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Soviet Symbols and Language Use in Three Hungarian Feature Films Made in the Early 1950s

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Аннотация. Цель статьи – раскрыть использование советской символики в венгерских художественных фильмах начала 1950-х годов. На примере фильмов “Civil a pályán” (Новички на стадионе, 1951), “Becsület és dicsőség” (Честь и слава, 1951) и “Dalolva szép az élet” (Пение делает жизнь прекрасной, 1950) в работе анализируются детали кинокартин, имеющие какое-либо отношение к Советскому Союзу (внутренние и внешние пространства; одежда героев; другие предметы, не относящиеся к декору; отсылки в речи персонажей и песнях; гость из СССР; другие аспекты, связанные с повседневной жизнью). Автор выявляет обращения, используемые героями художественных фильмов, указывающие на то, какие отношения существуют между различными группами героев (коммунистические лидеры, рабочие, вредители). Научная новизна исследования заключается в доказательстве того, что в анализируемых фильмах проявляется сильное советское влияние, так как обнаруживается не только визуальная советская символика, но и отсылки в речи героев и даже появление персонажа – рабочего из СССР. Полученные результаты показали, что обращения, используемые в рассматриваемых художественных фильмах, помогают четко определить изображаемую общественную иерархию, подчеркивая важность сообщества работников и отражая осознание коллективизма.

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Советская символика и использование венгерского языка в трех венгерских художественных фильмах начала 1950-х годов

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Abstract. The paper aims to reveal Soviet symbols in Hungarian feature films made in the early 1950s. Using the films “Civil a pályán” (Civilians on the Field, 1951), “Becsület és dicsőség” (Honor and Glory, 1951) and “Dalolva szép az élet” (Singing Makes Life Beautiful, 1950) as examples, the work analyses the details appearing in the feature films that may be in some way associated with the Soviet Union (internal and external spaces; people’s dress; objects other than pieces of decoration; verbal references and songs; a Soviet visitor; other aspects related to everyday life). The author identifies forms of address used by the characters indicating the relationship between various groups (namely, communist leaders, workers, saboteurs). Scientific novelty lies in proving that there is strong Soviet influence in the analysed feature films, since not only visible Soviet symbols, but also verbal references and even a case of a Soviet worker appearing in person were discovered. The research findings showed that forms of address in the feature films under consideration helped to clearly define a hierarchy in the depicted society, highlighting the importance of the community of workers and reflecting an awareness of collectivism.

Introduction

The function of Hungarian cinema between 1948 and 1953 was to legitimize the rule of communist party and to represent the values and ideals, which established the ideology of the regime (Pólik, 2014, p. 177). As G. Szilágyi (1992, p. 217) noted, after the fusion of the two workers’ parties in 1948, the newly formed Hungarian Workers’ Party, following the Soviet example, paid a special attention to feature films. Communist leader M. Rákosi considered film the most important branch of arts (Gervai, 2014). For the regime, films were instruments of propaganda in the form of arts.

One may ask if in the same period, Soviet cinema or policymakers influenced Hungarian feature films. Researchers have mentioned several instances that can be regarded as Soviet influence. In a 1949 interview, V. Shcherbina,

Deputy Minister of Cinematography in the USSR, recommended that Hungarian cinematographers should thoroughly study Soviet cinema, and then add their own Hungarian Bolshevik art – and they certainly did so (Szilágyi, 1992, p. 219). Furthermore, several newsreels also prove that Soviet films were highly appreciated and without doubt, considered as a model for Hungarian filmmakers. In 1948, a one-week festival was organized to celebrate Soviet film, and a newsreel (UMFI-28-08) shows that Hungarian policymakers in the cultural field, who were present, did not only appreciate the importance of that event, but were amazed by I. Pyryev's *The Ballad of Siberia*, which they then saw. The public was also informed about the preparatory works of the Soviet Film Week, suggesting the importance and beauty of those films (UMFI-28-09).

Another link between Soviet and Hungarian cinematography, reported by researchers, was V. Pudovkin's visit, being most likely the most important link. In 1950, he gave the welcoming speech at the 2nd Hungarian Peace Conference, where he highlighted the importance of creating new arts and not destroying old pieces (MVH-50-45-01). During the discussions with Pudovkin, it was concluded that "films have to be created that actively support political struggle" (Szilágyi, 1992, p. 87). Pudovkin made suggestions to reorganize film industry, gave professional advice in general, but also helped during the production of some feature films (Szilágyi, 1992, p. 116, 177, 120, 201, 233). In 1952, András Kovács raised the question how it was possible that Pudovkin, who visited Hungary for the first time, had a better understanding of Hungary's present and past than Hungarians themselves. Kovács answered his own question: "Pudovkin knows Marxism-Leninism very well... which did not only answer the questions of one nation, but gives a key to the understanding of the life and history of all nations of the world." (Cited in: Lányi, 1990).

Films in the period of schematism. Hungarian films of the early 1950s can be divided into two major categories. The historical films showed past events and personalities who prepared the socialist present-day, while the "films of production" demonstrated socialist present-day as a stage of development on the way towards communist future. Although less important, a third genre, "films of education", can also be identified. These films present school and military communities as ones that take an important role in the moral and ideological education of young people. The films of production reflect a positive utopia, which reflects an idealised man of the period. This idealised man is a simplified and schematic character of a worker, who has a central role in the dramaturgy of the films. He, as the protagonist of the film, has at first some negative character traits, such as being individualistic or doing a bad job. The most important motif of the films is his personality development. As a result of this process, by the end of the story, he becomes a self-conscious worker who is also a recognised and committed member of the community. It is also important to mention that these films also present a simplified view of the society, based on morals. The "divine", morally good character is represented by the local secretary of the communist party or another personality of local power, while the "evil" appears in the form of saboteurs, who are enemies of the regime. It is a logical consequence that the "good" supports, while the "evil" hinders the protagonist in the process of his personality development (Pólik, 2014, p. 178, 179).

The Hungarian feature films, which were built on schemes, present a world construct, but does not reflect what exists, but what *could* exist, being utopistic (Pólik, 2017, p. 98). The strict ideological message inevitably resulted in the diminishment of dramaturgy and one-sided, simple characters, but also highly influenced the themes that the films showed.

J. Pólik (2014, p. 176) distinguishes between three ways of analysis of these films. The first approach is a formal analysis, i.e. revealing general principles of artistic expression, such as character presentation, dramaturgy, or camera work in the given historical and political environment, considering constraints in this case. The second approach is an analysis of genres in the given period. Finally, the third approach is an analysis of contents, identification and interpretation of visual signs, objects, places, symbols, conflicts, character types. In practice, as Pólik says, one needs to determine how the film displays the typical individual of the given period, how it presents humans' subjective relationship to the past, present, and future, with a focus on the perspectives of history, and finally, to what degree the film supports the political system of those days, and what opinion it forms about the regime.

Based on J. Pólik's principles, the goal of the present paper is to reveal two main aspects of these films. First, an analysis of Soviet-related symbols may reflect Soviet influence and can support the idea that Soviet Union was considered as a model. Second, it is believed that different forms of address, which people used in the films when they were talking to each other, define their social relations at the same time. It is therefore reasonable to suppose that an analysis of forms of address can reveal a social structure, which was a significant property of this utopian world. Thus, the research questions are as follows. What details appear in the films that may be related to the Soviet Union in any way? What forms of address were used by the characters?

For answering the research questions, the following Hungarian feature films were analysed:

- (1) *Civil a pályán* (Civilians on the Field, Новички на стадионе), 1951, directed by Márton Keleti.
- (2) *Becsület és dicsőség* (Honor and Glory, Честь и слава), 1951, directed by Viktor Gertler.
- (3) *Dalolva szép az élet* (Singing Makes Life Beautiful, Пение делает жизнь прекрасной), 1950, directed by Márton Keleti.

The main topic of (1) is organizing a sports club in a factory for all workers, but the football trainer tries to hinder these efforts. The story of (2) takes place in a steam locomotive factory, where workers are preparing for the celebration of Stalin's 70th birthday in 1949. However, there are problems with production because of some saboteurs. Film (3) is about organizing a new choir in a factory, because the conductor of the old one is not willing to teach new, progressive songs, and insists on singing old, depressive ones.

Data collection was based on watching the films and a thorough observation of all sights shown, i.e. exteriors, interiors, people, objects etc. The researcher took notes about any items that could be categorised as "Soviet symbols". Such items included any visual elements observable in the film, including badges, posters, pictures of Soviet politicians, but verbal references to any aspect of life in the Soviet Union were also recorded.

Conversations were also thoroughly observed and any forms of addressing people, such as “comrade”, “my friend”, “mister” etc. were recorded, along with the speakers involved in the conversation. For the analysis of forms of address, we used A. Á. Reményi’s (2000) ideas as a starting point. She highlights that forms of address communicate status differences. It was expected that in formal situations *elvtárs* (comrade, товарищ) was mostly used, literally meaning “fellow in principles”, originally suggesting an ideological agreement between the partners. There are, however, many other forms that used the *-társ* part, such as *bajtárs* (“fellow in trouble”), still used by ambulance or fire brigade crews, *kartárs* (“fellow in staff”, i.e. colleague, especially in intellectual or office work), *szaktárs* (“fellow in profession”), used by workers, or even *sporttárs* (“fellow sportsman”), or *utastárs* (“travelling fellow”). As J. Ladó (1959) noted, those with the *-társ* ending, such as *szaktárs* and *kartárs* also expressed the equal status of people within the same social class. A. Guszokova (1981, p. 70-72) pointed out that *elvtárs*, *kartárs*, *szaktárs* largely replaced other forms of address after World War II, however, by 2002, they completely disappeared (Domonkosi, 2002, p. 103). We expected the occurrence of *bácsi* and *néni* (“uncle”, “aunt”), respectful forms of address mainly used by younger people when they talked to older ones. Apart from the forms of address used, another important aspect of communication is the use of *te/ön* or *maga* (T/V, tu/vos, ты/вы), which also clearly indicates the status of the communicating parties (Reményi, 2000).

Additional research materials used in the study include the following sources:

Filmography

Gyarmat a föld alatt (Underground Colony, Колония под землёй), Magyar Filmgyártó Állami Vállalat, directed by Károly Makk, Mihály Szemes, 1951.

Сказание о земле Сибирской (The Ballad of Siberia), Mosfilm, USSR, directed by I. Pyryev, 1948.

Newsreels

MVH-50-45-01. Tudósítás a II. Magyar Békekongresszusról (Report on the 2nd Hungarian Peace Congress). November 1950. URL: <https://filmhiradokonline.hu/watch.php?id=10434>

UMFI-28-08. Magyar írók a szovjet filmről (fogadás a szovjet film ünnepén) (Hungarian writers about Soviet films (a reception at the Soviet Film Festival)). September 1948. URL: <https://filmhiradokonline.hu/watch.php?id=6885>

UMFI-28-09. Előkészületek a szovjet filmhétre (Preparatory works for the Soviet Film Week). September 1948. URL: <https://filmhiradokonline.hu/watch.php?id=6895>

Results and Discussion

Soviet-related elements were observed in the films in diverse situations, therefore, they were grouped according to their occurrence.

(a) Internal and external spaces

Soviet symbols frequently appeared as part of the decoration in external or internal spaces. Internal spaces include offices, halls, meeting rooms where photos, paintings, or sculptures of Lenin, Hungarian communist leader Rákosi, and Stalin were placed. The three portraits most often appeared together, with Rákosi in the middle (1), (2), (3). There was one occasion in (3), when words were added to the portraits, suggesting “in the spirit of Lenin, led by Rákosi, under the guidance of Stalin”. Also, in (3), one factory had a “red corner”, where the portraits were placed, along with other elements of decoration. There were other occasions, where only pictures of Lenin and Stalin (2) or only Stalin (2), (3) were shown.

The coat of arms of the Soviet Union appeared twice. First, although somewhat blurred, it was observable in a meeting hall (1), and second, it was placed on a new steam locomotive, together with the Hungarian one (2).

Regarding outdoor scenes, people carried portraits of Stalin and Rákosi at an outdoor sports event (1) and red and national flags were also used there.

The slogans of the regime, typical of the period, were also frequently used in both internal and external spaces. These slogans can be divided in several groups. The first group of slogans have clear Soviet references: “The heroic Leninist Komsomol” (2), “Stalin is our fight, Stalin is our peace, the world is being built with the name of Stalin!”, “We walk Stalin’s way in work and fight!”, “Glory to the first fighter of peace!”, “Long live the 70-year-old Stalin!” (2), “We protect peace, the Soviet Union is the most important guard of peace!” (3). Another group of slogans includes general statements encouraging people or setting short-term or long-term goals. Such slogans include “More tractors – more bread!”, “Be ready for work and fight, for peace and socialism” (1), “Work is a matter of honour and glory” (2), “We build socialism with a 5-year plan!” (3). Finally, other slogans had references to current events, such as “Long Live the World Festival of Youth” (2). Together with this slogan, the symbol of Komsomol («ВЛКСМ» in a red star) also appeared.

Propaganda posters promoting sports (1) or singing (3) were often seen. One poster encouraged people to join the Hungarian-Soviet Society (3).

(b) People’s dress

The positive character in (1), Dunai, wears a Soviet-styled captain’s uniform, which was used in the armed forces and virtually everywhere in Hungary where people wore uniforms. Badges with a red star or a Hungarian flag with a red star were used on sports dresses (1).

(c) Objects other than pieces of decoration

Here we can mention two books, of which title pages are clearly visible and which were published in real life, so the audience could read them. In (2), a Stakhanovite turner Pavel Bikov’s biography is shown, presenting a positive

model to the people. He was famous for his high-speed method of cutting metal. In (3), a book with the title “On the Questions of Arts and Philosophy”, comprising Andrei Zhdanov’s speeches, provided a theoretical background supporting the superiority of the new arts. In (3), the secretary of the communist party used this book in an argument with the old-fashioned conductor, suggesting that people in real life should also use the same book when they have a debate with the representatives of arts considered old-styled and obsolete.

(d) Verbal references and songs

These include an enthusiastic speech about Stalin, followed by applause (2), or mentioning Lenin, Stalin, and Zhdanov, as masters who taught aesthetics to the local secretary of the communist party by their books (3). A song is sung by the workers’ new choir: “The new world is built in the name of Stalin” (3). In (2), the protagonist’s son goes to the cinema with his girlfriend to watch *The Ballad of Siberia*, showing this as a usual free-time activity for young people. Furthermore, children sing a Russian folk song in Hungarian in (3) (*Áll egy ifjú nyírfa a réten / Во поле берёза стояла*), but this song was already known in Hungary before World War II.

(e) A Soviet visitor

In addition to verbal references to prominent Soviet people, there was an instance when a Soviet worker appeared in person. In (2), a Stakhanovite turner Bikov visits the steam locomotive factory and shows his high-speed method to the local workers to their great amazement. Furthermore, he has an important role in the dramaturgy of the film, as he helps the protagonist improve his invention so that it works perfectly. Although not analysed here, there is only one other example, when somebody from the Soviet Union visits Hungarian workers. In *Gyarmat a föld alatt* (Underground Colony, Колония под землёй, 1951), a respected Soviet scientist, captain Gusev, arrives in Hungary and helps mine engineers find the correct site to exploit oil, having a similar dramaturgical role as Bikov in (2).

(f) Other aspects related to everyday life

In (2), when we first see them together, the local secretary of the communist party and the protagonist speak Russian, although in a grammatically incorrect way (– *Как дела, товарищ? – Жена работа хорошо*). It turns out that they were prisoners of war in Nizhny Tagil, so the audience will know where they learnt Russian, but the context suggests that speaking Russian is a useful skill. Nevertheless, people do not generally speak Russian. When Bikov shows his method to the Hungarian workers, he speaks Russian, and his speech is translated to Hungarian. Also, in (2), the expression *sztálini műszak*, a shift (work period) devoted to Stalin appears. One old worker says that by his work he also wants to give something to Stalin.

Forms of address

The analysis of the forms of address the characters use in the films cannot be separated from an investigation of societal groups the films depict and possibly suggest as ideal. As a starting point, one may use the approach by J. Pólik (2014, p. 179), i.e. there is a protagonist, a “divine” and an “evil” character, represented by a worker, a secretary of the party, and a saboteur. Although they are the most important figures from a dramaturgical point of view, they also represent typical societal groups, whose other members also appear in the stories. The relationship between members of the groups is established, but also indicated by the forms of address they use. The groups, together with forms of address are as follows.

(a) Communist leaders

In addition to the “divine” characters in an ideological leader’s position, such as the highly respected sports leader (1) or the local secretary of the communist party (2), (3), other persons in leading positions were also identified. They were factory directors, production managers, or team leaders. The ideological leader addresses groups of people using *elvtársak* (comrades, товарищи), but employs more friendly and informal forms of address when talking to individuals, calling them by their first names or *bácsi* (uncle, дядя). He addresses the protagonist using the pronoun *te* (Т, ты) (1). Other leaders in lower positions seem to use *elvtárs* in formal situations more frequently than the ideological leader (1). It was interesting to observe forms of address those two old communist friends used when they met after a long time, but only one of them recognises the other. First, they use *elvtárs*, then first name, then *barátom* (my friend, мой друг) (2). When addressing the main saboteurs, the leaders consistently use *úr* (mister, господин).

(b) Workers

The protagonist and the ideological leader have a formal, but friendly relationship. The protagonist uses either T (1), (2) or the formal V (3) when addressing the ideological leader.

The relationship between the protagonist and the other workers seems to be less determined politically. The use of T, calling each other by their surnames, nicknames, or diminutives most likely reflect the customs of the age, independently of the political situation, but stresses their equal social status. Same can be said about the relationship between the other workers. In addition to V, the respectful *bácsi* or *néni* also appeared, especially when younger people addressed older ones. However, in a formal situation, when the workers applied for work competition, all of them used *elvtárs* (2). In some informal situations *elvtárs* occurred, but less frequently, e.g. a young worker addressed an older one (1), or during work, but in the latter situation, *elvtárs* expressed a more formal relationship between the workers because of their debate. Between workers, *szaktárs*, expressing equal social status, appeared more frequently (1), (2). An older worker called a young one *fiam* (my son, мой сын) (2). The protagonist and usually the workers call the saboteur or his partners *úr* (mister, господин) (1), (2), while one of the partner saboteurs is addressed as Mr. Swing by the protagonist (3), which is highly pejorative.

(c) Saboteurs

There is not only one saboteur in the films, but there is a main saboteur with some partners. Their relationship is usually formal, indicated by the use of V (*maga*, formal “you”, вы) or *úr* (mister, господин).

The saboteur addresses people using *bácsi* (1), *szaktárs* (1), (2) or calling them by their surnames (2). The old-fashioned conductor calls the choir members *daltárs* (singing fellow), which is politically neutral (3). However, he calls the ideological leader *elvtárs*, when he unsuccessfully tries to talk to him confidentially, while the leader still uses *úr*. In the other two films, the ideological leader and the main saboteur do not talk to each other. The conductor also calls the audience *elvtársak* (comrades, товарищи) before the concert of his choir (3).

In sum, Figure 1 presents the main findings of this analysis.

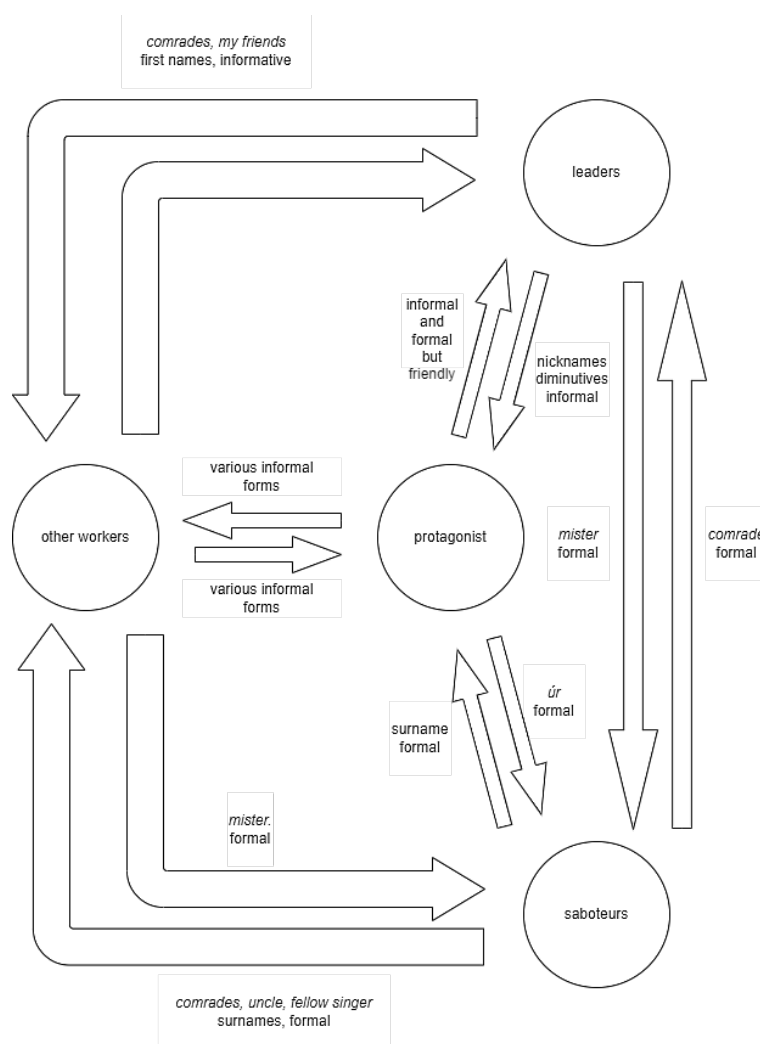


Figure 1. The most typically used terms of address observed in the three films

The most important finding is that in the “leaders – protagonist – other workers” triangle a variety of formal and informal terms of address were used and reciprocal T forms also appeared many times. These suggest a friendly and confidential relationship between the three sides. However, the terms of address in relation with the saboteurs express distance or even exclusion. Using A. Á. Reményi’s (2000) ideas, the communication processes between the leaders, the protagonist, and the other workers largely reflect a solidarity-oriented group. Although the conductor in (3) tries to be involved in the workers’ society, the consistent use of *úr*, chosen by the leaders and the workers, defines a strict distance. These results can be analysed using address theory (Braun, 1988, p. 19). Where reciprocal use of address variants was observed, especially among workers, intimacy can be expected, while nonreciprocal use expressed status differences. It is not only the informal T form that was used downwards and the formal V – upwards, as F. Braun suggests, but also the V forms, the formal *elvtárs* upwards, from the saboteur to the leaders, while the formal *úr* was used downwards, still V, from the leader to the saboteur.

Conclusion

One purpose of this paper was to reveal Soviet symbols in Hungarian feature films made in the early 1950s. The analysis proved that not only visible symbols, but also verbal references and even a Soviet worker in person appeared in the films, suggesting strong ideological links.

Forms of address proved to clearly define a hierarchy, highlighting the importance of the community of workers. This finding is in line with the idea that the local community was more important than the individual. The films reflect an awareness of collectivism (Pólik, 2014, p. 180) and the use of reciprocal forms of address between workers also

confirms this. The ideological leader appears as a person, who is “one of us”, while the negative characters are shown as ones distant in any possible way, again, reflected by the terms of address.

Further research should address the question how similar these films were to those made in the Soviet Union in the same period. A systematic analysis can also provide details about the extra properties and contents that Hungarian films showed, but the Soviet ones did not, as G. Szilágyi suggested. It is believed that an analysis of these films provides a better insight into and understanding of the early 1950s in both countries.

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Информация о статье | About this article

Дата поступления рукописи (received): 14.06.2022; опубликовано (published): 30.07.2022.

Ключевые слова (keywords): венгерский кинематограф; венгерские художественные фильмы начала 1950-х годов; советская символика; обращения; период схематизма в кино; Hungarian cinema; Hungarian feature films of the 1950s; Soviet symbols; forms of address; period of schematism in cinema.