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The Art of Annotation

Documentariness and Play in Péter Esterházy's *A Novel of Production*

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Abstract. This paper aims to interpret the process of self-documentation in Péter Esterházy's *A Novel of Production (1979)*, an important Hungarian novel which utilizes extensive endnotes to link a parodic narrative to a body of fictionalized autobiographical commentary. Drawing on theories of play and self-reflexivity as well as critical studies on the history of annotation in nonfiction and fiction, the article presents the structure of Esterházy's novel and elucidates some textual connections between seemingly disconnected parts. The interpretation focuses on a storyline involving the attempted signing of the fictionalized author, also a lower-league football player, by a club bigger than his current one. The article argues that this narrative demonstrates the intersection of several thematic levels and discourses within the narrative, including football, finance, politics, and literature—and illustrates the way in which a complex reality is modeled by the intersections and mutual displacement of competing discourses or fields of play. In conclusion, the article considers the role of self-documentation and self-commentary in the process of semiotic modeling, and links Esterházy's creative method to Greimas's semiotic square.

Keywords: annotation in fiction, documentariness, Hungarian prose, postmodernism, semiotics

Regarding the theoretical difficulties involving documentariness in fiction, it is useful to recall Terry Eagleton's general remarks on the relationship between fictionality and reference:

> Ironically, the fact that fiction lacks a direct individual referent means that it can illuminate the nature of reference all the more instructively. In one sense of the word, fiction makes reference all the time—to wars and power struggles, sexuality and self-sacrifice, domestic affections and natural disasters. But since it accomplishes all this by portraying events and characters that do not exist, or whose real existence is beside the point, it is able to show up the act of referring as one dependent on contexts, criteria

> and interrelations among signs, rather than as a straightforward connection. Fiction is thus a useful therapy for those with unduly reductive ideas of referentiality.[1]

Documentary intent in fiction may, in some cases, imply a somewhat nostalgic desire to reinstate an immediate connection between sign and referent, the illusion that complex realities can be reproduced in a relatively straightforward narrative form. In this paper, I will focus on a Hungarian literary work which engages in documentariness while also maintaining a reflective and playful stance toward the process of signification—Péter Esterházy's *A Novel of Production*.

The fact that the two tendencies of documentariness and reflectivity are not mutually exclusive is clearly displayed by internationally better-known works such as Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, a 1991 story cycle about the Vietnam War, in which the homodiegetic narrator (named Tim O'Brien) repeatedly introduces a distinction between referentiality and the exigencies of narrative, or what he calls "happening-truth" vs. "story-truth".[2] He retells stories in multiple, sometimes contradictory, versions highlighting the unreliability of individual testimony, while also framing the primary narrative in the recollections and later life stories of the surviving participants. The ambiguous effects of the text are highlighted by extratextual knowledge that is also hinted at within the book, such as the fact that the Tim O'Brien presented on the pages is different from the author in many respects, e.g., we know that the real author does not have children, while the narrator-protagonist's daughter plays a major role in the narrative. The collection is often cited as one of the most accomplished literary documents on the Vietnam, War while it is also criticized for its narrow scope, focusing only on the American soldiers' experience (at the expense of women, especially the Vietnamese). The critical disagreements also bring into focus the necessarily limiting perspective of literary narrative, which O'Brien's defenders argue is duly acknowledged *within* the book even though this cannot rectify the power imbalances *outside of* it.[3]

Tim O'Brien's work is usually categorized as 'metafiction'. Virtually at the same time as Esterházy published his novel in Hungary, Linda Hutcheon identified metafictional strategies in fiction as focusing on the "mimesis of process" rather than on the "mimesis of product"—meaning that the narrative arc in contemporary

1 Eagleton, *The Event of Literature*, 162.

2 O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*. The distinction between "story-truth" and "happening-truth" is found in the story "Good Form." For a discussion of metafiction in O'Brien's stories, see Silbergleid, "Making Things Present."

3 A small but relevant sample of critical arguments (excerpts from articles by Steven Kaplan, Lorrie N. Smith and Susan Farrell) has been reprinted in *The Norton Introduction to Literature*, 562–98.

metafiction tends to follow the creative process and the composition of the narrative as much as the narrative itself. Hutcheon linked this shift from product to process to the dialectic between the productive and the receptive sides of the literary process, and to the constant need for innovation in the face of the changing concepts of reality:

> Novel theory which has reified "realism" and has limited mimesis to product alone has ignored the dialectical relationship that must exist between literature and criticism, a relationship that demands a reworking and possibly a transcending of the limits of any theoretical formulation which fails to come to terms with new literary forms. Reader aesthetics has been one reply to the needs of modern metafiction. A related concept of mimesis of process might be another. [4]

Accepting Hutcheon's generalization, the distinction may be further complicated by the following amendments.

1. With regard to such self-flaunting works, the term "mimesis" may be somewhat misleading, as the process of creating is not so much a subject of imitation as of (careful and playful) *documentation*. The latter term highlights the textuality and/or media-dependency of the process.
2. The self-documentation of the creative process does not simply reaffirm or eliminate the distinction between intra-textual and extra-textual reference, or fiction and reality. Rather, a layered and complicated system of framing and re-framing emerges, in which different meanings of "fictionality" may be applied, and the same component may acquire a fictional or a non-fictional status relative to the vantage point of the observer.
3. Playfulness is an inescapable aspect of this framing, and as such, the process of self-documentation may be best approached by theories of play, such as those by Gregory Bateson, Roger Caillois or, as applied to literature, Wolfgang Iser.

It is well known that Gregory Bateson compared the framing of play to Epimenides' argument and acknowledged the ultimate logical undecidability of the map-territory relation with regard to play. "In primary process, map and territory are equated; in secondary process, they can be discriminated. In play, they are both equated and discriminated."[5] If fiction is related to play, there must be a similar ambiguity in the relationship between textuality and referentiality. Wolfgang Iser's attempt to break out of the fiction-reality dichotomy may be instructive in this regard. In *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, Iser proposed a threefold schema to replace the old dichotomy, in which fiction (or rather, the fictive) is already an intermediate

4 Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative*, 47.

5 Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 143.

category mediating between an otherwise inaccessible reality and a shapeless imaginary, rendering the former comprehensible and the latter tangible. The fictive is thus not an exclusive characteristic of literary or even artistic representation but is a necessary component of all social institutions, from legal principles through philosophical theorems to political ideologies. In literary fiction, however, the specific fictionalizing acts of selection, combination, and self-disclosure are always at work, ensuring that the reader distinguishes the map from the territory and relates the former to the latter, just as in Bateson's above-cited model which informs Iser's discourse. This leads to an application of theories of play to textual operations of fiction, which is a somewhat underdeveloped but potentially fruitful aspect of Iser's theory. His intention was "to raise play above representation as an umbrella concept to cover all the ongoing operations of the textual process."[6] For this purpose, he adopted Roger Caillois's classification of games, including the distinction of *paideia v ludus* (translated into free and instrumental play), and the fourfold categorization of *agon, alea, ilinx, and mimicry*. It is possible to apply these categories to self-documenting or self-annotating fictions, even if it is not always possible or desirable to neatly fit literary examples into these boxes.

In Esterházy's book, like in some notable other works of modern and contemporary fiction, the specific device utilized to give literature a quasi-documentary feel is the use of footnotes and endnotes, devices closely linked to the print medium. Annotation lends these works a somewhat "academic" look, creating the impression that they are as much "expository" texts as they are fictional narratives. The history of employing such annotation in fiction is almost as deep as the history of annotation in historical narratives. Anthony Grafton traces the emergence of the historical footnote to the late 17th century. By the mid-18th century, English authors such as Fielding and Sterne used the footnote in their comic fictions.[7] In Grafton's narrative, the specific functions of the historical footnote are related to the increasing professionalization of historiography: they were intended to persuade the reader that the historian had done their homework, and indicate the specific sources referenced by the historian.[8] In this regard, Grafton contrasts the modern footnote to its antecedent forms in grammatical, philological, and theological annotation, since these earlier forms were meant to buttress the authority of a text "considered to be of eternal value" and mediate the text to "a modern reader whose horizons are necessarily limited by immediate needs and interests." The modern historian's footnotes, on the other hand, "seek to show that the work they support claims authority and solidity

6 Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, 250.

7 Benstock, "At the Margins of Discourse," 206.

8 Grafton, *The Footnote*, 22.

from the historical conditions of its own creation,"[9] that is, the archival and library resources available to the historian at the time of their research. This is evidently relevant not only for historical works but also for annotated editions of literary works which link the text to the historical (biographical, social, cultural, and economic) contexts of their composition. Esterházy's *A Novel of Production* belongs to a small subgenre of postmodernist pieces (along with Nabokov's *Pale Fire*) that parodically imitate the conventions of this editorial practice.

Footnotes (and endnotes), then, are inevitably linked to an experience of temporality, which may also explain why their employment in modern fiction is so often inseparable from irony. In his conclusion, Grafton associates the use of modern footnotes, and the research techniques they imply with historians' and journalists' ability to challenge governments, while admitting that, as a formal device, the footnote may also be used by enemies of the truth "to amass citations and quotations of no interest."[10] The formal aspects of the device may be abused because annotations, rather than bringing historical reality directly into the text, point to further documentary evidence, that is, mostly to texts, images, recordings, and other media. Nonetheless, and precisely because of this ability to bring other voices into play, the footnote is associated with the idea of a conversation "in which modern scholars, their predecessors, and their subjects all take part"[11]—as opposed to a monologue narrated by a single individual. Sheri Benstock reminds us that authority in modern fictional texts "rests not on extratextual sources that support an intellectual aesthetic but on the implied presence of the author" and that, consequently, the annotations employed in fiction "differ radically from those of scholarly discourse."[12] This is true in the sense that, rather than buttressing the scholarly authority of a historian, annotations often serve to undercut the authority of a speaker, narrator, or even the fictionalized author, as in the case of *Tristram Shandy*. In more contemporary fiction, such as in several works of David Foster Wallace or Junot Diaz, annotations may challenge or reinterpret narrative authority in various ways.[13]

In the late 1980s, Betsy Hilbert argued that the demise of the long, digressive, essayistic footnote in humanistic scholarship may be on account of publishers' frugality and a general tendency to model all forms of scholarship on the relatively

9 Grafton, *The Footnote*, 32.

10 Grafton, *The Footnote*, 235.

11 Grafton, *The Footnote*, 234.

12 Benstock, "At the Margins," 207, 205.

13 For Wallace's use of endnotes in *Infinite Jest*, see Letzler, "Encyclopedic Novels and the Cruft of Fiction: Infinite Jest's Endnotes." David Letzler argues that the "cruft" of seemingly useless and overwhelming information in the novel serves as a protective device or testing ground against the overload of information in contemporary media culture.

straightforward ideal of the scientific paper. She cites the 1984 MLA Style Manual as a point of no return, after which content notes, extensive reference notes, and even full publisher information have been devalued in academic publishing. She calls the tendency to relegate annotations to endnotes "a bastard compromise, a happy innovation for students, who no longer worried about the bottom margins."[14] However, in the same paper, Hilbert also argues, that "[t]he footnote is being reborn in another medium, learning to thrive in contemporary fiction." She cites John Barth's 1982 novel, *Sabbatical,* as her prime example, and defends Barth's novel (particularly the use of seemingly extraneous footnotes) from its detractors. "What seemed to critics like stylistic debauchery, however, is careful development. A central theme of *Sabbatical* is the authority of knowledge, the frail understandings on which human choices must be based".[15] I will argue that similar thematic concerns are at work in Esterházy's novel as well.

The tendency to relegate annotations to the end of books in order not to interrupt narrative or expository continuity is certainly an important development for contemporary reading culture and, perhaps, the narrative of the gradual decline of academic precision which has most recently been associated with the rise of the internet. However, in terms of modern and contemporary literary fiction, footnotes and endnotes have both been used creatively as devices of self-documentation. In this sense, the use of annotation may be historically aligned with other methods of formal experimentation in 20th-century narrative fiction. Mihály Szegedy-Maszák discussed Esterházy's work in the context of "nonteleological narration," also mentioning it alongside *Pale Fire* and citing both among examples of "aleatory arrangement." This is mostly because readers of such works may choose among different potential reading paths: they can decide to read the first part first and the commentary consecutively, or "they can turn to the latter whenever they wish to consult it."[16] It seems more than a coincidence that Julio Cortázar's *Rayuela (Hopscotch)* and Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* were published only one year apart (in 1963 and 1962, respectively), since both display or anticipate the postmodernist concern with multiple paths of reading. *Pale Fire*'s act of linking an extensive series of endnotes by an apparently insane philologist to a poem has been the subject of much scholarly debate but it seems to create, at first, a primarily *agonistic* relationship between text and commentary, as the annotator's desire to make the text about himself results in the annotations overpowering John Shade's poem, and not only in a quantitative

14 Hilbert, "Elegy for Excursus: The Descent of the Footnote," 401. This can be seen as a reversal of the historical moment when David Hume convinced his and Gibbon's shared publisher to convert Gibbon's endnotes into footnotes (Grafton, *The Footnote*, 221–22).

15 Hilbert, "Elegy," 202, 204.

16 Szegedy-Maszák, "Nonteleological Narration," 279.

sense. However, perceptive readers have discovered many "subtle subliminal links between text and commentary"[17] which cannot be attributed to the admittedly ignorant and self-interested commentator. It is the resultant need to rethink the authority of both the fictional author and the fictional commentator that drives the interpretive history of *Pale Fire*. A similar dialectic of disconnection and connection is detectable between the two parts in Esterházy's *A Novel of Production*.[18]

Termelési-regény (kisssregény), published in 1979, was Péter Esterházy's first novel and his third book overall. The original Hungarian title is virtually impossible to translate. The main title refers to a literary genre, the novel of production, which was promoted in the Communist Eastern Block in the heighday of "socialist realism." The hyphenation, however, is a deliberate spelling error, perhaps to indicate the low literary quality of typical novels of this type. The parenthetical subtitle contains a multilayered pun. The term "kisregény" (lit. "a small novel") is also the name of a literary genre (the novella or short novel) but, spelled with a tripled *s*, it evokes both the English word "kiss" and the homophonous name of the Communist Youth Organization in Hungary (KISZ, pronounced as "kiss"), which was in existence until 1989. The tripled *s* may also be read as the sound of hushing or silencing others (the letter *s* standing for the sound "sh" in Hungarian). All these meanings are activated by the text of the novel. While the book has not been translated into English, the titles of the German and French translations illustrate these difficulties and help explain the structure of the book.[19]

The German version, published in Terézia Mora's rendering in 2010, is called *Ein Produktionsroman (Zwei Produktionsromane)*. This is because, as indicated above, the novel is composed of two distinct parts. The first, shorter part is a zany,

17 Boyd, *Nabokov's Pale Fire*, 119.

18 I have not yet found any evidence that Esterházy read *Pale Fire* before or during the composition of his novel. Esterházy mostly read in Hungarian and German, and Nabokov's work was translated into German in 1968. From the Hungarian author's library records (housed by the Lutheran Library in Budapest), it seems that he did not own the book, which, given the young author's modest lifestyle and the difficulty of accessing Western European books in the 1970s, is not surprising at all. He may have heard about Nabokov's work from friends but the manuscript materials which I looked at in the Archives of Die Akademie der Künste in Berlin do not point to any familiarity with Nabokov at all. Either way, the two works display remarkable structural similarities, which is perhaps due to the "Zeitgeist" rather than a direct link between them. Ernő Kulcsár Szabó convincingly argued that a more immediate source of inspiration could have been Salinger (from whom the epigraph of the second part is taken), most specifically *Franny and Zooey*. Kulcsár Szabó, *Esterházy Péter,* 64.

19 The texts of existing translations of the novel (German, French, and Russian) have been published digitally in the online repository *Digiphil*, as part of a project directed by Gábor Palkó. See http://digiphil.hu/context:ep-tr.

parodic narrative which takes place in an economic research and planning institute in Budapest. The plot, with many unexpected turns and digressions, mainly revolves around an attempt by the young engineer, Imre Tomcsányi, to introduce new computerized methodology into the planning and management of industrial production. The key term for the new methodology is "parametric programming," which is explained by the narrator (indirectly citing the main character's arguments) as a method of dynamic modeling. The old, outdated method "works with a model mirroring reality, mirroring economic relations, and as such, it necessarily simplifies things: the model only considers linear relations, and treats limitations (markets, capacity, etc.) as constants; the model is static, as it contains information relevant in a given moment in time only […]."[20] The phrases "mirroring reality, mirroring economic relations" evoke the then-dominant official Marxist critical discourse on literature, an analogy which will be important later. Tomcsányi sets out to change this old way of modeling by employing a more dynamic, complex, and time-sensitive (that is, parametric) method of programming. However, the shift would require new equipment, institutional reforms, and personnel change, which creates resistance within the establishment. Tomcsányi falls victim to internal strife and backstabbing and is only saved at the last moment by the chief executive of the institute, represented in the first-person plural in the first and last chapters as a parodic trinity, which also explains the main title of the French translation (*Trois Anges Me Surveillent,* 1989, translated by Agnès Járfás and Sophie Képès).

The second part of the novel is linked to the first in a way which was completely unusual in Hungarian literature at the time, as a series of endnotes devoted to the "life and times" of the author, Péter Esterházy, also addressed as "the maestro (a mester)."[21] These endnotes claim to be the work of a commentator who calls himself "E." with a footnote attached to the first endnote relating him to Goethe's secretary, "Johann Peter Eckermann." The identification is twofold, then: Esterházy links his own name to that of Eckermann while playfully presenting a version of himself in the role of the author, Goethe-like, worthy of admiration and detailed biographical attention. This duality finds an interesting analogy in David Damrosch's observation about the contested

20 Esterházy, *Termelési-regény*, 17. Further references to this edition are in the main text, in parentheses. All translations from the novel are my own.

21 "This work was published with two bookmarks, one red and the other black, to encourage the public to read the first part, a parody of a genre of socialist realism, simultaneously with the second part, a spiritual autobiography of the author. A superficial reading will disclose no connection whatsoever between the main text and the endnotes. On closer consideration, however, the latter create an alternative teleology which contradicts that of the generic parody." Szegedy-Maszák, "Nonteleological Narration," 279.

authorship of Eckermann's conversations with Goethe.[22] This contested and contradictory presentation of authorship is represented in the subtitle of the French translation *(Les Aveux D'un Roman)*, the confessions or biographical details emerge in a space which is not identifiable with any subjective or objective, authorial or scholarly position.[23] In what sense is it possible to say that the novel confesses itself, testifies to itself, or even *documents* itself? These questions gain pertinence in the context of the renewed debates on the status of the literary work between "monument" and "document,"[24] and the capacity of literature to convey reliable (historical, social, etc.) knowledge while maintaining its artistic license and generating an aesthetic response.

The main thesis of this paper is that Esterházy's work may be read as an attempt to create a literary version of "parametric" modeling to solve this conundrum. At one point, in a brief endnote (no. 12), seemingly unrelated to the main plot, the commentator narrates an anecdote about the maestro being approached by a colleague named "Mr. Ferenc from Temes" (a thinly veiled reference to Esterházy's contemporary, Ferenc Temesi[25]), who proposes that the two of them compose two closely linked short stories ("ikernovellát" lit. "twin stories") together. Esterházy's reaction is enthusiastic: "'We set down a few *parameters*, and that is all,' said the

22 Commenting on John Oxenford's English translation of Eckermann's book, David Damrosch observes: "*The Conversations* gained in this way in translation. Yet, Eckermann himself lost, for the book entitled *Gespräche mit Goethe* became *Conversations with Eckermann*: Oxenford gave Goethe, not Eckermann, as the book's actual author. Eckermann's authority over his text diminished along with his authorship: from Oxenford on, translators and editors have felt free to rework his entries and even his prose, according full respect only to the text's quotations from Goethe." Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* 33.

23 The Eckermann situation and the pseudo-autobiographical intimacy of subject and commentator recall the cliché "great man in slippers", which is a *topos* to be rejected by the annotator. As it happens, however, slippers keep showing up in various incidents, thus turning the word into a literary motif contrary to the intentions of the annotator. Tibor Bónus, in a recent re-reading of the novel, pointed to this aspect of the text (commented on in a footnote attached to an endnote) to emphasize the admitted aleatoriness of the composition: "the text, which through motifs organizes itself into art, owes its existence not to the invention of its author but to the arbitrariness of life." The term "author" here primarily references the pseudo-Eckermann of the commentaries. Bónus, "Die Kunst, Fliegen zu fangen," 139.

24 Ceserani, "The Difference between »Document« and »Monument«," esp. 18–20.

25 Temesi wrote a novel entitled *Por (Dust)* in a dictionary form, roughly at the time when Milorad Pavić was working on *Dictionary of the Khazars* in then-Yugoslavia (*Por* was published in 1986, two years after *Dictionary of the Khazars*). While the latter became an international sensation (cf. Damrosch, *What Is World Literature,* 260–80), Temesi only achieved moderate critical success inside Hungary. In addition to the unpredictability of international book markets and critical taste, the differing fates of the two novels demonstrate that an innovative format does not in itself guarantee literary success—since in Temesi's case, the format is not matched by a similarly innovative and original writing style.

maestro. 'And that is all,' the man from Temes nodded. 'Stefanovits is the man of the future,' he added, and looked at Esterházy to see if he understood. Now it was the maestro's turn to nod. 'We combine a section of space with a person.'" (p. 193, emphasis added). While the point of the anecdote is that Esterházy quickly abandons the idea because he "got started on a longer text, so this thing of ours is on the backburner," this may also refer to the fact that Mr. Ferenc's suggestion helped him come up with a formula for his own work, a "parametric" design for narrative.

Esterházy uses experimental methods and establishes playful textual dynamics to allow complex and meaningful relationships to emerge between different layers of reality. If the simplified codes of "socialist realism" are analogous to a simple, static, and pre-established relationship between fiction and reality (fiction "mirroring" in a linear manner what one already claims to know about social and economic reality), then more complex textual devices are required for a more nuanced understanding of the world. Annotation and self-documentation are among the devices Esterházy implemented in this novel. These devices create a narrative structure which is full of tension and apparent self-contradiction, but apparently Esterházy's purpose is to create a careful balance between the textual and the referential. Self-reference, metafiction, and irony are used to *document* not only the social and cultural realities surrounding the composition of the work but also the very methods and principles of composition.

Just as with *Pale Fire*, the first-time reader primarily experiences confusion and disjunction in the relationship between text and commentary. Once we start to understand the slowly unfolding storylines, certain lacunas and inversions become even more pronounced. The annotations allude to the fact that the maestro is a mathematician who works at a research institute near Marx Square (as Nyugati square was known from 1945 to 1992), earning 2700 Hungarian forints a month after his most recent promotion. These facts tally with the plot of the novella and give the impression that the maestro built his fictional word based on his work experiences (also an intra-fictional equivalent of what is known of the extra-fictional Esterházy's work situation at the time). However, the annotations offer little information about Esterházy's work and, instead, focus on other areas of his life, namely family, literature, and—perhaps most extensively and most typically—his adventures as an amateur football (soccer) player. These areas are all presented in the Batesonian sense as *playing fields*. Each of them comes with its framing devices, rules, and regulations, yet they intersect and interfere with each other and, thereby, model a larger reality which is only accessible through them.

The most obvious example is the football field, which is often represented in the abstract as "a magical green rectangle" surrounded by white lines, thus delineated and isolated from the outside world as an autonomous field of play. Nevertheless, this model of reality also has its own tangible reality, defined by geographic, economic,

social, and cultural features. "When one—that is, he—stands inside a world, that world is complete. This way, there is no difference between the (allegedly) excellent lawn of the People's Stadium and the footsore-inducing, hard clay surface of Goli Field" (p. 284). This statement, made in the middle of a very important scene when the maestro is about to sign for a new club, combines several key motifs of the novel. The abstract, geometric beauty and the universal rules of the game mean that all football fields of the world are alike, the ideal being the People's Stadium in Budapest where the Hungarian national team plays its home games (see also pp. 165–66). However, the materiality of experiencing a world also matters, and is a constant component of the descriptions of Esterházy's footballing experience: "(What did orientation mean in this narrow horizon? It meant the unevenness of the soil, the familiar molehills, humps, puddles, dried and cracked shoeprints, knurls […]" (p. 155). Another time Esterházy snaps at his teammate who cares too much about Italian football: "here in Hungary, after so much running, under the shower, in Local League 28, making 13.20 forints an hour, you are bothered by the promising performance of Como…" (p. 173). The locality and material conditions of the football experience complicate the relationship between model and reality. First, in Clifford Geertz's terms, the models offered by Esterházy are both models *for* and models *of* the larger world,[26] which means that they both anticipate and reflect characteristics of a broader reality. The borders of these worlds are also in some sense "porous,"[27] in the sense that the material, cultural, and economic conditions of "the outside" penetrate—but never eliminate—the boundaries of the playing field.

This is clearly visible in the storyline involving the attempted, but ultimately aborted, signing of the maestro by a bigger club. This storyline is, with only a hint of irony, framed as a morality tale since the terms *árulás* (betrayal) and *hűség* (loyalty) are strategically used within and around the narrative frame containing this storyline. The numbers 12 and 13 are employed strategically to allude to the story of Judas,[28]

26 "Unlike genes, and other nonsymbolic information sources, which are only models *for*, not models *of*, culture patterns have an intrinsic double aspect: they give meaning, that is, objective conceptual form, to social and psychological reality both by shaping themselves to it and by shaping it to themselves." Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 93. See also Iser, *The Range of Interpretation*, 95–97.

27 In David Foster Wallace' *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, "the porousness of certain borders" is a recurring theme, not least with reference to the border of fiction and reality, text and commentary in the metafictional practices, which are described as "S. O. P." (Standard Operating Procedure) by this time. See Wallace, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, 153.

28 "Here we must recall that thirteen spheres of equal size can be arranged in the smallest amount of space by placing twelve spheres around the thirteenth one in a way that they envelop and hide it. The centers of these twelve external spheres, each of which touches the central one at a single point, will coincide with the vertices of an *icosahedron*. See: Jesus and the twelve apostles, Jacob

and the entire storyline takes place in a timeframe between Easter and Christmas. The narrative also has its own *mise-en-abyme* in the form of a shorter narrative of a game in which the opponents attempt to bribe Esterházy's team, and it is the maestro who rejects the bribe. His reasons are counterintuitive from a practical point of view: he refuses the bribe *because* they know that they are going to lose anyway—the opposing team is stronger, playing at home, and they probably bribed the referee anyway ("the referee already knows the result," p. 227[29]). While it would be logical to throw a game which one will lose anyway, the maestro's reluctance is motivated by a feeling of futility: "why on earth did he ride across the whole city if this is the scene of a pseudo-football-game?" (p. 228). This storyline once again stresses the intrusion of external forces on the playing field while conveying the sense of a specific morality which consists in maintaining the autonomy of the game (play for play's sake) in the face of these external pressures. The distinction between actual play and pretend-play is also relevant here and for the following.

Similar narrative and semantic units are brought into play in the narrative of the signing but the abstract morality which applies on the playing field is now displaced by the specific socio-economic conditions of socialist Hungary. In the scene of negotiation narrated in endnote 21, the hero is offered a contract at his future club with a monthly salary exceeding the amount that he makes at his current job with the research institute (4000 as opposed to 2700 forints). However, he delays signing the contract until they tell him exactly what his new work responsibilities will be, a delay which will cause the deal to collapse. To understand this narrative, the reader should know that in the Communist Bloc, professionalism in sports was not supported, and even the best athletes did not officially receive wages for playing or doing sports. Since elite athletic performance is not possible while maintaining a full-time job, jobs which existed only "on paper" were created for athletes to maintain the illusion of *amateurism* (which also gave Eastern Bloc countries an advantage at the Olympic Games from which professional athletes were also excluded at the time).[30] Esterházy's refusal to sign the contract amounts to a repudiation of this dishonest system but it also points to several other strands in the narrative.

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and the twelve tribes of Israel, the Sun and the twelve zodiacs, 'heavenly Jerusalem' and the twelve angels, the Cross and its twelve right angles, etc." This quote refers to an arrangement of spherical beer mugs in a bar and is taken from—the reader probably guessed it—endnote 13 (p. 194).

29 This phrase has political connotations since the Hungarian word *bíró* means both "referee" and "judge," and the preconceived show trials of the Rákosi era are also referenced in the book (endnote 25, for example).

30 See Fodor, *Újrajátszás,* 92–93. Péter Fodor interprets the Hungarian film *Civil a pályán (Civilian on the Pitch)* directed in 1951 by Márton Keleti as a document of the ideological shift to state-sponsored pseudo-amateurism in sports. Readers unfamiliar with the Hungarian language may consult the volume cited by Fodor: Edelman, *Serious Fun*.

First, the storyline further complicates the relationship between fields of play and the realities which these fields model. Football, which on the one hand is an autonomous world, is also embedded in a larger world in which several fields intersect. In the example cited here (as well as in numerous other passages), the reader is made to understand how football is enveloped by social, economic, and political fields with their own specific rules and pressures. In this specific instance, the fictional Esterházy's refusal to countersign the contract may indicate a recognition that faux amateurism conceals the economic exigencies of sports and, instead, imposes the demand of political consent: the contract implies an unspoken agreement instead of a mutually binding, open one. Since the continuation of the football narrative heavily focuses on the financial troubles facing the maestro's club, the relationship between sports and economics is evidently an important theme.

Earlier, in endnote 10, money is already presented as a motif which provides connectivity between seemingly unrelated fields, and as such, it is referred to as a metonymy of "life." In a crucial passage which follows a drawing of friends as "milestones" in a person's life, the fictional Esterházy and the head coach, while standing "in the magical, green rectangle," talk about money. After claiming that he is "not really interested in money," the maestro feels the need to explain himself. The narrator sums up his words, and then reports their later conversation in which the maestro expressed his regrets.

> The maestro, in order to rectify things, said something to the effect that money is only an instrument for him, and that he only needs as much of it as absolutely necessary. […] This pure spirit was apparently very uneasy. 'I was still beating myself up at night about it. To approach the question in such a juvenile manner [diákosan]!' Surely, he felt then that he was still a child (military service, family, child, fame aside). 'It was a very *amateurish* attitude,' he said, and one would be hard-pressed to find a harsher word to apply to one whose job is to understand life" (p. 170 – emphasis added).

The juxtaposition of this admittedly naïve attitude to money and the word "amateurish" *(amatőr)* anticipates the implied criticism of faux amateurism in sports. In the same discussion of money, we also learn about the odd jobs which the head coach, Mr. Armand, must take to support himself as a further illustration of the inadequacy of the system. The fact that the word *amatőr* is not highlighted in the original text but its contextual equivalent, *diákosan* ("in a juvenile manner," literally: "like a pupil") is, displays the technique of indirection, to which we will return briefly. The commentator's conclusion also relies on presuppositions which directly link literature (the maestro's job), life (that which a writer must understand), money (an important part of life which a writer must surely understand), and football (the framing scene of the entire conversation) in a tight network of semiotic connections.

In the same endnote, football is also linked to economic realities through the anecdote alluded to in the conversation with Mr. Armand, who had the honor (and misfortune[31]) of playing with Ferenc Puskás in his youth. Armand insists that Puskás and the "golden generation" of Hungarian footballers played only for the sake of playing, regardless of external circumstances, such as money, fame, or the grandeur of the stage. "There was no difference between matches, there was only the love of the game," to which the maestro cheekily asks, referring to a saying attributed to Puskás, "and what about 'better money, better footie' [*kis pénz kis foci*][32]?" The saying, whose authenticity and original context are uncertain,[33] refers to an alleged incident when Puskás, as spokesperson for the national team, suggested that better financial incentives would lead to better performance. Armand, "who did not lack a certain sense of irony [*önirónia* – lit. 'self-irony', self-deprecation]" unexpectedly answers: "Football is an exception." (p. 165). The ironic remark relies first on the lexical distinction between *foci* and *futball*, the first being a diminutive, endearing form for the second (perhaps based on the British "footie"), and on the folklorization on Puskás's alleged remark, which has been applied to other areas of life in Hungarian culture. Armand seems to suggest that the principle of correlation between remuneration and performance holds true in most fields except in the one where it originates, so the term "foci" can take on a variety of meanings except "football." The small anecdote gains greater significance when read in the context of football as a model *of* / *for* life and as a model partaking of the reality which it is expected to represent. The semantic split introduced between the two words also models the disjunction between "map and territory," and points to the role of language in the process of modeling. Since reference is necessarily indirect and mediated through language, it is possible for an expression to have a meaning completely separated from, or even opposed to, the original referential or semantic context. Even though Mr. Armand's remark is marked

31 Mr. Armand claims that Puskás inadvertently ruined his football career by breaking his leg in a crunching tackle during the tryout game for Budapest Honvéd, the best team in the Hungarian league (so named because of their sponsorship by the Hungarian People's Army and treated preferentially by the communist authorities).

32 The alleged original phrase was "Kis pénz, kis foci: nagy pénz, nagy foci," which literally translates as "little money, little football: big money, big football."

33 An urban legend connects this saying to a 1952 match between Switzerland and Hungary, which the Hungarian team started taking more seriously after being offered more money at halftime. For his book about the legendary player, the journalist Tibor Hámori interviewed Gusztáv Sebes, the head coach of the "Mighty Magyars," and Puskás himself, asking both about the phrase; neither corroborated the story. Puskás admitted uttering this phrase but in a more general sense, about professionalism in football (which is also relevant for Esterházy). See Hámori, *Puskás*, 52, 151. The phrase took on such a life of its own that it found its way into academic discourse on the psychology of economics, such as in the title of the following book: Garai, "*kis pénz → kis foci?*"

as ironic or playful, this does not detract from its significance. Rather, the irony also illustrates the playfulness with which language and literature model realities.

Also in the same endnote, immediately following the maestro's *amateurish* remark on money, the football field is metaphorized in a new way. During the warm-up laps around the pitch, the maestro addresses his teammates: "A corner of the pitch is folded, and it reads: SECRET," evoking a playful habit of schoolchildren who (used to) send one another secret messages hidden under dog-eared corners of pages. The commentary offers bafflement as well as indirect insight: "To be frank, this was not true: in the sense that the corner of the pitch was not folded, and it did not read: secret; it is not even clear how he meant the whole thing technically, perhaps in the sense of *law*n [gyep*szőnyeg*]?—anyway, it was another poetic component on his side, a small detail of the unified poetic worldview that is so typical of him. I believe that this is a very honest thing" (pp. 170–71). The implication of the maestro's playful remark is consistent with the understanding of football as a model which can reveal rules and truths concealed in other areas of reality. The metaphor, which E. draws attention to by refusing to acknowledge it, identifies the football pitch with a written page, buttressing the analogy between the maestro's two ruling passions as competing, simultaneous, interacting models. The maestro brings a literary device (metaphor) onto the football ground (in other passages, he also discusses his writing with his teammates, connecting the two areas of play). This is a reminder that the analogical thinking necessary for model-building also depends on semiotic or rhetorical operations. The principles of signification which make writing and literature possible also enable us to understand football as a world model. Furthermore, by employing a metaphor that is technically impossible, the maestro also refers—metafictionally—to the written, fictional nature of the football field encountered on the pages of his book. In other words, he identifies the football field and its fictional description as a *document*. The commentator, though he is somewhat confused by the applicability of the metaphor, is nevertheless correct when he points to the "unified poetic worldview" revealed by the metaphor. The imagined analogy between the page and the pitch is consistent with the constant testing of reference points shared between various narrative scenarios and playing fields serving as models. The worldview is "unified" not because it offers a representative totality but because it connects different playing fields and frames to explore their analogies and disparities.

In the larger structure of the book, the storyline of the failed signing establishes a parallel between the maestro of the commentary and the hero of the "short novel" since Tomcsányi is also offered a fake job within the research institute to curtail, or at least delay, his push for modernization.[34] The head of Tomcsányi's department, the

34 Gábor Palkó interpreted this connection in the following way: "The first and second parts of the novel focus on activities during and outside of working hours, respectively; both in the

diminutive Gregory Peck (sic) says to his subordinate: "We greatly need your talent. We will offer you a short-term research assignment, lasting *circa* [*kvázi*] two years. After this term, you and your colleagues will present the study. What study, you ask? Surely you are jesting: *the* study. You say it is already finished? Well, it is finished. So what? [*lárifári*]" (p. 41, first emphasis in the original). This is only one example of the multiple, seemingly indirect, ways in which connections may be established between the two major parts of the text.[35] The indirection is best understood as (metonymic) displacement since, as mentioned before, the fictional Esterházy also works as a researcher but, when he is offered a fake position, it happens at a football club rather than at the research institute. Indirections such as this are far from being insignificant, since the relationship between the two parts (narrative and commentary, literature and life, fiction and reality) cannot be direct, linear, and specular without contradicting the principle of "parametric" modeling. Within the multilayered fictional universe created by Esterházy, literature does not *mirror* life but *models* it the same way other fields of play do.

This means that literature, much like football, friendship, or family life, has a material side—materiality being an umbrella term encompassing all aspects which complicate and resist the idea that a literary work is reducible to the world it creates, whether this world is seen as an autonomous, self-sufficient whole or a mirror of a reality beyond it. In the deconstructionist theory of Paul de Man, the term "materiality" was used in opposition to "phenomenality," a distinction which is itself open to interpretation but certainly has to do with the ability of language to conjure an imaginary/illusory world and thereby model the real one. The conceptual opposition is developed from a reading of Kant[36] but has wider philosophical ramifications. In the volume mostly dedicated to this issue, Arkady Plotnitsky pointed to the links between modern literary theory and theoretical physics, a link which may be informative here since Esterházy also relies on the analogies (and differences) between mathematical modeling, linguistic signification, and artistic world-building. Plotnitsky identifies "a qualified analogy"[37] between quantum theory and literature, highlighting the "nonclassical" interpretation of chance and its consequences on the interpretation of form: "From this viewpoint, the ultimate 'aesthetics' or 'poetic vision' of physics is not that of coherence, harmonious wholeness, and other icons

main text, in the malheur of Tomcsányi's futile efforts and in the notes, in the transfer hiccup, the interplay of workplace, actual work (motivation) and remuneration are at stake." Palkó, *Esterházy-kontextusok*, in the chapter: "A parazita."

35 For further examples of and commentary on the parallelism between the two parts, see Kulcsár Szabó, *Esterházy Péter*, 83ff.

36 de Man, "Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant."

37 Plotnitsky, "Algebra and Allegory," 79.

of classical aesthetic ideology, although these may apply at other levels of quantum theory. Instead, it is the aesthetics of the radical decoherence, of the formal without form."[38] Compare this with the maestro's letter (endnote 58) to "son ami," in which he responds to questions about "methods, mathematicity, etc." The argument centers on issues of coherence, chance, and the (non)correspondence between sign and object. The first postscript identifies the letter as a "document" which must be typed to be incorporated into the commentary, identifying self-commentary as self-documentation. A part of the letter reads:

> What I am saying stands even for masterpieces. (And the obligatory: let alone…) The fact that 'the same thing' may be done in a thousand ways, and *equally* well. I attempted to defend against this 'fury of chance' by letting it take me where it would, letting the writing go on and be formed by the whims of 'the personal daily routine.' This really helps the 'attitude' […] but not the practice. The world must correspond to its descriptions, I recently heard Mr. Imre say. Which takes me back to the issue of description.
>
> It has always been obvious to anyone with a modicum of brain that one can always only talk about a *version*, and I can sit with my accursed sense of language over the words, I can go blind writing […] replacing one word with another, which is either better or worse, or rather, not better. There —up to the closing of this book—the 'attitude' is solved by the hope in the 'formulation' of some sort of *silence* (etc., etc.) which—flashing by the text, retrospectively makes the placement of individual words irrelevant (p. 430, emphases in original).

The disjunction between linguistic reference and reality, exemplified by the existence of synonyms and textual variants, is in tension with the expectation of correspondence between world and description, and creates room for randomness. The letter claims that (1) relying on randomness is an integral part of the method of composition and that (2) silences or gaps are more important structural components than the actual words on the page.[39] Arguably, this "documentary" admission of the author (lest we forget, the fictionalized author, which makes the situation even more indirect) corroborates the interpretation that the overall meaning of the text is not expressed directly in the individual storylines but rather in the intersections of various narrative frames, fields of play or modeling procedures. However, chance is not to be understood in the sense of "automatic writing" or a purely associative

38 Plotnitsky, "Algebra and Allegory," 70.

39 The importance of silence(s) and silencing has been noted and given detailed treatment by Lőrincz, "Figurationen des Schweigens in Péter Esterházys früher Prosa," esp. 60ff., and Szirák, "Ausgesprochen unausgesprochen."

technique. The deliberate use of indirection, for example, is evident from the composition and results in the de-figuration of conventional phrases and figures of speech as well as thematic or semantic units by displacing them from their original or self-evident context: the parameters of a short story, the writer's amateurish attitude towards money, the dog-eared corner of the football pitch, and football as an exception to the rule of football are obvious examples of this strategy.[40]

On the other hand, the materiality of literature is not to be understood purely in the abstract theoretical sense of the materiality of the signifier, as "a materiality without matter"[41]—although incorporating this notion enhances the reading of the novel. However, in a broader sense, the novel incorporates references to more immediate practical matters which constitute a kind of materiality. They range from the typographical arrangement of the page[42] to the placement and role of illustrations and diagrams, from the practical matters of revision and proofreading to the existence of literary institutions, deeply embedded in political or economic structures. These aspects highlight the inseparability of words from the ever-shifting, historically contextualized signifying chains of discourse. In several scenes, the commentary documents the compromises which writers are forced to make to get published in socialist Hungary—in the radio program, for instance, the maestro is forbidden to make even the slightest changes to the text pre-approved for reading aloud (pp. 219–20). Not coincidentally, the text which Esterházy reads in the studio refers to his family's earlier deportation by the communist authorities, and he disagrees with the editor on whether this narrative is to be authorized politically (by the editor) or biographically (by the author). Once again, a single narrative segment becomes the juncture where different discourses and different models of reality intersect and contest each other. Similar scenes (of rejected publications, readers expressing disappointment and lack of understanding, disagreements between author and commentator) abound in the novel. Writing, then, is a potentially endless process of revision, which is copiously illustrated in the reformulations, repetitions, restarts, and self-corrections of the commentary as well. The purely abstract "mathematical" concerns formulated in the above-quoted letter are also contextualized in the writer's involvement with the broader social context. The world is not only "the object of description" to which it must correspond, but it also envelops the act of writing. As a result, the self-documentation of the writing process becomes, in a complicated sense, a process of documentation.s

40 For further examples of "atopical phraseology," see Palkó, *Esterházy-kontextusok*, especially the chapter "Forma, médium, idő." In German translation, see Palkó, "Literarische Produktion," 95–98.

41 Derrida, "Typewriter Ribbon," 352.

42 Jerome McGann uses the term "materiality" in a similar sense, discussing the bibliographic aspect of textuality. See McGann, *The Textual Condition*, 14, 85.

The metafictional laying-bare of narrative procedures, including the playful self-documentation of the composition of the novel, highlights the materiality of writing and links literature with the other fields of play which contribute to the modeling of reality. This process, however, creates recursive loops which inevitably lead to paradoxes at the level of mimesis. For instance, the commentary documents the setting, layout, proofreading, and publication of the very book in which it participates. When the maestro and the illustrator (Mr. Banga, the name of the actual illustrator) look through the proofs, the author is upset because the typesetter retained the conventional form of a word that he playfully altered (*vajasmézes kenyér*, that is bread and butter and honey, for his *vajamézes*, p. 233). Most curiously, this phrase first appears in the second endnote (134, highlighted in both instances), which prevents us from rationalizing the paradox by arguing that the maestro is proofreading his short novel within the fictional frame of the commentary. By confusing the intra-fictional boundary between fiction and reality, the novel once again draws attention to the complex processes of modeling: literature, *like* football, is both life*like*[43] and a part of life, and its creative potential arises from the complex interplay between analogy and participation, metaphorical and metonymic signifying processes.

This paper has shown only a small percentage of the playful textual complexities which make the reading of *A Novel of Production* such a baffling and joyous experience. Despite the excellent interpretations available, there is still a lot to discover. The recent availability of Esterházy's manuscript archive in Die Akademie der Künste in Berlin and the start of a Hungarian research project aiming to produce an annotated critical edition of the novel mean that the textual self-documentation within the text will be compared with the existing documentation of Esterházy's composition process. If done with proper attention, this research will clarify some questions of interpretation, while probably complicating others.

At this stage of the interpretation, the novel may be described as a specific, self-conscious actualization of Greimas's famous semiotic square, in which the building blocks of a semantic universe are narrativized and the ruling oppositions are displaced, generating ever-new terms, and even turning some terms on their heads in an act of negation. The basic dichotomy of fiction and reality, for example, may be supplemented by non-fiction and non-reality, with non-fiction meaning something other than reality, and non-reality meaning something other than fiction. Fredric Jameson observed that this device can "'reduce' a narrative in movement to a series of 'cognitive' or ideological, combinatory positions; or it can rewrite a cognitive text into a desperate narrative movement in which new positions are generated

43 "Literature simulates life, not in order to portray it, but in order to allow the reader to share in it," Iser argues, "Indeterminacy," 29.

and abandoned." He argued that this linking of the narrative to the cognitive allows interpretation to perceive the ideological in narrative since ideology is precisely the "twofold or amphibious reality" of narrative and cognition coexisting in "a constant process whereby one is ceaselessly displaced by the other."[44] In Esterházy's novel, the ideologically opposed polarities of fiction and reality, literature and life, playfulness and seriousness, amateurism and professionalism, text and commentary, process and documentation constantly displace one another in a shifting semiotic dynamic that may just be the literary equivalent of Tomcsányi's "parametric programming" because, rather than "mirroring a reality" it explores the very semantics of the reality which it models and in which it participates.

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44 Jameson, "Foreword," xiii, xvii. In "On Interpretation," Fredric Jameson also claimed that the semiotic square "can be reappropriated for a historicizing and dialectical criticism by designating it as the very locus and model of ideological closure." Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 32. Jameson's seriously Marxist theorization, on the other hand, has its parodic equivalent in the mock-Marxist passages inside the novel, making primary and secondary text (literature and criticism) one of the binaries potentially displaced.

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