

Theses of doctoral (PhD) dissertation

**APPROACHING THE CULTURAL MEMORY OF THE 1980S IN
HUNGARY (CONTEMPORARY STRATEGIES, POPULAR MYTHS
AND THEIR AFTERLIVES)**

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I. Objectives and outline of the dissertation

The primary goal of the dissertation was to map out the dynamic relationship between the 1980s and the present day, while it also wishes to analyze how the memory of the 1980s is transmitted – with a special emphasis on the popular culture of the decade, along with its memory. Based on all this, therefore, the examination is not limited to the 1980s. It also focuses on the present readings of the past and their alterations. That is why the analytical chapters focus on such events, *lieux*, where a society can anchor its memory, as Pierre Nora puts it.

Accordingly, the dissertation consists of five chapters: two theoretical and three analytical ones. The first chapter, entitled *The Forgotten Decades* seeks to explore the various approaches to the memory of the 1980s that appear in the 2000s-2010s. The second part, by the name of *The Unreadable Eighties*, in close association with the opening chapter, analyzes how the 1980s as an era of Hungarian cultural history can be accessed and interpreted. These are followed by the case studies, the selection of which relied on the following considerations. In order to narrow the scope of possible topics, the dissertation exclusively focuses on Hungarian events. Besides, since the paper examines certain phenomena *and* their memory, it was obvious to choose events that are – at least to some extent – parts of present-day public discourses. Hence, the quantity, quality and accessibility of resources was also a criterion in choosing the themes of the case studies. Therefore, considering the objectives of the dissertation, the following events were analyzed in the text:

The premier of the rock opera *Stephen, the king* (1983)

The first modern beauty pageant and the suicide of the beauty queen (1985-6)

The reburial of Imre Nagy (1989)

It is also a common denominator of the chosen events, that, regarding from a retrospective horizon, all of them is connected to the topic of system change: they either reflect upon the idea of political change, or they have been identified later as “tiny system changes”.

II. The methodology of the dissertation

The dissertation hopes to position itself in the field of cultural studies (both the Anglo-Saxon one and its German counterpart, *Kulturwissenschaften*). Accordingly, it is an explicitly interdisciplinary work, which seeks to define itself by the textual reading strategies of literary studies, the interest towards the past that is a characteristic of historical sciences and the

argumentative strategies typical of sociology. All this is apparent in the choice of sources, methods and theoretical backgrounds. Regarding the cultural texts that were used as sources, it must be noted that the events analyzed can only be accessed through these textual remnants, in their mediality. As such, the examination of such an event inherently includes the analysis of related cultural products: newspaper articles, investigative documentary books, documentary films, even archival documents and occasionally personal accounts, interviews. Taking all this into account, although the treatise does not fully forgo the chance to reveal the “primary context”, it is still the documentation of a past reading experiment of someone who was “born too late”.

Considering these it is no wonder that the dissertation is primarily based on Western European memory theories and their variants that were fitted to Hungarian conditions¹: Pierre Nora’s notion of *lieux de mémoire* along with Aleida and Jan Assmann’s theory of cultural memory and its mediatisation form the wider theoretical basis of the dissertation. In a narrower sense, the treatise uses the concepts of trauma and nostalgia – along with traumatic and nostalgic readings of the past – as a theoretical framework. In this case – being fully aware of the danger of oversimplification – one may claim that the “trauma approach” is more of a moral understanding of the past, while nostalgic reflections are more associated with a visualized way of recalling the past.

Although academic accounts on the concept of trauma – partly due to the necessities of the Adornoian *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* – have spread during the last few decades, it seems that nostalgia still needs even newer definitions. Nostalgia, as the dissertation understands it means the construction of a past that was not necessarily lived through by the individual, as a place with exclusively positive associations, where one can yearn to, which may be evoked by certain images, objects or events, and which enables a complex conversation between past and present. It induces a manner of speaking in which the past is by definition more valuable than the present and in which it becomes theoretically possible to directly re-live the past.

In correspondence with the concepts of trauma and nostalgia, it must be noted that neither of them is understood here as an individual emotion; they are rather interpreted as theoretical analogies that are able to efficiently describe cultural phenomena of a broader scale. In this case it is apparent that the techno-media of the late 20th century – especially films and television – play a major part in understanding a certain era either traumatically or

¹ The researchers of the University of Debrecen have made pioneering work in this matter throughout project Nr. TÁMOP-4.2.1/B-09/0/KONV-2010-0007.

nostalgically. In this case the new techno-media of the late 20th century play a major part in whether an era is perceived as traumatic or nostalgic.

The dissertation is also rooted in the theoretical-methodological premise that ideology overarches time. Accordingly, the thesis cannot regard the present as if it was totally exempt from any kind of ideological influence. Our present, from which one tries to approach the “ideologically contaminated” past, is necessarily characterized by a sort of hegemonic ideology; the major difference between the state socialist past and the “post-communist” present is to be found in the media of ideology.

III. The results of the research

As it has become apparent, the five chapters are not different approaches to the same, narrowly defined topic. They can rather be read from the direction of a broadly understood thematic framework – the popular culture of the 1980s –, where the chapters discuss its more specific segments.

The first chapter, examining the theoretical options of remembering the 1980s, entitled *The Forgotten Decades* starts with identifying three variants of relating to the late Kádár-era: traumatic, nostalgic memories and indifference. It must also be added, that nostalgic memory practices may be subdivided into *Ostalgie* and retro, along with “ordinary” nostalgia. The correspondence of the three subcategories is rather ambiguous, since the term retro is frequently used as a synonym for nostalgia, while popular culture tends to mark the differences between the two merely based on *what kind of past/which past it is* that is being recalled. Parallel to that, the nostalgia/*Ostalgie* comparison is similarly problematic, since literature is often inclined to define *Ostalgie* as “Eastern nostalgia”, which, among many other things, treats *Ostalgie* as a sub-case of nostalgia, while it is possible that it implies entirely different memory practices.

Thus, the question may arise: are we dealing with nostalgia, *Ostalgie* or retro in relation to the late Kádár-era? The chapter argues that all three of these behaviours can be found here, although they refer to different segments of the same past. The rational Kádár-nostalgia based on the higher living standards is compatible with the rather ironic *Ostalgie*, while retro, styling up the objects of the past into metonymic markers also fits into the memory of the era.

The chapter ends with the conclusion that memory practices that are rooted in pleasant individual memories, such as nostalgia for the 1970s and 1980s is getting to be more and more weightless for the purposes of present day memory politics. Instead, a traumatic discourse is emphasized, which is created by analogically expanding the cliché-like terror imagery of the 1950s. This homogenizing and distancing attitude puts the understanding of 1989 at direct stake. If one dispenses with the notions of Kádarian consolidation and “the happiest barrack”, one may also choose to go without understanding the system change as the peak of a complex, socio-cultural, economic and political process. Such a shift would indirectly lead to the revision of the role 1989 plays in Hungarian history: it would appear as a unique, special moment, which retrospectively bestows the process of the system change with the attribute of heroism (which was so painfully lacked by the contemporaries). To put it shortly, such a procedure *retrospectively* creates space for heroes, who, appearing in the right historical moment, were able to put an end to the regime as an active subject/agent.

While Chapter 1 looked at the memories of the 1980s, the second chapter, *The Unreadable Eighties* analyses the accessibility of the decade as a material for a cultural studies research. How can one access the 1980s and the cultural products of the age? What kind of ideological and medial embeddedness is to be considered here? What kinds of reading strategies are enabled? These are the main questions the chapter seeks to answer.

The Unreadable Eighties is based on the idea that nowadays there is a retrospective narrative that interprets the 1980s as the “decade of change” – parallel to the silencing of the nostalgic approaches. In this case one may notice the discursive construction of foreshadowing signs, which, from the perspective of the 2000s enables to perceive certain events as earnest of the system change, while it also renders the notion of “democratic transition” applicable to all the segments of public life. The chapter concludes that an analysis that focuses on the memory of the decade The chapter concludes that an analysis focusing on the memory of the decade neither has the right to remove the extra layers in hope of revealing some kind of hidden truth nor is its duty to do so. Instead, such an examination must also look at these supplements.

Besides the problems of ideological embeddedness and the accessibility of sources, the chapter also explores the public sphere and mediality of the Hungarian eighties – since these had a direct impact on the readability of the decade. Regarding the mediality of the 1980s, the treatise concludes that censorship and self-censorship merely operated in the written – and especially the literary – public sphere, which, for a long time, took the part of the political public sphere. The 1980s in Hungary is an especially interesting decade from the perspective of media history, since it was witness to the gradual and cautious transition from literacy to

secondary orality. While the former was relatively easy to control, secondary orality and the sudden accumulation of information (peaking with the introduction and widespread permeation of VHS) got to a point where it was no longer possible for the government to keep everything under control.

The last part of the chapter focuses on the medial changes of the 2000s, and the impact they have on understanding the 1980s. VHS as a medium did not have the aura, as Walter Benjamin puts it, of an old book – object and medium at the same time – would have. Parallel to that, the medial arrangement of the millennium is also getting more and more disembodied. Motion pictures were present in many forms in the 1980s (television, home videos, music videos and cinemas) – each of them having their own unique means of accessibility and their special reputations and regulations. However, a researcher from the 2010s may not have full and obvious access to these immensely important nuances. Everything is available through social media (which is not, is like it never existed), although everything is transformed, and thus, everything is correlated (and which is not, will perish in the lack of weak links). The chapter concludes that the readability of the decade has been radically transformed during the last few years, and these changes cannot be left unnoticed.

After outlining the theoretical context, the dissertation moves on towards the analytical chapters. These do not follow a chronological order, they are rather ranging from the most typical and memorable event to the equally important, yet less and less visibly political ones. As such, the first analytical chapter includes the examination of the reburial of Imre Nagy in 1989 – the event, which is the most typical *lieu de mémoire* of the 1980s. It is no novelty that the reburial was a ritual or symbolic action, which condensed the whole self-understanding of the regime-change into itself. The chapter is based on the assumption that the age of rites and myths is already over. However, modern societies can still access rites as metaphors and myths as rhetorical structures. The chapter uses the rhetoric of rites to demonstrate how the reburial became a site of memory in the noraian sense .

It starts with exploring the staging of the reburial, moving on to the analysis of the speeches given at the event. Each of the six, completely different utterances attempted to reinterpret the revolution of 1956 and the role of Imre Nagy, which process can be outlined by the following thematic highlights: “being Hungarian”, “remembering/forgetting”, “democracy and being European”. On the one hand, these key words can be explained by the nature of the holiday and the traditional rhetorical structure of obituaries, but on the other hand they offer interpretive patterns that have been inseparably bound up with the memory of the reburial.

With some admitted simplification, these patterns could be summed up as it follows: 1956 laid the foundations of modern Hungarian democracy. The revolution was the uprising of Hungarian people against foreign oppressors. Those who participated in the retribution are no longer part of the Hungarian nation. June 16, 1989 was a turning point, when the Hungarian people cleansed itself from the sinners and started its way towards Western-style welfare democracy.

The chapter moves on to look at the memory of the event. First, it discusses new Hungarian films that, in one way or another reflect on the reburial. Two films are mentioned here: *Moszka Square* (2001) by Ferenc Török, and Márta Mészáros's 2004 drama entitled *Unburied Dead*. After that, the text continues with analysing another aspect of memory by touching upon the official top-down remembering practices and its media, which is especially relevant in the case of larger anniversaries. The most recent of these anniversaries can be regarded as unprecedented, since no commemorations of this scale were made before the one in 2014. While the difference between the two films concerns the context and the understandings of the reburial, the novel commemorative events also seek to reinterpret the question of *who* buried the dead, and, in a broader sense, of *who changed the regime*. Within this new narrative, 1989 appears as a historical moment that left space for heroism, and which, accordingly, has active agents – typically people or political organizations that managed to *defeat* the communist regime *at one, against the international situation*.

It is definitely an advantage of the above described rhetorical strategy that it is able to condense the process of the regime-change into a single, well documented and widely analysed moment, so that it becomes easy to recall and understand. However, its drawback is that it deprives 1989 from its context and hence makes it impossible to make any realistic claim to understand the process of the system change.

The next chapter is about the cult rock opera *Stephen, the King*, which premiered in 1983 and has been revamped quite frequently ever since. The text uses the theoretical toolkit of adaptation to approach the piece, while it argues that the various theatrical re-enactments of the original piece have altered the memory of the rock opera for well definable goals.

This chapter, entitled *Cult and History*, starts with the depiction of the original cultural context of the rock opera in 1983, which could be best described by the notions of youth culture, subculture and rock music. The text argues that beat music, which appears in the rock opera, was already “retro” by the 1980s. Although both creators and critics attempted to link the music of *Stephen, the King* to the then contemporary youth cultures, Szörényi and Bródy,

the two authors rather belonged to the “tolerated/supported” than the “forbidden” category by 1983 – and being in their late 30s, it was definitely not the contemporary youth subcultures they represented.

After the examination of the context, the chapter moves on to read the rock opera as a cultural text. The first step of this work is the comparison of the original drama text of Miklós Boldizsár’s *Millennium* with the rock opera. The alterations found in *Stephen, the King* are primarily not aesthetic decisions, and this adaptation is not about the oversimplification of a piece that would traditionally belong to high culture. Instead, one may speak of integrating it into popular culture, which is a scene that has its own mechanisms, and the keyword of which is impact.

One of the most visible stakes of the original Királydomb performances was the allegorisation of the play; it was the point that decided which place the rock opera would occupy on the forbidden-tolerated-supported scale. Many of those present at the performances accounted that the rock opera touched upon a general climate that – although in a still very controlled and allegorical form – bore the seeds of the system change in itself. Many experienced the performances as the first protests of such a scale. This can be partly explained by the cultural context of the play at the time, as King Stephen was easily associated with János Kádár: the good king, who chooses the historically progressive path, though in return he acquiesces to morally questionable deeds. Provided that the allegory had stopped at this point of linking Stephen I and János Kádár, it might as well have been proof that the rock opera was a safety valve legitimising the regime. However, if one continues the analogy, it might turn out that murdering the rebel Koppány alludes to the original sin of the Kádár-regime: the execution of Imre Nagy – which notion is also underlined by the fact that Koppány remains unburied during the play.

After the comparison of the dramatic text and the rock opera performances, the chapter moves on to explore the tendencies of change in the history of the play. It examines how space was used, how the actors and the costumes were chosen in the most typical stagings of the rock opera. Besides the 1983 premiere, the 2003 production at Csíksomlyó, the show performed by the “Társulat” in 2008 and the most recent performance directed by Róbert Alföldi were compared here – each of them related to an anniversary of the original play.

The three realisations have entirely different ways of relating to the original *Stephen, the King*. The Csíksomlyó-production tries to build a monument to the Királydomb-performance, re-presenting it by an almost ritual repetition at many points. It does not reflect on its relationship to the past while it refashions the national aspect of the play. As opposed to this,

the Társulat-performance does not only present the rock opera, but it also stages the process of involvement from the actors' side. The third one, directed by Róbert Alföldi, enters the flow of tradition by reflecting on both its starting point and the unavoidable temporal changes that occurred ever since.

The chapter argues that the 1983 rock opera created a myth, which was based on the ideas of revolt, Hungarianness and allegorisation. Compared to that, two major changes occurred in the understanding of *Stephen, the King*. First, somewhere in the beginning of the 2000s, its understanding shifted towards an explicitly rightist, conservative traditional paradigm – as it is marked by the 2003 Csíksomlyó production. Second, in 2013, the new version removed the play from the then consensual interpretative tracks, leaving space for multiple interpretations – which was understood by the radical protestors who appeared on the premiere as desecrating the play.

The closing chapter discusses “the first Hungarian beauty contest”, the suicide of Csilla Molnár, beauty queen and its later reflections. It is based on a theoretical claim that the pageant is an example of what one might call “zeitgeist memory”. Zeitgeist memory, as it is understood in the dissertation, metonymically evokes an entire cultural milieu. Such events are always mediated, and their memory does not only imply a series of events, but also the assignment of a number of fixed interpretations.

The first part of the chapter is a more historical one, which explores the cultural history and context of Hungarian beauty contests and examines how the idea of a beauty pageant could be fitted into the ideological context of the 1980s. Here it is expedient to consider ideology as a common, normalised point of reference, which was mostly emptied of its semantic content, and the function of which was rather to keep the continuity: therefore the chapter deals with a softened kind of ideology, turned into clichés.

The chapter argues that the contemporary newspaper articles and analyses focusing on the pageant are proofs for such an understanding of ideology. However, in order to present the already tamed Marxist ideology as an accepted and “normal” discourse, the media first had to establish the “West” as such. Looking at the public discourse about the event, it was quickly interpreted as an excellent example to showcase the demise of the west – especially by creating a direct link between the concepts of “west” and “business.” Hence, it is almost natural how a dichotomy is formed, where one side is western, capitalist system of values, counterpointed by cleanliness, beauty for itself, and indirectly by the purity of socialist morality.

As a next step, the chapter contrasts the concepts of “business” and its Hungarian equivalent, “biznisz”: this is how the Hungarian way, pettiness, mediocrity becomes contrasted with the professionalism and culture that is associated with the West, with being European.

The border between the imaginary East and West, socialism and capitalism, where contemporary press positioned Hungarian national characteristics, is also clearly visible in the discourse that understood Csilla Molnár as a celebrity. The next part of the chapter looks at the notion of celebrity and its relevance for the 1980s in Hungary.

The chapter closes with the analysis of present day reflections on the topic that can be found on the internet. The commenters of the 2010s understand the videos and other accounts of the pageant as documents of the era. They expand their morals to a more general level hoping to get a vivid image of the late Kádár-era. It seems that the events that were understood by the contemporary “socialist” press as ruptures made by the capitalist world order, are transformed in the comments as inherently socialist flaws, which offer a complete image of the “age” – that is, of the decaying Kádár-era. The Hungarian counterpart of western “show biz”, the poorly performed gig or “biznisz” appears as a symptom of the age, which perfectly fits into the image of the late Kádár-era as it appears in the post-1989 period.

