



Constructing a Hero

From Physical Labour to Historical Discourses

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Summary

Taking the excavation and reburial of Imre Nagy and other executed martyrs of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution as a starting point, this project investigates the physical work involved in reshaping historical narratives. It examines how objects such as statues, memorials, and graves are relocated, renovated, and altered, as political actors seek to define desired futures by reinterpreting the past. Who are the people who do the physical labour that has to be done for societal paradigm shifts, and how do they interpret their role? By examining the perspectives of these workers, this research seeks to broaden the concept of heroism and explore the interplay of labor, memory, and societal change in Hungary. The research will serve as a foundation for a creative film project that merges archival material with original contemporary documentary footage.

Introduction

In this report, I describe my creative research process at the Blinken Open Society Archive. I start by describing my original plan and research question, whereafter I outline the insights and findings that have shaped the current development of my documentary film project. The writing of this paper concludes my first research phase, setting the foundation for the practical work to bring these narratives to the screen.

Original plan

I arrived at OSA with the aim to research the representations of heroism and martyrdom in late socialist Hungary and how heroes are (re)imagined in narratives of freedom ever since. At first, my archival research on heroism and martyrdom focussed on film material from one specific location: Heroes' Square. Built in the time of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the square has seen many different political realities, and the statues of the Millennium Monument on the square shifted with the various ideologies and narratives of historical heroism. There were constantly different heroes to honour. Heroes' Square is, however, not only a place where historical figures are honoured, but it is also a place where new heroes arise. Such as in 1989, during the reburial of Imre Nagy and other prominent figures of the 1956 Revolution, when Viktor Orbán gave his famous speech that would catapult him into the center of Hungarian politics.

This reburial was the starting point of my research. It specifically interested me because of the many layers of memory politics; how determining the fate of historical figures represents opportunities to imagine desired futures. How can the act of venerating heroes, in turn, elevate the venerator?

As an artist, I planned to perform my research associatively. I did not work towards a theoretical contribution or argument, but towards an artistic intervention, and as such started to work on a creative filmplan inspired by my research findings at OSA.

The reburial

To explore the various notions of heroism during Imre Nagy's reburial, I began by examining audiovisual recordings by Hungarian Television and by the Black Box Video Archive. In addition, I consulted several academic analyses and reviewed translated speeches that were held during the reburial, including the speech of Viktor Orbán.

I came to understand how the communist party was trying to 'remake' history, using Nagy's name and his physical remains, out of fear for another revolution like in 1956. However, they ultimately failed in their attempt, and unwittingly contributed to the end of socialism in Hungary.¹ Orbán, however, did succeed in using the historical moment to make political claims about a desired future. With his sharp analysis of what the party was trying to do with this reburial, his speech caused a sensation. He demanded democratic elections, and an end to 'the communist dictatorship'.

¹ Rév, I. (2005). *Retroactive justice: prehistory of post-communism*. Stanford University Press.

This pivotal historical moment is beautifully captured in the VHS material of the Black Box Foundation. The footage is striking not only for its historical significance but also for its distinct cinematographic approach. Rather than focusing solely on the reburial ceremony itself, the camera captures the audience, the atmosphere, and the broader scenes unfolding around the event on the streets of Budapest. After watching several documentaries of Black Box, I also started watching their raw footage, to be able to hold these two next to each other and analyse their editing methods and decisions. This comparison allowed me to investigate the narrative choices made by Black Box: what story were they trying to tell about this moment? What shots did they pick, and how did the edit transform them into cohesive narrative documentaries?

This approach illuminated Black Box's emphasis on the audience's reception of the reburial. The filmmakers selected emotionally charged shots of people in the audience, and edited them in between happenings on stage, making the viewer pay attention not just to what was happening on stage, but mostly to the audience's reception of what was happening. As if the filmmakers were suggesting that the actual history was not being written with the event itself, but with how people gave meaning to the event, and what they made out of it. The film crew even filmed how people were watching the live television broadcast of the reburial in private homes or public café's, and how a group of young adults listened to a live radio broadcast. This framing powerfully conveys the emotional complexity of the moment, illustrating how individuals aligned themselves with the legacy of the 1956 revolution in diverse, deeply personal ways.

This work summarizes the initial phase of my research at OSA. I engaged with the mentioned historical recordings with the awareness that nowadays, memories of the 1956 revolution have shifted significantly, and the collective memory of 1989 is also constantly changing. During my stay in Budapest in 2024, Viktor Orbán's October 23 speech, commemorating the 1956 revolution, vividly illustrated this shift. In his speech, Orbán reframed the anti-communist legacy of 1956 within a conservative framework, presenting it as a nationalist uprising. This interpretation allowed him to evoke nationalist and anti-EU sentiments, illustrating how contemporary political agendas continue to shape historical narratives.

Remains

To better understand how changes in historical narratives work, I used Maya Nadkarni's concept of remains, which she describes as the material and symbolic remnants of the past—such as monuments, artifacts, and memories—that persist in the present and become sites of ideological contestation.² These remains are not just relics; they are actively reinterpreted, preserved, or discarded to negotiate and reshape historical narratives, collective memory, and identity.

One illustrative example Nadkarni discusses is Budapest's Memento Park, exhibiting socialist statues that were removed from public space after 1989. In the early 1990s, as Nadkarni describes, Memento Park represented a rejection of the socialist past and served as an assertion of

² Nadkarni, M. (2020). *Remains of Socialism: Memory and the futures of the past in postsocialist Hungary*. Cornell University Press.

dominance over socialist relics, that no longer belonged to public space, but to a museum. Today, however, this sentiment feels misplaced, because a lot of hopes and sentiments of the early 90s did not fully materialise.³ As a result, the Memento Park now functions as a memory to itself. As the relics of the failed hopes of transition, causing nostalgia not for what was, but for what should have been. The park now mostly seems to evoke memories of the intentions with which the statues were replaced after the fall of the iron curtain.

Combining this concept of remains with the rhetorical shift of Orbán on, '56, I started looking at current-day physical 'remains,' such as statues, and how they are changed and replaced on the basis of Fidesz's narratives on history and heroism. A recent example is the replacement of the statue of Imre Nagy from Martyrs' Square to the less central Jászai Mari Square. Another example, one that is happening at the time of writing in November 2024, is the renovation of the Liberty Statue at Gellért-hegy. This renovation is part of a bigger project, entailing the entire citadel, but the modifications to the Liberty Statue itself are particularly revealing. On the place where once in the past stood a Soviet Soldier of the Red Army, now a Christian Cross will be installed, perfectly in line with Orbán's Christian Nationalist politics.

I started visiting these contemporary remains and took photos of the construction work being done. I found that the physical appearance of the statues under construction symbolised a lot of the theoretical research I had done so far. It inspired me to shift my focus to the physical labour involved in the reshaping of historical events. Thus, where Nadkarni mostly writes on the symbolic aspects of remains, I decided to concentrate on the very tangible aspects.



Photo by author
Budapest, October 2024)



³ Nadkarni, M. (2020). *Remains of Socialism: Memory and the futures of the past in postsocialist Hungary*. Cornell University Press.

This focus on physical labor led me to revisit footage from *Black Box*, not of the reburial itself but of the exhumation of Imre Nagy and other prominent figures of the 1956 revolution prior to their reburial. These recordings vividly depict the physical work that has to be done to rewrite history, and re-honour people that were previously ought to be forgotten. It is this physical work of the archeologists, the digging, the brushing, the analysing, that on the one hand seems detached from the symbolic meaning of the reburial, but on the other hand, it is the only actual, physical changes that are being made in order to achieve the desired rhetorical change. This is where Maya's concept of remains becomes very literal. It is the physical remains of the martyrs that serve as a means to rewrite history. The remains of the martyrs become a subject of ideological contestation; they are actively re-interpreted, leading to a physical re-burial.

Development of filmplan

Throughout my historical and academic research at OSA, I always tried to maintain an artistic perspective, relating myself and my film language to the stories and theories I encountered. Building on this foundation, I am now developing a film plan on the physical work involved in reshaping historical narratives. I focus on how objects such as statues, memorials, and graves are relocated and renovated, based on how political actors try to re-write the past to define desired futures. Who are the people who do the physical labour that has to be done for societal paradigm shifts, and how do they interpret their role? By examining the perspectives of these workers, I want to try and broaden the concept of heroism and explore the interplay of labor, memory, and societal change in Hungary.

I plan to combine archival footage of the 1989 excavations with contemporary footage of my own hand, as I follow the people responsible for renovations and adjustments to statues and memorials. Inspired by *Black Box's* innovative approach—especially its focus on audience reception—I aim to introduce a new perspective that centers not on the reception but on the production process. Within this (re)production process, my focus will not include activists who alter, replace, or damage statues to convey a message. Instead, I will turn my attention to the commissioned workers involved in the ongoing transformation of these monuments. My interest lies in those individuals who may not act from a specific ideological standpoint but rather engage in this work primarily due to their employment circumstances. By examining their roles, I seek to understand how paid labor intersects with the processes of historical and cultural transformation.

The aim of this project is not to define a history of the '56 revolution, or of '89, nor is it to merely explore Fidesz's historical construction of this past. It is to investigate the physical process of this historical reconstruction and the people behind it. By emphasizing these tangible actions, I aim to render the more abstract, rhetorical process visible and accessible to a broader audience. I show the step that is often forgotten: the step in between the intention of re-writing history and the outcome.

List of consulted documents

Call Number	Title
HU OSA 305-0-3:834/2	Imre Nagy's Funeral Ceremony on Heroes' Square and in Rákoskeresztúr Cemetery
HU OSA 305-0-2:13/1	Funeral Ceremony of Imre Nagy
HU OSA 305-0-3:126/1	Ceremony and Reburial of Imre Nagy on Heroes' Square and Rákoskeresztúr Cemetery. Camera A
HU OSA 305-0-3:128/1	Ceremony and Reburial of Imre Nagy on Heroes' Square and Rákoskeresztúr Cemetery. Camera B
HU OSA 305-0-3:829/1	Imre Nagy's Funeral Ceremony on Heroes' Square and in Rákoskeresztúr Cemetery (2)
HU OSA 305-0-3:830/1	Imre Nagy's Funeral Ceremony on Heroes' Square and in Rákoskeresztúr Cemetery (3)
HU OSA 305-0-3:127/1	Ceremony and Reburial of Imre Nagy on Heroes' Square and Rákoskeresztúr Cemetery. Camera A (2)
HU OSA 305-0-3:127/2	Ceremony and Reburial of Imre Nagy on Heroes' Square and Rákoskeresztúr Cemetery. Camera B (2)
HU OSA 305-0-3:127/3	Ceremony and Reburial of Imre Nagy on Heroes' Square and Rákoskeresztúr Cemetery. Camera B (3)
HU OSA 305-0-3:127/4	Ceremony and Reburial of Imre Nagy on Heroes' Square and Rákoskeresztúr Cemetery. Camera B (4)
HU OSA 305-0-3:554/2	Removal of a Statues from Public Areas
HU OSA 305-0-7:205/3	Day End News (June 5th 1989)
HU OSA 305-0-2:86/1	Funeral Ceremony of Imre Nagy (2)
HU OSA 305-0-2:90/1	The People Demand. Part 1
HU OSA 305-0-2:91/1	The People Demand. Part 2
HU OSA 305-0-1:4/1	Original handwritten script lists to footage produced June–December 1989
HU OSA 320-1-2:99/1	Gyula Hidegkuti Home Movies
HU OSA 320-1-2:292/1	Mrs. Mihály Polcsán Home Movies
HU OSA 320-1-2:319/3	Polacsek Home Movies
HU OSA 320-1-2:385/1	[Unidentified Home Movie]
HU OSA 320-1-2:444/2	[Unidentified Home Movie]
HU OSA 320-1-2:446/1	[Unidentified Home Movie]
HU OSA 320-1-2:101/2	Urbach Home Movies
HU OSA 388-0-1:4/8	Party at Someone's House
HU OSA 305-0-7:160/3	News, First Edition

Call Number	Title
HU OSA 388-0-1:18/3	The Oravetz Family
HU OSA 305-0-2:5/1	New Hungarian Lament 1
HU OSA 305-0-2:6/1	New Hungarian Lament 2
HU OSA 305-0-2:7/1	New Hungarian Lament 3
HU OSA 305-0-3:89/1	Interview with Viktor Orbán
HU OSA 305-0-3:90/1	Interview with Viktor Orbán
HU OSA 305-0-3:791/1	Interview with Viktor Orbán
HU OSA 339-2-2:5/2	16/6/1991
HU OSA 339-2-1:1/3	Drót program 3
HU OSA 305-0-3:125/2	Exhumation of the Martyrs of 1956. Part 6
HU OSA 305-0-3:783/2	Exhumation of the Martyrs of 1956
HU OSA 305-0-3:548/1	Removal of a Statue
HU_OSA_10000943	1989.07.02 Napzárta adás [1989]
HU OSA 386-2-5	Forensic photography Physicians for Human Rights
HU OSA 339-2-1:111/1	Drót archival background
HU OSA 339-2-1:112/1	Drót archival background
HU OSA 339-2-1:113/1	Drót archival background
HU OSA 339-2-1:114/1	Drót archival background
HU OSA 339-2-1:115/1	Drót archival background
HU OSA 339-2-1:116/1	Drót archival background
HU OSA 339-2-1:117/1	Drót archival background
HU OSA 339-2-1:118/1	Drót archival background
HU OSA 339-2-1:119/1	Drót archival background

Consulted literature

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