Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics 20 (1): 162–175
DOI: 10.2478/jef-2026-0010

NOTES AND REVIEWS

"I STILL BELIEVE THAT ONE PICTURE CAN TELL MORE THAN MANY WRITTEN PAGES": INTERVIEW WITH MIHÁLY HOPPÁL

Mihály Hoppál (b. 1947) is a well-known scholar in shamanism and visual anthropology. Based in Hungary, he has conducted extensive fieldwork in Siberia, Inner Asia, and East Asia, combining comparative ethnography with audiovisual documentation. Alongside his scholarly publications, Hoppál has produced numerous ethnographic films on shamanic rituals in which film functions as an integral component of anthropological research. In addition to his research and filmmaking, Hoppál has been actively involved in international networks of visual anthropology, including ethnographic film festivals and scholarly associations devoted to the circulation and discussion of ethnographic film.

Liivo Niglas conducted the interview at Hoppál's home in Budapest in spring 2022. The conversation focuses on his long-term engagement with visual anthropology.

You are widely known for your work on shamanism. Why did this subject become central to your work?

I started as an ethnographer. In Hungarian, we call it *néprajz*, which is an older term meaning 'to describe the folk'. My university background was at Debrecen, where there was a very good department of Hungarian ethnography. My first dissertation topic was in ethnomedicine. But over time, I realised folklore was more suitable for me. My interest shifted toward spiritual culture and belief systems.

After the death of the famous shamanologist Vilmos Diószegi,[1] who died quite unexpectedly – he was something of an idol both in Hungary and in Siberia –, things changed for me. At my Institute of Ethnology in Budapest, he had been the head of my department. When he died, he left behind an English-language manuscript. I was asked – in fact, I was ordered – by the director of my institute: "Mihály, this is your task. Please edit it." That manuscript was *Shamanism in Siberia*.[2] So I got a very thorough introduction, because I had to go through the manuscript page by page, line by line. It had been translated mainly from Russian into English. That's how I became more and more interested in this delicate topic, which already had a long history in Hungarian ethnological studies.

Since Hungarians originally came from somewhere in Siberia, it was always a basic idea that our oldest belief system – our primordial mythology – was connected with shamanic cultures and concepts. That's how I entered this field. At the same time, in the 1970s, '80s, and '90s, we had exchange programs between the Hungarian Academy and the Soviet Academy of Sciences. Through these, I was able to travel not only to Russia but also to Siberia. That created a further shift in my interests.

I edited volume after volume, and I organised conferences and symposiums on shamanism with the help of my Russian colleagues, with whom I had very good relations. For example, Vladimir Nikolayevich Basilov,[3] the famous expert on Central Asian shamanism in Moscow – we became good friends. Not speaking of Juha Pentikäinen.[4] And of course, when Lennart Meri[5] came to

Hungary in 1977, as soon as we sat down together, he immediately began speaking about his Siberian journeys among the Nganasan and some other Finno-Ugric peoples. We found a common topic right away. When he visited Hungary, we spent almost a week together, sitting side by side in the back seat of a car, travelling around the Great Hungarian Plain. He was making his famous film *The Winds of the Milky Way*.[6] That gave us a perfect chance to discuss in detail both Siberian shamanism and Hungarian ethnography.

Had you already made your own films by that time?

I had already started to make ethnographic films. At that time, we never called it 'visual anthropology' – that came only later. My focus was on Hungarian folk culture. At that time Hungarian Television was quite interested in producing ethnographic documentaries, and they supported the work. We even filmed on 35 mm, which was fantastic. I had a series of films. I was still quite young. One of them became quite well known and was broadcast many times on Hungarian Television. It showed the Nativity play, a very important folk custom around Christmas. That was the only film ever made that captured the old rituals of the Nativity – how the birth of Jesus was enacted in village tradition. It was a very nice film, and as I said, Hungarian Television showed it repeatedly.

What was the situation of ethnographic filmmaking in Hungary when you started making films?

In Hungary we have quite a long history of ethnographic film. In fact, I wrote the first catalogue of Hungarian ethnographic films. It was published in *Ethnographia*, our most important ethnographic journal.[7]

There was a famous person, László Keszi Kovács,[8] who made a number of very fine ethnographic films. He had even travelled to Estonia at the end of the 1930s. He always had wonderful stories in his head and constantly told us what had happened here and there. He was a very nice person and an excellent expert on Hungarian ethnography.

As for myself, as I mentioned, I became increasingly interested in spiritual culture. Whenever I had a chance, I made smaller films, for instance, about incantations, or about the spiritual aspects of peasant weddings in small Hungarian villages. These were black-and-white 16mm films. I was deeply interested in making such films.

What was your own role in these early films?

I was usually the director, and of course the expert on the folk material. Some of my friends helped me as cameramen.

For example, with one of them I filmed the Nativity play in the northern part of Hungary, also on 16mm. That was quite special because it was performed as a puppet theatre for the audience – an absolute rarity. So in many cases, the films I made are the only existing record of these old traditions. As for sound, usually I did that myself. We had quite good equipment – Uher, a magnetophon[9] –, and I often made the synchronised sound recordings. Practically all of the films had synchronous sound.

How did your films come about? Was it your own initiative?

Usually, it was my own initiative. At the very beginning of the 1970s I was very busy going to the smallest villages. At that time our institute had just been established and we had a special advantage: there were two cars, one for the director of the institute, and one for the rest of us. With that second car, we could simply say, "I want to go there, I want to visit this village", and it was easy.

So I would take some of my friends as cameramen and, later, also as sound recordists. Hungarian Television was quite interested in making documentary recordings at the time. I was lucky, as I have been many times in my life. Despite communism, despite socialist propaganda against religion, we were able to make films even on pilgrimages. And these films were shown on Hungarian Television – not only once, but repeatedly.

My main idea was to be like a fly in the corner. I never told people what to do. I never said, "please look here" or "stand there". No,

we were always silent observers. It was real participant observation, of course, because we were there, present. Many times, people asked me how the villagers reacted to the camera, what they said to you. I always answered: "They were completely absorbed in the ritual, so they didn't pay attention to me. They were not interested in who this guy was standing there with the camera."

Usually, I also knew them beforehand from earlier field trips. We were often already friends, or at least good acquaintances. That helped a lot. I never had the experience that people were disturbed or bothered while they were acting out their customs. They just carried on.

How were these films received at the time?
Well, we had the chance to show them from time to time. In my early years, together with friends, we established regular meetings – symposia on documentary filmmaking. The broader film community also organised festivals, and over time I was invited to participate. For example, I was invited to the NAFA festivals,[10] I became acquainted with Mark Soosaar,[11] Lennart Meri, Heimo Lappalainen,[12] and Colette Piault[13] from France, as well as some English colleagues. And of course, with Russian friends as well, such as Yevgeniy Aleksandrov.[14]

So there was this small group of ethnographic filmmakers, and we had our meetings from time to time – sometimes in Sardinia, sometimes in Barcelona, sometimes in Helsinki or Stockholm, and even up in Lapland. Heimo Lappalainen was the main driving force, together with Mark Soosaar. They were the key people behind it. It worked quite well. Our meetings were held regularly, here and there, and it created a real community among us who were working in ethnographic film.

But coming back to your early films: at what point did filmmaking become necessary for you, alongside writing and research?
This is the main principle of visual anthropology in my mind: one picture, a photo, tells more about the topic you are studying than ten written pages. And then I realised that one minute of motion picture – video or film – tells more than ten still pictures. That is like fifty pages or more.

So I decided quite soon that without pictures, there is no reason to publish even a single page. For instance, when I was editing my first books on shamanism, most of the studies were without pictures. It was crazy. That is why we had this 'lilac fog' around shamans. Everyone said: "Oh, magical, mystical, whatever". And I was categorically against this approach. They are not magical, they are not mystical. They like to drink: they like to sacrifice vodka to the spirits, but of course, the rest is for them. They are real human beings – sometimes genuine, funny, nice informants, good human beings. Just people who can help others by using shamanic techniques, rituals, and whatever.

So I hoped that pictures would help. And gradually, the idea came to me: I must make picture books. That is how I started a visual approach to studying shamanic cultures. And of course, you cannot write down all the details. Many times it happened to me that in the field I made quick notes, but even the same evening I was not able to decipher them. So I decided: now, at the time when video came – VHS – I can look again at home, and I will see all the details.

You initially worked with professional crews. When did you start filming on your own?
Even the first time when I went to Tuva – quite late, in 1995 – we still had what we called a professional crew. But that crew consisted only of three people: a cameraman, a sound-recording lady who also arranged everything – she was the manager, the producer, whatever we call it – and myself. So you see, it was really a small group of filmmakers. And then of course came the *montage*, the editing process. I was always sitting there. I decided what was necessary, what was important. At that time, it was not digital but VHS. The equipment was terribly heavy, and the camera was quite big. But anyhow, we captured

about 20 hours. Normally, you cannot film for 20 hours on film, but with this equipment, we did. Later, as cameras got lighter and smaller, and the quality better and better, of course, you could capture even more. But then, when you come to editing, it is hell.

I also realised during the editing process that you can make a kind of summary of the whole thing. For instance, once on the shore of Lake Baikal, among the Buryats, we captured a whole day-long ceremony. It was for calling the local spirits and for healing. Four to five shamans took part, among them a lady shaman. At home I faced this terrible task: what can I do with it? We first made a two-hour version, then a one-hour version, which was acceptable even for television presentation.

I always told my ethnologist friends who said to me, "but it is just a summary": "Yes, it is, but I swear, all the important moments of the whole day-long ritual are there, although of course in a very compressed form."

The experiences I had in Siberia, especially meeting shamans, and later seeing more and more ethnographic films and documentaries – films about Siberian shamans, films on different tribes in Africa, and the MacDougalls'[15] work on Australian Aborigines – greatly influenced me. By the way, I also became very good friends with David MacDougall, Asen Balikci,[16] and some others.

So gradually I became kind of an ethnologist, and I grew more and more interested in different nations – different minorities, let's say – beyond just the Hungarians. My colleagues at home were busy mainly with Hungarian ethnography. But after the death of Diószegi, I really got more and more interested in ethnology and in an anthropological approach to these phenomena. I had the chance to go to the United States on a scholarship. I was able to visit Australia, where I studied Hungarian immigrants, but also to go to China and to India. I had many kinds of fieldwork – sometimes short, sometimes longer. Especially in China, where I went eight or nine times, and to South Korea as well. I kept field diaries. Every evening I wrote down what had happened that day. And I took pictures. So in this way I became much more of an ethnologist.

When you were doing your fieldwork, especially with shamans, did you always have a video camera with you?

Yes and no. My institute, and especially my director, Ortutay,[17] bought a very good Sony camera. Of course, it was bigger than the ones used now, but at that time, it was one of the best.

I started to be my own cameraman. To tell the truth, it was a very nice experience. I could decide immediately what to shoot, what to capture, and what was not so important. So the pre-selection, the pre-editing, already began in the camera. It was fun. I was mainly interested in rituals themselves, in ritual processes. And of course, after filming, I also made quite long interviews with shamans. But sometimes I did not have enough time for that. We captured a ritual, then had to reach the plane – because my tickets were usually prepaid and prearranged. When you are in the middle of nowhere in China, you must reach the plane on time. That was always a kind of restriction.

But since I knew the shamanic material quite well, already in the field, on the spot, I was able to ask the proper questions. That helped a lot. So unlike an ordinary filmmaker, who has nothing to do with the topic, I was at the same time the expert, the cameraman, the director, and the editor.

So when you compare the two different roles – filming with a professional team, and later, when you became an independent filmmaker working alone with your own camera – how were those situations different for you?

Gradually, I realised that to capture shamanic rituals with the camera – that is the real fieldwork for me. For example, in Korea, and also during my journeys to China, I had no chance to find any sponsor. I was not even interested in trying to find sponsors or a television crew, because it would have been impossible. In Korea, that was the last time we had what you might call a professional crew of three.

But later I decided it was better just to work alone.

And since cameras had become so sensitive – no lights, nothing extra was needed –, it was possible. Sometimes it was funny, because I also wanted to take photos, but when you are documenting with a video camera, you are not able to. I liked filmmaking more and more, because the composition would be better. If you are just a director, you would stand alone, you can take notes and photos… But the video camera became the note-taking equipment for me.

David and Judith MacDougall told me that they worked the same way, just the two of them, in India, or among the Aborigines. I thought, yes, that is the proper way.

My main interest was simply to capture everything, and later to have the chance to turn the film into a very detailed description, a real manuscript. I became more and more aware that this is the right way of visual anthropology: not to play the director or the *regisseur* or whatever, but to capture the whole thing. And then later you can work it out. For instance, I realised that there is no good film without a dog, without children, and without what we call *vágókép* – cutaways of portraits and close-ups –, many of them. Because when you are editing, you have to use these. This is what I learned during the editing process. If you are lacking cutaways, you cannot put the film together nicely. These are the tricks of filmmaking, and you have to learn them. Otherwise, the film will not be smoothly readable – or, I should say, seeable.

Some of your films, for example, *Shamans in Four Nations*,[18] show shamanic rituals in different cultures. There is no voice-over or subtitles explaining what they are saying. How did you imagine the use of these films? For the classroom?

Yes, for the classroom. Usually I gave live commentary to the students.

At that time I was not able to prepare a proper voice-over. I realised that I had visited so many places, met so many shamans, and meanwhile I had also become the director of the Folklore Institute, and later the director of the Research Institute of Ethnography here in Budapest. I simply had no time to work out the narration. So I was happy just to show something. My students had never seen documentaries like these before. Sometimes even the films were almost uncut – because I had no time, no chance, no support anymore. Hungarian Television had already shifted its interest. They no longer wanted to give any money for that kind of documentary.

Why did this institutional support disappear?

Many times, what happened was that a production manager came to me, even a director, and said: "Oh, let's go together…" They wanted to travel. But for me, it was not attractive, because I knew what would happen. The director would say: "Stop! No, no, we have to do it again. We need this, we need that." But this kind of film is not like that. I didn't want to spend the whole time discussing with someone who had no knowledge of shamanism whatsoever.

But you never had ambitions to make films like the MacDougalls, with stories and personalities, not only rituals?

No, telling the truth. Because I became the director of two institutions. That meant tremendous responsibility and a tremendous workload on my shoulders. I was travelling all the time – to Estonia, to Finland, to Russia, to China. I thought: "This is much more important. I don't want to become a world-famous director." What for? I was quite happy with my position. I had enough to do: I always organised conferences, published papers and books. And on top of that, I was under constant pressure: "You have to make your big dissertation, your *doktor nauk*."[19] I postponed, postponed, postponed. My father always asked me: "When will you be an academician?" I told him: "My dear, I shall never become an academician of the Hungarian Academy. Because I am always working."

Those who never travelled as much as I did had that as their real goal: to become

academicians in the Academy of Sciences. But I didn't care that much. Of course, it's nice – there is extra money – but I never cared much about money.

When I stayed in the house of the MacDougalls in Canberra, they told me: "Here is the literature, and here are the videos, use whatever you want." So every evening I went through them systematically. But I didn't want to make films with a special 'story'. I was much more interested in just going there, starting to talk a little, or starting with the ritual, the actual topic, mainly shamanism. If we had some time, then of course we sat down and made an interview. Especially later on, when my younger colleague came with me, he was an expert in all kinds of Central Asian languages – Kyrgyz, Kazakh, Uzbek, Buryat, and even Mongolian. It was a blessing.

To tell the truth, from the very beginning I decided I really wanted to make video documentation, because I was not able to learn all these languages myself. But when I became director, I immediately hired him. He was the first person in the institute who could understand and speak all these Central Asiatic languages. Usually, I introduced him like this: "This is the young gentleman who knows all the languages that I should have known, but never had the chance to learn." His name is Somfai Kara.[20] We went together to Xinjiang. We visited the yurts, the Kazakhs, the Kyrgyz. We captured a very nice Kyrgyz shamanic healing ceremony there.

Some of the films I made include *Shamans of Four Nations* and *Shamans Are Flying Again* with Juha Pentikäinen;[21] *A* Kut *in Seoul*,[22] which I made with another Hungarian colleague; and many others.

But you were also interested in visual anthropology more broadly. I know you had a grant to study Soviet ethnographic films in late 1986 and early 1987. Can you talk about that?

I was always interested in the history of studies. The history of studies always brings surprises.

For instance, I realised that there was a famous filmmaker in the old Soviet Union, before the Second World War – between the two wars – by the name of Kozintsev. He made a film titled *Odna*, which means 'Alone' in English.[23] In this film, there is a wonderful sequence of an Altaic shaman: how he whirls, drums, sings, and so on. All the small details come one after the other. That caught my interest. I thought: maybe I can write something about ethnographic filmmaking in Russia.

At that time, Estonia also belonged to the Soviet Union, so I could include younger filmmakers there, and of course, Lennart Meri. It was quite nice. Basilov, who was one of my closest friends in Moscow, was also interested. He made some very nice ethnographic films in the Caucasus and in Central Asia. And then I came across a series of interesting films by Litvinov[24] about the Nanai, Udege, and Amur peoples. That was a whole new world for me. I often used these sequences in my own films, which I made among the Nanai and others. So it became a kind of patchwork.

How did you get the copies of the films?

Well, over time, I received them from my friends. But I also found some in the Hungarian Film Archive. They were astonished when I showed them that I had used Kozintsev's and Litvinov's sequences in my film in Moscow. They asked: "How did you get it?" The answer was simple: because the Hungarian Archive had good contacts with the Russians during communist times. And somehow those copies were there. It was a general film archive, not an ethnographic one. It was just by chance that I found these films.

Later, I made the film *Shamanism: Past and Present*,[25] using the extracts from these films. That was commissioned by Hungarian Television. It is quite long, two parts. Around 1992–1994, when it was prepared, we still had no real chance to go to Russia; it was just after the opening.

So I collected parts. Kozintsev's *Alone*, and others. I made it as a kind of study, or an article film about shamanism. I even wanted to

add footnotes, but of course, it was a video. Still, I started like that. The first part is full of such material: old photos, very often from the Helsinki archives of SKS[26] or from the Ethnological Museum. It was with a voiceover. Since it was my first film, there were not many reactions. Just some friends called and said it is a nice film. But it was a good thing. When I went to Estonia or Helsinki, I showed it there. The students liked it. I hope they at least got a picture, instead of lilac fog on the shamans. We even received a prize for it – in Hungary, and later in Pärnu, Estonia. And then *Shamanism: Past and Present* was shown in 1994 at the Margaret Mead Festival in New York.

By the way, I can tell you even about my first film on shamanism *The Shaman in Eurasia*, from 1985. It was on 35 mm colour film, 34 minutes long. It was a kind of experimental film. At that time, I had never met a real sha-man. But I had a very close friend, Jankovics Marcell,[27] a very famous cartoon filmmaker. He was interested in the decoration of sha-manic drums. And what he did: he made an animation of the shamanic journey to the upper world and to the lower world. It was so nice and funny, and it turned out to be quite a good film.

Can you describe your research trips to the Soviet Union and Russia?

At that time, whenever I had the chance, I tried to use the exchange program with the Soviet Academy. I went to Moscow and some other places. I even planned to go to Georgia and other regions. I still have some nice photos from Kyrgyzstan.

When I applied, I always gave a very general topic. The Russians accepted it. And I built close contacts, even friendships, with the authorities there. For instance, with Bromley,[28] the head of the Institute; with Basilov, who was the scientific secretary and the head of the Central Asia department; and with the person in charge of the film archive – the number one man in the film archive. They showed me fantastic materials which, at that time, were completely closed to outsiders.

The film archive itself was in the basement, in the cellar of the Institute of Ethnography. Sasha Os'kin[29] was responsible for it. After some vodka and good discussions, he showed me everything. I was so happy. That was the time when we realised that the Nganasan tradition of shamanism was still alive.

For instance, once I was at a folklore festival in the south of France. A friend called me: "Mihály, please come, because the Nganasan shamans will come." I said: "Don't fool me, my dear friend." But it happened. They had paid everything – the plane ticket, everything – for the family of the shaman, the very same family that Lennart Meri had filmed.[30] I went there, and I filmed their so-called theatre production on stage in southern France.

So I often said: "This is a new anthropological approach." Yes, it was on stage, out of context, but the melodies, the songs, the texts, they were absolutely authentic. Because they knew only that one text, that one melody, nothing else, concerning shamanic ritual. So it is not so easy to say: "Oh, this is fake." It was not fake. However, of course, in another sense, it was fake – because it was on a stage, in southern France, at 30 degrees above zero, while their costumes had been made for 30 degrees below zero. But still, these were the kinds of discussions I had with colleagues: this is a new kind of ethnography – out of context, but otherwise authentic and reliable.

What was the broader context of ethnographic filmmaking in the Soviet Union at the time, and which institutions played a central role?

In my mind, the main centre – and the most authentic –, was the Institute of Ethnography and Anthropology. That was its official title. They had the chance to use film early on. Basilov, for example, used 16 mm film in the Caucasus. Later, they came out of the cellar and got a proper place: good equipment, a projection room, and so on. Technically speaking, they were on top. They made videos, they made DVD discs. I don't know what the situation is now, but in the 1990s everything there was at the top level.

Who were the people working there? How many were making films at the institute?
Not that many. Of course, Sasha Os'kin was the head. At the same time, he was a bit jealous about inviting young people, to tell the truth. But he was a good friend of the older generation. For instance, Simchenko.[31] They went together to the Nganasans. In the field, Os'kin was the cameraman, and the ethnographer was the expert on the material. The ethnographer gave the general advice on what to capture and invited the local people. In my mind, that was the best solution.

So, I saw many of their films but had no chance to see all the films. During my stays I could see maybe a maximum of five films. Os'kin would say: "Oh, Mihály, Friday we can look at some films… ah no, I don't have time on Friday, forget it." So it was very friendly, but also a bit careless. I never pushed them – "Show me this, give me a catalogue" – because that approach never worked. If I had said, "I want to go to the film archive", they would reply: "No. Why? Do you want to steal our films?" No, I don't want to steal anything. Whatever is given to me, that is fine.

Even in China something similar happened. They told me: "We are taking you to your first shaman, to the field. A beautiful old gentleman, he is even on the book cover." Later they said to me: "We took you because you were not pushy, not like others." So I have always been like that: I try to build friendship, to approach things as a friend, not to push. I am a kind of fatalist in this sense. What was given to me, I really appreciated.

Can you tell about your connection to Estonia – how did it start?
As far as I remember, one of my first trips to Tallinn was around 1970. At that time, there was a very nice lady working at the academic exchange's headquarters, she organised my first meeting with Lennart Meri. For instance, during one of my first visits to Lennart's home – maybe even the very first – he started to show me the raw material of his film *The Waterfowl People*.[32] It was not yet finished. We spent the whole day sitting in the projection room… maybe it was not in his house but in the studio. It was quite interesting, but of course it was unbearably long, I might say. I still have the notes I took that day during the projection. It was a funny experience, but also valuable. Even though it was long, he made his comments, I wrote my notes, and I was so happy to see the Ostyak[33] shamans he had captured.

So we started a kind of friendship. Later, when he was working on his second film about the Finno-Ugric nations, he came to Hungary and asked me to accompany him. My director at the institute said to me: "You are the filmmaker here, go with Lennart!" So that was our official visit, the academic exchange, in 1977. We were sitting in the same car for at least a week, side by side. Later, whenever he came to Hungary or I went to Estonia, we always remembered those days – our discussions and exchanges of ideas.

One of Lennart's main concerns, which I noted very clearly in my diaries, was the problem of ethnic identity. He was always asking: How can small nations under Soviet rule preserve their ethnic identity? How can they survive? And of course, how can they reach independence? Sometimes he would just call me on Sunday morning, very early. He would say: "Hello, how are you? I will come to Hungary", or "I am in Paris", or somewhere else. And his main topic was always: what will happen to these small nations? What will happen to Estonia? What will happen to Finland? What will happen to Hungary? He was completely occupied with these problems. I was so glad later when he became the foreign minister, and then the president of an independent Estonia.

Do you know why Estonia has the complete Shakespeare, all the plays translated? Because Lennart's father was the translator. He told me this proudly. Very few nations have the complete Shakespeare. They were repressed and living somewhere in the Volga region, and the gentleman who was then the former foreign minister of Estonia in the 1930s had nothing else to do, so as his daily pro-

gram he translated Shakespeare. These kinds of details gave me a very good and friendly feeling toward your nation. They are beautiful little details. It was also a great idea when Lennart made the film for the Finno-Ugric nations – *The Sounds of Kalevala*,[34] and so on.

The film you worked on together in Hungary was *Winds of the Milky Way*. Can you describe where you went with him, and what ideas he had?

He had, of course, a number of ideas. But since I knew the Hungarian material better, I tried to persuade him: "Don't go there, please come with me, and I can show you." So we went to the northern part of Hungary, to capture traditions there. We went to Hortobágy on the Great Hungarian Plain, to film the shepherds. We also went to a very nice place called Hollókő, which is now under UNESCO protection. And we filmed there. But the main thing was that he also got to know about the boat-like grave signs in Szatmár County. He immediately embraced the idea that these represented the boat which goes to the other world. Yes, of course it had been mentioned in the scholarly literature, but I told him: "Well, it's not really the case." But anyhow, he was sure that this was the right interpretation. And of course it sounds beautiful, much more interesting than saying: "Maybe it is, maybe it is not." So he was stubborn, holding his view. The same with the shepherds' culture – with the nomadic background, the fierce Hungarians on horseback, like cowboys.

But we had a very nice time, in fact. It was a good experience. We sat in the same car for a week or two. There was also the cameraman and the sound recordist, so it was a nice team.

Lennart Meri's way of filmmaking seems quite different from your own approach. How did you experience his way of directing and working with the crew?

He was always a real *regisseur*, a real director. He told people: "Stay here, stand there, now from this angle." He really directed the scenes. It was a very different style from mine. But why not? At that time, he was already a famous writer. And I suppose this was one of his first films.

So it was not my style, as I said. But anyhow, he was the kind of person who took everything into his own hands. I think his films are good, in spite of his strong directorship. Because the pictures themselves speak. The shepherds, for example, you cannot say anything to them, they are far away, they just appear as they are. I think the idea was very good: finally to have a film about the Finno-Ugric nations. From the smallest ones to the bigger ones. We even had material on the Ostyak – on the Khanty – the Nganasan, and the shamans there. That was important.

In your overview of Soviet ethnographic film,[35] you wrote that *Sons of the Torum*,[36] about the Khanty bear festival, is a film you especially liked. Why was that?

Yes, I liked it very much. Because somehow my feeling was that it was not so much overdirected. Anyhow, it is a play. Even in the original, the local people call it a play – the *medvezh'i igrishcha*. So it was already framed like that. It was nicely made, and I appreciated it.

So yes, in my mind Lennart is a great figure of anthropological filmmaking. Even though he made only a few films, it was a great idea, and he had the chance. He was able to make films about the small Finno-Ugric nations – minorities – which was not the case in the Soviet Union. For that I really appreciate him. And as head of the Estonian Writers' Association, he had the right contacts, the power, and the authority to talk to the Russians.

In your articles you suggest that proper visual anthropology and ethnographic film in the Soviet Union really began with Lennart Meri. Did I understand you correctly?

I don't think so strictly, but probably yes, why not? Because many times I took part in film festivals and gatherings of documentary films in Russia, in the Soviet Union. Later, there were also Novosibirsk, Moscow, and some others, but at the beginning, Pärnu was the main one. I think 1987 was the first Pärnu festival. I even have a photo of us sitting together – Colette Piault, Asen Balikci, Lennart Meri, Mark Piualt.[37] I was invited to Lennart Meri's home then.

And what I saw were wonderful pictures: beautiful landscapes, the view from the airplane window, the sun rising, the sun going down. Many, many such scenes. And beautifully dressed local ladies, singing and dancing. Even in Kazakhstan and other parts, it was the same. Everything seemed prearranged. For the ordinary viewer, this was not obvious. But for me, who also made films, it was clear that it was over-directed, overregulated.

That is why I appreciated Lennart's work. He was also directing, yes, but not on that scale. For example, there was a Kazakh lady, I don't remember her name, who always made these long scenes: the sun going down, landscapes, all that. Minutes and minutes. But not real rituals, not real ethnographic processes like preparing a local meal, or showing everyday practices. Those kinds of things were missing. Thanks to God, this kind of overdirection was completely absent from Lennart's films.

How do you relate to filmmaking today, and how do you see your work in visual anthropology continuing?

I am not making films anymore. What I would really like to do is to make a complete catalogue of my films. But whenever I try, I soon realise: where are my films? Somewhere over there on these shelves...

But I do have more than 5,000 photos, still photos. And I have many ideas of what I would like to finish, in terms of books. For instance, I have an almost complete manuscript, my first edition, about sexual symbolism in Hungarian folk art. It is quite interesting, funny, with wonderful pictures, a lot of pictures. I would like to publish that.

I also decided to make a visual anthropology series. I decided to make four such books – one on Tuva, one on my Korean trips, one on my Chinese trips, and one on Siberia. Because up until now, I used only three, maybe six pictures to show different ethnic groups, shamans. But now I want to include 30, 40, 60, even 80 pictures to give a more typical, complete image. I also plan to include details from my field diaries – the notes I wrote each evening during my field trips. You can find them in these big black bags, my diaries. This new series of visual anthropology books is the first step to publishing all my field materials. They include the photos together with my field notes. And as I said, there will also be films. On DVD. They will be included in the books, in the cover, as supplements. As I said earlier, one picture tells more than ten pages. I still believe that one picture can tell more than many written pages. That is my conviction. In these new books, instead of just one picture, I want to show four, five, even more. In this way, the reader will really see what happened.

Before, in my publications, I usually used just one photo. But now I want to give a real impression with many pictures. I even received some money for this project; I applied and it was accepted.

Why do you think earlier academic works included so few pictures?

Look, I don't think there was some big principle behind it – it was simply laziness. Because to take pictures earlier was not easy. You remember: the focusing, the big heavy cameras. And then the pictures had to be developed, cut, catalogued, and selected. Of course, without pictures, there were fewer problems. That is the simple reason. So they were simply not interested in this type of work. Because it meant work. And you had to write your dissertation, etc. Nowadays, it is changing. For instance, a young scholar in my institute recently published an article in my journal, *Shaman*. On one page, there were four pictures, and only very little text. It was a new type of article. And of course, we accepted it for the journal, because I was co-editor. I even begged the institute: "Please, let him publish it." So things are changing. Life is changing, the world is changing. The influence of television – pictures, pictures, pictures – this is changing everything around us.

Are there films you would have liked to make, but never managed? Any plans you wished you had the time or opportunity for?
Look, I would really like to finish some of my books. Nowadays it is even more difficult to organise film work. I have a very good friend, my cameraman, who was with me once or twice in Siberia. He made summaries of all my shaman sequences and documented them. But again the problem is: I have filmed more than 20 shamans. Sometimes I captured only five minutes, sometimes ten or 15 minutes. Each was an absolute summary. Altogether, that makes more than two hours.

I will do it. It will be the supplement to these visual books. He will edit them. Out of the whole material we can make new films. But again, it is too long. It is even impossible to show sometimes. Who will want to watch a film of two hours that is just drumming?

I am sure many people are interested in your films.
That is why I already gave these things to one of the universities. Their library will have a special room for my books, my notes, my field diaries, and my films and film materials. It will be called *Collectio Hoppaliana*. The opening will be on May 26th this year. It is the Reformed Church University in Budapest.

I am blessed again, because nowadays libraries don't have space anymore, not even for valuable collections like mine. But they accepted it. My collection covers Hungarian ethnography, comparative folklore and mythology, history of religions, semiotics, ethnosemiotics, shamanism, and visual anthropology. So all of this will be preserved there.

But some of this work is still ongoing. Years ago we established *the Encyclopaedia of Uralic Mythologies*,[38] and similar work is still continuing. For example, Devyatkina[39] prepared a volume on her people. Additional books are currently in preparation: the Udmurt volume is expected soon, Mare Kõiva[40] promised the Estonian volume, and I am preparing the Hungarian one.

But over the years, you have not only been active in research and filmmaking, but also in other creative work – painting, calligraphy, and sculpture. Can you tell more about that?
When I was young, I was an abstract painter. Just recently, I made some calligraphy with a friend of mine. And even earlier, in the old days, I made sculptures. For example, there is a Hungarian folk ballad about a lady who was sacrificed and built into the wall of a castle. I made an absolutely abstract sculpture of that story when I was about 20 or 25 years old.

I still like to do such things. I am a Horse in the Oriental horoscope. A Horse is typical for being able to do different things almost at the same time. That gives me a good feeling – to create in different fields. But I could not do any of this without the help of my wife. She helps me in all aspects of life. It is very important not to be alone in this constant struggle we call life. I am really lucky to have her.

NOTES

1 Vilmos Diószegi (1923–1972) was a renowned Hungarian ethnologist whose research focused on Siberian shamanism and comparative religion.

2 *Shamanism in Siberia* (1978), edited by Vilmos Diószegi and Mihály Hoppál is a comprehensive collection of studies that documents the spiritual and ritual practices of various Siberian Indigenous groups.

3 Vladimir Basilov (1937–1998) was a Soviet and Russian ethnographer and scholar of religion. Fluent in Uzbek and Turkmen, he carried out extensive fieldwork on the religious beliefs of Central Asian and Altaic peoples. He was also active in popularising ethnography through publications, films and public media.

4 Juha Pentikäinen (b. 1940) is a Finnish scholar of comparative religion and northern ethnography whose research focuses on religious traditions and oral cultural heritage, combining field-based and comparative approaches.

5 Lennart Meri (1929–2006) was an Estonian writer and documentary filmmaker whose Soviet-era work at Tallinnfilm focused on Finno-Ugric and Samoyedic peoples through an essayistic, mythologically inflected ethnographic style. He later served as President of the Republic of Estonia

(1992–2001), playing a central role in the country's post-Soviet political and cultural reorientation.

6 *The Winds of the Milky Way* (1977) directed by Lennart Meri is an ethnographic documentary filmed primarily in northern Eurasia among Finno-Ugric and Samoyedic communities. The film combines observational footage with essayistic narration to explore cosmology, oral tradition, and human–environment relations. The film received Silver Medal at the New York International Film and TV Festival in 1979.

7 See Hoppál 1972.

8 László Keszi Kovács (1908–2012) was a Hungarian ethnographer associated with the development of ethnographic film in Hungary. He worked at the Ethnographic Museum in Budapest and contributed to the establishment of archival collections for visual documentation. From the 1930s onward, he used film as a research tool in ethnographic fieldwork and conducted studies in Transylvania and the Great Hungarian Plain.

9 Uher was a German manufacturer best known for its portable reel-to-reel tape recorders, widely used in reporting, documentary filmmaking, and ethnographic field recording; the brand is today owned by Assmann Electronics.

10 The NAFA festivals are annual international events organised under the auspices of the Nordic Anthropological Film Association, showcasing ethnographic and anthropologically oriented films. Founded in 1979, they are among the longest-running ethnographic film festivals in Europe.

11 Mark Soosaar (b. 1946) is an Estonian filmmaker working primarily in documentary and ethnographic film. He is the founder and long-term director of the Pärnu International Documentary and Anthropology Film Festival.

12 Heimo Lappalainen (1944–1994) was a Finnish anthropologist and ethnographic filmmaker. He served for many years as the Secretary General of the Nordic Anthropological Film Association (NAFA).

13 Colette Piault (1933–2025) was a French visual anthropologist, filmmaker, and research director at the National Centre for Scientific Research (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, CNRS). She was a pioneer in ethnographic cinema, known for portraying everyday life with an observational lens and for founding the Société Française d'Anthropologie Visuelle (SFAV).

14 Yevgeniy Aleksandrov (b. 1946) is a Russian visual anthropologist affiliated with Moscow State University, where he has headed the Public Center for Visual Anthropology since 1991. He is the initiator and director of the Moscow International Visual Anthropology Festival *Mediating Camera*.

15 David MacDougall (b. 1939) and Judith MacDougall (b. 1938) are US-born Australian visual anthropologists and filmmakers known for their collaboratively produced ethnographic films shot in East Africa, Australia, and India. In addition to his filmmaking, David MacDougall has published extensively on observational methods, cross-cultural representation, and the sensory dimensions of ethnographic film.

16 Asen Balikci (1929–2019) was a Bulgarian-born visual anthropologist and ethnographer. His landmark films on the Netsilik Inuit and his academic work at the University of Montreal significantly shaped modern visual anthropology and Arctic ethnography (see Niglas 2021).

17 Gyula Ortutay (1910–1978) was a Hungarian folklorist and ethnographer associated with the Budapest school of folkloristics. He played an important role in shaping Hungarian ethnography and folklore studies, contributing to the development of institutional frameworks for research, teaching and scholarly publication.

18 *Shamans of Four Nations* (1996) is 42-minute video by Hoppál documenting shamanic practitioners from Hungarian, Korean, Mongolian, and Siberian (Buryat) traditions.

19 *Doktor nauk* (Doctor of Sciences) is a senior doctoral degree in the Soviet and post-Soviet academic system, awarded for a substantial body of original research beyond the PhD (*kandidat nauk*). It is comparable to the habilitation or higher doctorate in Western academic systems and is typically required for senior academic and research positions.

20 David Somfai Kara (b. 1969) is a Hungarian scholar of linguistics and ethnography. His research focuses on the languages and cultures of Central Asian peoples, particularly Turkic and Mongolic groups.

21 *Shamans Are Flying Again* (1994) is a 20-minute video documentary documenting Pentikäinen's fieldwork with Siberian shamans. The film is based on interviews and was directed by Hoppál.

22 *A Kut in Seoul* (1992–1993) is a 45-minute video documentary directed by Alain Guillemoz, Gábor Vargyas, Keith Howard and Hoppál. The film documents a *kut* (or *gut*) ritual performed by Korean shamans for the well-being of individuals and the wider community. Filmed in Seoul, it was produced as an ethnographic audiovisual record.

23 *Alone* (1931), directed by Grigoriy Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg, tells the story of a young teacher assigned to a remote Altai village, where she encounters resistance from local elites and social tensions framed within early Soviet reform policies. The film combines elements of social

drama and ideological narrative and is notable for its depiction of an Altaic shaman sequence within the broader storyline.

24 Aleksandr Litvinov (1898–1977) was a pioneer of Soviet ethnographic cinema who produced documentary films on Indigenous peoples of the Russian Far East and the Amur River region in the 1920s and 1930s.

25 *Shamanism: Past and Present* (1994), is a two-part video documentary with a total running time of 80 minutes. The film was directed by Hoppál, who also conducted the ethnographic research. It premiered internationally on 18 October 1994 at the Margaret Mead Film Festival in New York.

26 SKS (Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura), the Finnish Literature Society, a scholarly organisation founded in 1831 that promotes Finnish literature, folklore, cultural history and archival research.

27 Marcell Jankovics (1941–2021) was a Hungarian graphic artist, film director and animator. He is particularly known for his unique, psychedelic visual style that incorporated Hungarian folklore, mythology and symbolism.

28 Yulian Bromley (1921–1990) was a Soviet ethnographer who served as director of the Institute of Ethnography of the USSR Academy of Sciences. His work is associated with the development of ethnos theory in Soviet anthropology.

29 Aleksandr Os'kin (1937–1999), a researcher at the Institute of Ethnography of the USSR Academy of Sciences, produced ethnographic documentary films based on long-term field expeditions. His work exemplifies Soviet ethnographic cinema's use of film to document 'living' cultural practices and forms part of a broader tradition of visual ethnography in the USSR.

30 *Shaman* (1997), directed by Meri, documents a traditional incantation ritual performed by Demnime (1913–1980), a ninth-generation Nganasan shaman. The footage was filmed in 1977 on the Taimyr Peninsula during the production of *Winds of the Milky Way* and later edited into a separate film.

31 Yuri Simchenko (1935–1995) was a Soviet and later Russian anthropologist and ethnographer specialising in Arctic peoples, particularly the Nganasan. He conducted extensive fieldwork in the Russian Far North from the 1960s onward. His research addressed ethnogenesis, kinship, belief systems, folklore and subsistence practices among northern Eurasian populations. He was also involved in documentary filmmaking and later participated in institutional discussions concerning Indigenous affairs in Russia.

32 *The Waterfowl People* (1970) is Lennart Meri's first documentary, which explores the culture of Finno-Ugric and Samoyedic peoples in Northern Europe and Siberia.

33 'Ostyaks' is a historical exonym formerly used for the Khanty people of Western Siberia. The term is now considered outdated; 'Khanty' is the accepted ethnonym in contemporary scholarship.

34 *The Sounds of Kaleva* (1985), directed by Meri, is a three-part film essay exploring memory and the historical–cultural ties of Finno-Ugric peoples. The film examines early mnemonic practices such as Karelian rock art, Kalevala runo song, and Khanty bear-feast rituals alongside Elias Lönnrot's visit to Estonia, and concludes with a reconstructed smelting ritual accompanied by Veljo Tormis's choral work *Curse upon Iron* (Tormis 1991 [1972]).

35 See Hoppál 1988.

36 *Sons of Torum* (1989), directed by Meri, documents an ancient Khanty bear-feast ritual. Filmed in Western Siberia during September 1985 and August 1988, the film records a ceremonial complex of ritual songs, performances and offerings. In Khanty cosmology, the bear is regarded as a sacred ancestor linked to high god Torum; the ritual affirms relations between humans, spirits and the social order.

37 Marc Piault (1933–2020), was a French visual anthropologist, ethnographic filmmaker and essayist. His work addressed the relationship between anthropology and cinema.

38 See Konakov 2003; Kulemzin et al. 2006; Gemuev et al. 2008; Tuchkova et al. 2010.

39 Tatyana Devyatkina (b. 1953) is a scholar specialising in the folklore, mythology and traditional culture of the Mordvin peoples (the Moksha and Erzya) in the Russian Federation.

40 Mare Kõiva (b. 1958) is an Estonian folklorist and researcher whose work focuses on folk belief, mythology, narrative traditions and contemporary folklore, particularly in Finno-Ugric and Baltic contexts.

References

Diószegi, Vilmos and Mihály Hoppál, eds. 1978. *Shamanism in Siberia*. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó.

Gemuev, Izmail N.; Anna M. Sagalaev and Aleksei I. Solovyov. 2008. *Mansi Mythology*. *Encyclopaedia of Uralic Mythologies* 3, edited by Vladimir Napolskikh, Anna-Leena Siikala and Mihály Hoppál. Budapest; Helsinki: Akadémiai Kiadó; Finnish Literature Society.

Hoppál, Mihály. 1972. Magyar Néprajzi Filmkatalógus. – *Ethnographia* 83: 136–156.

Hoppál, Mihály. 1988. Ethnographic Film in the Soviet Union. – *CVA Newsletter: Bulletin d'Information, Commission on Visual Anthropology* (October): 6–12.

Konakov, Nikolai D. 2003. *Komi Mythology*. *Encyclopaedia of Uralic Mythologies* 1, edited by Anna-Leena Siikala, Vladimir Napolskikh and Mihály Hoppál. Budapest; Helsinki: Akadémiai Kiadó; Finnish Literature Society.

Kulemzin, Vladislav M.; Nadezhda V. Lukina, Timofei A. Moldanov and Tatjana A. Moldanova. 2006. *Khanty Mythology*. *Encyclopaedia of Uralic Mythologies* 2, edited by Vladimir Napolskikh, Anna-Leena Siikala and Mihály Hoppál. Budapest; Helsinki: Akadémiai Kiadó; Finnish Literature Society.

Niglas, Liivo. 2021. I'm a Recorder: Interview with Asen Balikci. – *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics* 15 (2): 240–256. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2478/jef-2021-0026.

Tormis, Veljo. 1991 [1972]. *Raua needmine*, text by August Annist, Paul-Eerik Rummo and Jaan Kaplinski. Choral composition. Helsinki: Fennica Gehrman.

Tuchkova, Natalya A.; Galina I. Pelikh and Vyacheslav V. Bobrova. 2010. *Selkup Mythology*. *Encyclopaedia of Uralic Mythologies* 4, edited by Anna-Leena Siikala, Vladimir Napolskikh and Mihály Hoppál. Budapest; Helsinki: Akadémiai Kiadó; Finnish Literature Society.

Filmography

Guillemoz, Alain; Gábor Vargyas, Keith Howard and Mihály Hoppál. 1992–1993. *A* Kut *in Seoul*. Ethnographic Institute, Budapest, 45 mins.

Hoppál, Mihály. 1985. *The Shaman in Eurasia*. Pannónia Film, 34 mins.

Hoppál, Mihály. 1994a. *Shamanism: Past and Present* I–II. Ethnographic Institute, Budapest, 35 + 45 mins.

Hoppál, Mihály. 1994b. *Shamans Are Flying Again*. Hopenti Production, 20 mins.

Hoppál, Mihály. 1996. *Shamans of Four Nations*. Shaman Production, 42 mins.

Kozintsev, Grigoriy and Leonid Trauberg. 1931. *Alone*. Soyuzkino, 80 mins.

Meri, Lennart. 1970. *The Waterfowl People*. Tallinnfilm, 52 mins.

Meri, Lennart. 1977. *The Winds of the Milky Way*. Tallinnfilm; OY Mainos-TV; Magyar Rádió–Televízió, 50 mins.

Meri, Lennart. 1985. *The Sounds of Kaleva*. Eesti Telefilm, 40 mins.

Meri, Lennart. 1989. *The Sons of Torum*. Eesti Telefilm; Yle TV 2; Institut für den Wissenschaftlichen Film (IWF), 60 mins.

Meri, Lennart. 1997. *Shaman*. Lennart Meri, MTV 3 Finland Productions, 20 mins.