the affective layers of a landscape shaped by historical fractures and shifting ideological terrains (the time of the Magyar tribes and their pre-Christian, shamanistic religion, the period of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, the Russian occupation of Hungary, and the present populist regime). The resulting cinematic space is one of historical dissonance and sensory excess, where testimony pulses through image, sound, and matter as a living, metamorphic presence.

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## Filmography

*8th October 2016* (Péter Lichter and Bori Máté, 2016)  
*Barokk Femina* (Péter Lichter, 2020)  
*Empty Horses* (Péter Lichter, 2019)  
*Frozen May* (Péter Lichter, 2017)  
*George's Poem* (Péter Lichter, 2018)  
*Non-Places: Beyond the Infinite* (Péter Lichter, 2016)  
*Nutrition Fugue* (Péter Lichter, 2018)  
*The Grey Machine* (Péter Lichter, 2025)  
*The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (Péter Lichter, 2022)  
*The Philosophy of Horror: A Symphony of Film Theory* (Péter Lichter and Bori Máté, 2020)  
*The Rub* (Péter Lichter and Bori Máté, 2018)

## Biography

**Bori Máté** is currently an FWF ESPRIT post-doctoral researcher in the Department of Media Theory, at the University of Applied Arts Vienna, where she also completed her doctoral studies in 2025. She studied film history and film theory at the Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest. Her current research focuses on experimental cinema, elemental media and alchemy. Máté has been publishing articles in such journals as the *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* and the *Millennium Film Journal*. She guest edited the special issue (2/2023) called “(Eco)Traumatic Landscapes in Contemporary Audiovisual Culture” at the Czech Journal for Film Theory, History, and Aesthetics, *Iluminace*. As an experimental filmmaker, her works have been screened at festivals like the Berlin Critics’ Week, the International Film Festival Rotterdam, or the Jihlava IDFF. In May 2022 Máté also curated the program “Eco Cinema” (screening and lecture) — a collaboration between the joint university program Lectures for Future and the Department of Media Theory.

Email: barbatrukk1@gmail.com