

Ernst van Alphen*

On the Possibility and Impossibility of Modernist Cinema: Peter Forgács Own Death

Whereas modernism is a productive notion in literary studies and art history for the understanding of twentieth-century cultural practices, in cinema studies it is hardly viable. Cinema and modernism are an unlikely couple, for, as Peter Verstraten has argued, film scholars are adamant to contradict a history of film that would parallel the histories of older, established art forms.¹ One tries to create a unique position for cinema by keeping cinema outside the scope of modernism.

The unique position of cinema is not only caused by a different history, but also by its medium specificity. And since American art critic Clement Greenberg published his essay “Towards a Newer Laocoön” (1940) medium specificity has become an important issue in the understanding of modernism.² Greenberg considers modernism as a self-reflexive, formal focus of a medium on its own specificity. In the course of history, especially in the nineteenth-century the different art media have become hybrid in their imitation of other media. It is the “task” of twentieth-century modernism to purify media of everything that is not specific to the medium. The visual arts in general should prevent being perverted by words. And the medium of painting should get rid of the illusion of three-dimensionality, because in pursuing that illusion it rivals with the three-dimensional medium of sculpture. For Greenberg, music offers a valuable model for the other media, because as an art of immediate sensation and pure form it is less seduced by the pursuit of qualities belonging to other media than most of the other art media. Music is antithetical to literature, which focuses on subject matter.

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The Greenbergian notion of modernism implies a major problem for the new medium of cinema. Whereas other art media are supposed to have specific qual-

¹ Peter Verstraten, “A Modernist “Attempt at Cinema”: The “Impurity” of *Pierrot le Fou*,” in *Modernism Today*, eds. J. Baetens, S. Houppermans, O. Boele, P. Liebrechts, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013, 220.

² Clement Greenberg, “Towards a Newer *Laocoön*,” *Partisan Review* 7 (July-August 1940): 296–310.

* Department of Film and Literary Studies, Leiden University, The Netherlands

ities and characteristics, however polluted in the course of history by the qualities of other media, it is not clear at all how the medium specificity of Cinema can be imagined or defined. Cinema combines moving images, usually figurative, but in some practices abstract, with music and with words, spoken or written. It makes little sense to set the task for cinema as medium to purify itself of one of these aspects by arguing that the respective aspect is ultimately imported from another medium. If cinema has no qualities of its own, it makes no sense in the case of cinema to follow the project of Greenberg's notion of modernism of purifying media from what is not specific to them. Cinema, then, cannot be considered an art medium. Verstraten's answer to the dilemma impelled by Greenbergian modernism is elegant and convincing: "Cinematic expression is not to be reduced to a pure essence, since its nature is hybrid."³ The specificity of cinema resides in its synthetic nature, that is, in its impurity. A modernist cinema, then, is a cinema that not refrains from its impurity, but celebrates it and demonstrates it emphatically.

A rare example of a study of modernism in cinema that seems to follow this possibility of modernist cinema is András Bálint Kovács' *Screening Modernism: European Art Cinema 1950–1980*.⁴ He considers modernism as such as an aesthetic self-criticism of the traditions in the respective arts. Modernist painters affirmed and negated their affinities with precursors like Rembrandt, Velazquez, and Courbet. Modernist writers could do that with writers like Balzac, Flaubert, Turgenev, Tolstoy, and Dickens. But for filmmakers working in the 1920s it was not that easy. According to Jean-Luc Godard, for filmmakers working in the 1920s like Marcel Carné, Louis Delluc and René Clair, in the cinema "there was no critical or historical tradition yet".⁵ Kovács claims that because of the absence of an artistic tradition *within* cinema "early modernism was *cinema's reflection on artistic and cultural traditions outside the cinema*."⁶ Following the conception of cinematic modernism, in the decades of the 1920s and 1930s cinema can be considered as modernist insofar as it adopts inspiration from other art forms. A good example of such an early Modernist film, mentioned by Kovács, is Robert

³ Verstraten in *Modernism Today*, 227.

⁴ András Bálint Kovács, *Screening Modernism: European Art Cinema, 1950–1980*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

⁵ Godard quoted in *Ibid.*, 16.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 17. Emphasis in original.



Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920). This film drew influences from German Expressionist painting.

Inspired by Kovács notion of cinematic modernism and rewriting Greenberg's modernism, Verstraten argues that Jean-Luc Godard's *Pierrot le Fou*, taking the medium specific impurity of cinema as a guideline, "is a supreme example of modernist film because of its many ramifications in various art forms and media."⁷

Film is truly Godard's medium, because the medium lends itself to such surprising crossovers: in addition to image, film includes the option to all kinds of written texts, spoken words, sound, music, dance. This hybridization was strictly necessary as the basis for a new language whose function was to stretch conventional representations: as soon as cinema is exclusively defined in terms of visuality and reduced to pure image, it will risk fading. Film is truly film when it cultivates its hybridism. The film language propagated by Godard is based upon the idea that cinema is essentially a multilayered medium.⁸

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The fact that Godard's film uses crossovers with comic strips, advertisements, diary notes, book covers and reproductions of paintings by Matisse, Picasso, and Renoir is, then, not an adulteration of pure filmic language; it shows the modernist ambition to exploit cinema's hybridity fully.

⁷ Verstraten 2013, 234.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 233.

Modernism in Literature

In what follows I will explore another modernist attempt in cinema, this time adopting a device that is usually seen as specific for the literary text, in the sense that only in textual form the device is really possible and effective. I will examine *Own Death*, made in 2007 by Hungarian artist and filmmaker Péter Forgács, based upon the 2002 novella of the same name by Hungarian author Péter Nádas. The Modernist device that is consistently used in Nádas' novella device is the one of consistent character-bound focalization. The story told is from beginning to end presented through the eyes and experience of one focalizing subject: a middle aged man in Budapest, who does not feel well and who seems to get a heart attack. I will call the device "radical perspectivism", and it concerns a radical, that is, systematic, consistent adaptation of one point of view, or better one focalizing position.

According to present dominant visions in literary studies, high modernist fiction is characterized by formal innovation and above all, the radical subjectivization of literature. Modernism is said to be focused on the problem of mastering a chaotic modernity by means of formal techniques. The most characteristic formal techniques are ironic detachment, highly mediated and multi-perspectival narration, self-referentiality, stylistic ostentation, use of large-scale symbolic forms, and the dramatization of states of consciousness, including the author's own.⁹ Nádas novella seems to be an excellent example of this notion of modernism. It represents the state of consciousness of a man, followed during one single day, who seems to get a heart attack and will die. The device used for representing his state of consciousness is perspectival narration, more specific: consistent character-bound focalization through one single character.¹⁰

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Character-bound focalization is a narrative device notably used in realist literature. It is not Flaubert's narrator who explains to us what is going on inside the protagonist of *Madame Bovary*. Instead, we as readers are allowed direct access to her reflections, fantasies, doubts and feelings. Character-bound focalization helps to avoid explanations and comments from a narrator. It seemingly gives

⁹ Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the World Wars*, Berkeley & London: University of California Press, 1999, 17.

¹⁰ For a detailed elaboration of the concept of focalization, see Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1985, 2009.



us direct access to the sense perceptions of a character. As readers, we both feel for and sympathize with Emma Bovary.

However, character-bound focalization is not prevalent in realist literature. It alternates with introductions by a narrator, there is plenty of dialogue, and several characters take turns in focalizing. In modernist literature, the use of character-bound focalization is radicalized. Long scenes, entire chapters or even entire books are being narrated consistently from the point of view of a single character. I shall call this narrative technique aiming at consistent focalization of one single character ‘radical perspectivism.’ Virginia Woolf’s modernist novel *The Waves* (1931) is one of the most prominent examples of it. Each of the work’s six characters observes himself and the others using the narrow perspective of character-bound focalization. The six resulting observations together do not constitute one univocal story. What is striking is the discrepancy between the characters’ perceptions as well as between characters’ perceptions of themselves and the ideas others have of them.

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Flemish Louis Paul Boon’s novella *Menuet* (1955) displays a similar radical perspectivism. In this work, an event is recounted in three chapters, every chapter giving a different version of events depending on the character who is focalizing. Again, these three different accounts on the same event do not combine to make for a unified and coherent story. On the contrary, it seems as if these three characters with their individual perspectives are involved in completely different events.

The narrative concept of focalization is based on a visual metaphor: focus. This does not imply that focalization is always visual, or even sensory. It applies to any

form of subjective interpretation or perception of an object, situation or event. Yet the visual metaphor rightly indicates that focalization always involves a relationship: that between subject and object. Focalization implies that something is observed, experienced, or interpreted by a character in a particular way. It is therefore paradoxical that modernist examples of radical perspectivism seem to point to the direct opposite. Characters whose focalizations constitute the entire narrative seem to be prisoners of their own perspectives. It disables any relationship with their environment, cuts them off from other objects. It is the radical quality of this narrow perspective which causes a kind of existential isolation, barring characters from engaging with the very surroundings that are the object of their perspective. It is this radical and consistent perspectivism, so frequently occurring in modernism, which shows the two-facedness of focalization. It is not only relational but also isolating—experienced as some form of imprisonment.

Radical Perspectivism in Film

The way in which focalization isolates is shown very clearly in a few rare cases of films that employ radical perspectivism. Most films include a few point-of-view shots, shots that are presented as if coinciding with the perspective or position of a character. Films that aim for radical perspectivism however, are much rarer. Examples of this technique might be abundant in literary modernism, but in cinema narrowing down to the focalization of one character only is still considered an experiment. One example of such an experiment is the 1947 thriller *The Lady in the Lake*. The face of the protagonist, played by Robert Montgomery, can only be seen when he looks into the mirror. The entire film consists of his focalizations. Another, similar example (also a 1947 thriller) is *Dark Passage*, directed by Delmer Daves. Humphrey Bogart plays Vincent Parry, an innocent man who is accused of committing murder. He escapes from prison and has a plastic surgeon construct a new face for him. His new face should guarantee a new identity, freeing him and enabling him to start over again. The moment the bandages are removed is the first moment the spectator actually sees Bogart's face. Up to that point only his perspective was shown without actually showing him.

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What makes *Dark Passage* so interesting is the fact that the imprisonment of the main character is shown using radical perspectivism. When he was still “imprisoned” by the identity what was considered criminal, the spectator only had access to his focalization. Now that he has a different face and identity, Bogart



also becomes the object of focalization. He is no longer the person accused of a crime that would put him in jail, and so no longer the prisoner of his own gaze. His new-found freedom is represented through a range of points of view and focalizations of which he is the object. The film suggests that he is truly free the very moment he is seen by others.

A recent example of radical perspectivism in cinema Péter Forgács's *Own Death*, based on Péter Nadás's 2002 novella. Both text and film capture the diegesis entirely from the point of view of the male protagonist. He narrates us his thoughts, feelings and contemplations on the day he has a heart attack. The story is set on a sunny day in Budapest. Despite persistent chest pains, the main character leaves his apartment to visit a restaurant. When he has a heart attack in the street, he is brought to a hospital. It seems likely that he will die in there. However, he survives, after having had a near-death experience. Again, both film and text use his focalization only to convey his experience.

As conventional as such a technique would be in literature, in cinema it is surprising and unexpected. Translating character-bound focalization from a literary text to cinema is a highly unconventional move. As a visual medium, film does not convey inner thoughts and feelings as effortlessly as literature. It conveys the effect or illusion of representing the inner self—or, more formally speaking, of character-bound focalization—rather than objectively conveying that representation itself. It is possible to create the illusion that the lens of the camera and the eye of the character coincide. This is the case in *Dark Passage* and *The Lady in the Lake*. In *Own Death* however, the camera often does not coincide completely with the gaze of the character. The spectator is offered close-



ups of a part of his head, glasses, neck, or shoulders; effectively looking over his shoulder. In film studies, this type of shot is called a ‘dirty close-up’ as the elements indicating the subject position are polluting the clean close-up shot. *Own Death* also contains various shots that suggest character-bound focalization although the camera lens does not coincide with the character’s point of view. A certain passage from the film itself may explain why this is the case. The protagonist says:

Mantegna depicted Christ’s nude body in a foreshortened perspective viewed from his huge, bare soles. It was from this extreme, almost grotesquely foreshortened perspective that I looked out on my own body as it lay on the gigantic squares of the tiled floor. (2006, 231)¹¹

The extreme and limited perspective on Christ’s body created by Mantegna is described as a grotesque close-up of his own body. The protagonist emphatically characterizes this limited perspective, and thereby character-bound focalization, as grotesque in the sense of strange or excessive. The grotesque effect is caused by the extreme points of view. As the film effectively is a series of close-ups from a limited perspective, the spectator almost automatically assumes every close-up to be a point-of-view shot from the protagonist, even when formally or visually speaking that is not really the case. Even when a close-up shows the protagonist’s eye or head it seems to be a shot produced through character-bound focalization. In *Own Death*, this type of focalization cannot only be

¹¹ The film’s voice-over follows the English translation of Nádas’s work almost word for word. Therefore I refer to the page numbers of this translation when citing the film.

identified through specific sightlines but especially through the aforementioned grotesque effect.¹²

The film's dirty close-ups emphatically signify the main character's isolation before, during, and after the heart attack. Through the nature of this event, the character's imprisonment inside his own gaze receives immediate meaning. The fact that he is dying literally and figuratively cuts him off from his environment. The following passage shows he is well aware of this happening:

You don't understand what is happening, you have never experienced anything like this, yet you know exactly that this is what they call the sweat of death. An ice-cold surface covers your inner heat. You see that nothing has changed around you and so you can still comprehend that the difference between your own perception and that of others is greater than you would normally expect. A sensational experience that concerns me and no one else.¹³

Apart from getting separated more and more from other human beings, the main character's own inner sense of being is also increasingly cut off from his gaze. In *Dark Passage* and *The Lady in the Lake* subject and object of focalization coincided when looking in the mirror. In *Own Death* this does not happen: when the protagonist looks at himself in the mirror of the restaurant's bathroom, we hear the following voice-over:

I was holding out, but I wanted to see what this was. However, the most I could see in the mirror was that somebody was looking at himself. The surprising thing in all this was not my failure to identify myself with these characters looking at each other, but their waxy, gray complexion. [. . .] The sight I perceived didn't justify the sensation, and vice versa: the bodily sensation didn't justify the sight [. . .]. It wasn't I, yet theoretically I couldn't have seen anything other than my mirror image.¹⁴

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He realizes he is slowly being cut off from both his environment and his own gaze.

¹² Narrative technique can never be fully adapted for use in another medium. For more on narrative techniques and procedures in cinema, see Peter Verstraten, *Handboek filmnarratologie*, Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2006.

¹³ Nadás, 55.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 67.



This passage also clearly shows how Forgács's film and Nádas's novella are artworks on the fine line between modernism and postmodernism. The radical perspectivism created by consistent character-bound focalization singles these works out as modernist masterpieces. In that case the narrow perspective illustrates a set of epistemological issues. These concerns of knowledge prompt questions such as: how is it possible for a subject to connect to and understand his surroundings? But since *Own Death* focuses on a (near-)death experience, ontological issues are also at stake here. This means that in addition to questions on knowing the world, questions on being are also relevant; questions like: What kind of experience is dying? The examples of radical perspectivism mentioned earlier still may have passed for typically modernist works of literature or cinema. *Own Death*, by contrast, shows that if modernist strategies are applied radically and consistently, epistemological issues are abandoned in favor of ontological ones.¹⁵

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Ontological concerns come into play due to the protagonist's increasing separation from his environment. The world as he knows it starts to take on a different shape. Upon leaving the restaurant, he concludes: "My relations with everyone are more or less severed."¹⁶ He continues telling us how this has come about:

¹⁵ See Brian McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction*, New York and London: Routledge, 1987, for a reading of modernism in terms of foregrounding epistemological issues, and of postmodernism in terms of foregrounding ontological issues.

¹⁶ Nádas., 117.

Involuntary sense perception affects the mind only as long as one is capable of relating one's own experience to that of others and stores this experience in a processed form. In any case, people passed me by.¹⁷

His explanation for being severed from himself as well as from others may also explain why radical perspectivism is confined to modernism only in literature, and is barely used at all in cinema. The ability to relate one's own experiences to that of others is something that expands and increases consciousness. When a narrative strategy disables this option, a character becomes isolated (*The Waves*), imprisoned (*Dark Passage*), or dies (*Own Death*).

From the moment the main character of *Own Death* is hospitalized, he starts to lose access to his bodily and sensory perceptions. His self-awareness is what remains: "The mind deprived of its bodily sensations perceives the mechanism of thinking as its last object."¹⁸ His introspective abilities seem to increase: "I caught myself perceiving and thinking, but no longer acknowledging things within the limited conditions of bodily structures."¹⁹ These abilities are kept intact throughout the experience, even when he approaches the moment of death:

Totality does indeed realize itself in you. It carried me. Not away from my consciousness, as in fainting, but into it. What seized me was an enormous force that operates simultaneously within and without, and therefore it is pointless for consciousness to make such a distinction. We were beyond everything personal and passionate.²⁰

His ability to think and to be introspective ostensibly starts to fail when he is actually at death's door. Paradoxically, this moment is described in great detail, while it seems to cancel the possibility of doing so. He describes this moment as follows:

It is a single, short, flipping or tipping move. To tip over from somewhere and thereby end up somewhere else. In German there is a good descriptive verb, umkippen. In French, too, there is a verb for this, basculer.²¹

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 119.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 135.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 201.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 209.



This short move cancels the very thing that remained during the process of dying: his faculty of thought.

This means that, with his death, that which never really belonged to him falls away. And this thing is probably nothing else than language-bound conceptual thinking. It is through this that he was tied into the community of others. First to get rid of the constant bodily sensations, and then of that highly esteemed thinking.²²

His being barred from the society of others is represented here through the transition from first- to third-person narration. This too is a “single, short, flipping or tipping move.” The events leading up to this moment have all been narrated in the first person. From here on, however, tentative transitions to third-person narration occur several times. The third person does not implicate (the presence of) a second person like the first person does. Here, the presence of others is no longer automatically implied by the type of narration used. Form and content contradict each other in this quotation; it is a profound reflection on the loss of the capability to reflect. This suggests that this quotation does not so much capture a death experience as a near-death experience, as his ability to reflect has remained throughout.

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The connection to his surroundings is restored shortly after this particular moment. This does not only prompt the return of the first person, but also the appearance of the second person. The first person appears to observe himself from the point of view of the second person: “You look back with gentle irony. There

²² *Ibid.*, 209.

is no hurry, since you will decipher it as you move away from your life, at this pace and on these levels.”²³ The second person creates the possibility for the first person to come into existence. Character-bound focalization is no longer a form of isolation or imprisonment, or a sign of impending death. Instead, it enables relationality to come into play.

This quotation already indicates that this involves not only relationships between first and second person, but also between past and present. At a later moment in the film, the protagonist says: “Retrospection unites many different perspectives of consciousness.”²⁴ His retrospective abilities also return to him after his near-death experience. The film represents these abilities by inserting bits of old footage, probably of old home movies. For example, at the beginning of the film we see shots of a naked man jumping around. Later on, this is followed by footage of a dancing woman. Both cases seem to capture memories of moments of intense sensuality and bodily awareness, features that—as I indicated already—threatened to disappear while he was dying. His resurrection and regain of retrospective capabilities are confirmed by added old footage shots which again carry connotations of intense bodily awareness.

The idea of bodily experience is also created by the affective nature of the images. This does not so much hold for what these images depict (such as the naked, jumping man), but for the cinematic techniques employed by Forgács. He manipulates and exaggerates the characteristics of moving images in a manner similar to the way he has done so in his other films (that, in contrast to *Own Death*, consist exclusively of home-movie footage).²⁵ In an interview Forgács explains the fundamental difference between looking at photographs and moving images:

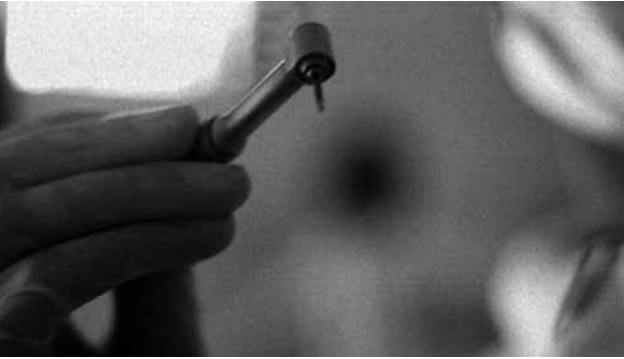
If we made right now a black-and-white photograph of ourselves, we could observe the event as already-past time: history. [. . .] But, while we have the moving images of the past, we always have the fluxes of life [. . .] which proves forever that

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²³ *Ibid.*, 233.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 235.

²⁵ For my analysis of Forgács’s films created with home-movie footage, see Ernst Van Alphen, “Towards a New Historiography: The Aesthetics of Temporality,” in *Cinema’s Alchemist: The Films of Péter Forgács*, eds. Bill Nichols and Michael Renov, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011, 59–74.



we're alive. So my viewers—and you—know that they [. . .] are physically dead, but they are still moving. They are reanimated again and again by the film.²⁶

Forgács manipulates narrative time in order to reanimate the characters from home movies, using slow motions or freeze frames. He creates a rhythm that enhances the vivacity and dynamics of scenes. Our ideas of time and movement are upset by the fact that story time is out of sync with narrative time. This causes the liveliness of the moving images to overwhelm us.

In *Own Death*, Forgács's manipulation of narrative time is even more radical due to its specificity. Instead of bringing dead characters back to life, this film shows the minutest details of the process of dying. Large parts of the film consist of series of stills, like Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962). Just when the film has created the idea for the spectator that the entire film employs this technique, moving images come in. While the voice-over is intellectual and introspective, the rhythm of moving and still images creates an intense sense of bodily awareness. In this paradoxical situation the display of still images in a film moves us: it makes us realize that moving images represent life, life that is under threat in this film.

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In connection to Michel Foucault's work, Mieke Bal writes on the representation of death: "Death is a challenge to representation to the extent that it is a moment that nobody can describe, an event that nobody can escape, a process

²⁶ Sven Spieker, "At the Center of Mitteleuropa: A Conversation with Péter Forgács." *Artmargins*, May 20, 2002. <http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/5-interviews/354-at-the-center-of-mittleuropa-a-conversation-with-peter-forgacs> (accessed December 1, 2010).

that nobody can narrate.”²⁷ And while it is indeed possible to narrate another person’s death, it is impossible to speak the words “I am dead.” In *Own Death*, Forgács makes the impossible possible by using radical perspectivism and by his manipulation of filmic time. He uses the typically modernist technique of character-bound focalization in a typically postmodern way, as he tries to explore a ‘world’ or ontology that would normally be inaccessible. Significant in this respect is the elliptic, English-language title of both Nádas’s novella and Forgács’s film. It could be read as “my own death,” but also as “to own death,” thereby implying that narrating one’s own death in the present tense means that one has a hold on it, controls it.²⁸ Forgács’s film shows spectators the process of dying from the inside. But the final breath is never drawn, and so the film’s closure is not brought by death, but by a profound, continuing contemplation of life, death, consciousness and bodily awareness.

²⁷ Mieke Bal, *Reading Rembrandt: Beyond the Word-Image Opposition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, 375.

²⁸ In the Hungarian title, *Saját halál*, the double sense is slightly less direct, but also discernable: “saját” connotes that which is referred to a specific individual, but also that which belongs to it as its “own,” as its “property” or “properties.”