

BEYOND THE SURFACE, BENEATH THE SKIN: IMMANENCE AND
TRANSCENDENCE IN GYÖRGI PÁLFI'S FILMS

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What is a “religious film?” This somewhat vague umbrella term has been used to designate movies depicting religious matters of different sorts, for example movies that tell a canonical religious story (like Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Ten Commandments*, 1956); movies that depict religious leaders (like Bernardo Bertolucci’s *Little Buddha*, 1993); or movies that reflect on the role of faith in a more general way (like Xavier Beauvois’ *Des hommes et des dieux / Of Gods and Men*, 2010).¹ In this sense, the internationally acclaimed movies of young Hungarian director Györgi Pálfi would probably not qualify as religious. His first film, *Hukkle* (2002), which meticulously observes the everyday course of events in a small Hungarian village, only casually depicts religious rituals like funerals or a wedding. Pálfi’s second movie *Taxidermia* (2006) that explores three episodes of Hungarian history does so without referring to religion at all.²

On closer examination, however, there seem to be some not-so-obvious references to religion in both movies. On the one hand, these references are to be found in motifs and iconographies that both movies’ first sequences evoke. *Hukkle* starts with close-ups of a dark, flaked surface which turns out to be the skin of a snake. The fact that the movie forces its viewers to share this snake’s perspective can be read as a first hint that not everything is paradisiacal in the small village explored by the movie. In the biblical story it is Eve who hands over the calamitous apple to Adam; in *Hukkle* the women deal out evil food to their men, poisoning them with lilies-of-the-valley. The first sequence of *Taxidermia* depicts skin as well. This human skin appears lit by a candle—an image that evokes Baroque *chiaroscuro* paintings depicting Christian scenes (e.g. George de La Tour). Iconographical references like these—references that both movies will

¹ See the articles in Lyden, *Religion and Film*; especially the overview in Anker, “Narrative.”

² Both movies received international prizes. *Taxidermia* was premiered at the Cannes film festival, in the *Un certain regard* section. Two of *Taxidermia*’s three episodes are based upon short stories by Lajos Parti Nagy (included in the collection *A hullámszó Balaton*, 1994).

subsequently also deconstruct³—remain an exception though. More important for the movies is another dimension, which has been introduced into film studies by Paul Schrader as “transcendental style.” This dimension does not manifest itself in religious motifs but in a medial form and in the relation that this form establishes to the Holy.

In the following I will refer to Schrader’s ideas to discuss the ways in which Pálfi’s movies relate to this spiritual dimension; how they make use of cinematic possibilities to relate immanence and transcendence, to represent the Holy. If this examination, in Pálfi’s movies, is part of a surrealist aesthetic, this also raises the question of how surrealism in general is indebted to religion: What happens if elements of transcendental style become part of a surrealist aesthetic?⁴ To answer these questions it might be useful to make use of a metaphor that we have already encountered in the first sequences: the metaphor of skin.⁵ The skin is always a surface and it can be construed in two ways, one of them strictly immanent, the other transcendental. Skin, as a surface, can be perceived as something that hides something else: a deeper meaning, the interior of the body. But is there really such a thing? To be sure, we never really know, for all we see is just this, the surface. It is this ambivalence with which Pálfi’s movies self-reflexively play: By depicting surfaces or skins, they always reflect on themselves, on the nature of cinematic images as a surface possibly hiding something else.

Film and Religion: Immanence and Transcendence

There is more than one way to skin a cat and to think of the relations between film and religion. Depending on the academic framework—as proposed for example by theology, sociology, or film studies—different questions will necessarily arise. The field of film studies itself offers a couple of theoretical ways to conceive of this relation, too.⁶ The perspective that turns out to be most useful for my purposes is a perspective that

³ The snake will not remain the only animal whose perspective the movie *Hukkle* forces its viewers to share; the candle flame is, as I will discuss later, used by *Taxidermia*’s first protagonist Vendel as a tool of autosexual stimulation.

⁴ On the history of Eastern European surrealism see Schlegel, *Subversionen des Surrealen*.

⁵ On the cultural history of skin and the theoretical issues that it has brought forward, see Connor, *The Book of Skin*.

⁶ See Lyden, *Religion and Film*; Anker, “Narrative.”