


## Urban Culture and the Modern City. Edited by Ágnes Györke and Tamás Juhász.

Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2024. 333 pp. <https://doi.org/10.11116/9789461665393>

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*Urban Culture and the Modern City* (2024) is a novel reinvestigation of Hungarian urban cultural and political history from the modernist period to the present. The eleven studies in the book offer a colorful variety of perspectives, ranging from studies of theatre and film to the cultural analyses of written and architectural inscriptions on cityscapes, whereby the contributors shed new light on how artistic practices have reshaped our perceptions of Hungarian urban environments. As the editors emphasize, the book aims to fill the void in contemporary debates within city studies, where Hungary has so far occupied only a marginal position. Here, the term ‘translocality’, i.e., the intersecting social, cultural, and economic actions across different cultural and geographical contexts, is key, as it presumes a spatial and temporal movement between communities, ideas, and practices. Within the historical framework of early twentieth-century Hungary, translocality is examined through the dimensions of urban developments, cultural shifts and exchanges, and political movements, as well as the nostalgic reflection on the once-glorious past and the trauma associated with the Treaty of Trianon, the latter aspect being amplified mostly by the right-winged populist narratives. The book promotes a view that embraces diversity by employing a critical lens, through which several hybrid identities and narratives might arise. In so doing, it challenges the grand narratives of Hungarianness that have historically dominated discussions about national identity, enriching the discourse on urban studies, and fostering a nuanced understanding of cultural memory.

Structurally, the book is divided into three main sections, with the first section discussing the early twentieth-century period, the second expanding on mid-century historical and cultural waves, and the third explaining how the fall of communism

in 1989 has impacted contemporary cultural narratives and critical thinking. In the first section, one fundamental and overarching paradigm comprises the genesis of the four chapters: the interrelationships between the idea of nationhood and the institutions and practices of urban environments. Central to each chapter is how leading artists at the advent of the last century, today inextricably linked to the Hungarian literary and cultural canon responded to and embedded in their works concepts of cosmopolitan citizenship, small-town and metropolitan relations, and the global, microsocial aspects of big-city life.

In the first chapter entitled “»You’ll Never Walk Alone« Ferenc Molnár’s Budapest in *Liliom* and *The Guardsman*,” Márta Pellérdi examines the roles of domestic and public spaces in Molnár’s works, exploring how Budapest, as a cultural hub, and the artist’s sense of imagined displacement have heightened their cultural reception. By employing the French philosopher Michel de Certeau’s ideas about wandering and inventing in the city, Pellérdi discusses the answers that theories of urbanism might provide for the international recognition and the universal relativity of Molnár’s plays, which necessitated the radical removal of all elements tied specifically to Hungarian culture.

The mobilizing aspect of the star system and its conflicted associations with nationalistic values, expressed by Gyula Krúdy in his 1926 novel *Primadonna*, is at the heart of Tamás Juhász’s essay. By expanding on the emerging celebrity cult in pre-war Hungary through Krúdy’s book, Juhász draws a very sharp picture of how this phenomenon, largely influenced by Western media, peaked in parallel with the resurgence of political nationalism. As Juhász claims, this paradox is highly palpable in Krúdy’s reconstruction of the life and career of actress Ilka Pálmay (1859–1945), offering a complex cultural geography of the Austro–Hungarian Monarchy and its global ties. As Juhász explains, Pálmay’s career illustrates the paradox of stardom, where celebrity culture, while shaping views of rural life, fosters imagined communities and urbanization that fuels commerce, industry, and state functions. Thus, Juhász notes that the gradual evolution of modern stardom in Hungary starting from the eighteenth century aligns closely with the rise of nationalism, raising critical questions about how public consciousness and national pride were perpetuated and nurtured by the early twentieth-century entertainment industry. By investigating Pálmay’s slow dissociation from the hierarchical institutions of the monarchy and the church in Krúdy’s novel within the context of the Trianon Treaty of the 1920s, Juhász describes how the impact of geopolitical events on communal unity, the disintegration of a cohesive national identity, and the rise of new, horizontally conceived concepts of national brotherhood contributed to Pálmay’s reception as an icon.

In her analysis of Dezső Kosztolányi’s *Skylark* (1924), Ágnes Klára Papp approaches modernist literary representations of small towns not just as simple

antitheses of the metropolis but as places where internal dynamics of time and the sense of alienation unfold. While Papp refrains from advancing a more daring gender critique, one that could observe how ugliness, framed as a heteronormatively understood feminine trait, serves as a curse for the heroine, her family, and their microsocial environment within the context of provincial patriarchal values, her investigation of the novel's suffocating, restrictive small-town settings, juxtaposed with the refined cosmopolitanism of urban centers, is nevertheless compelling. Drawing on several literary and theoretical perspectives, most notably Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin's view on the urban-rural binary, Flaubert's depiction of urban life as an object of desire in *Madame Bovary*, and Chekhov's sharp critique of the dull and oppressive small-town life in *Three Sisters*, Papp approaches Kosztolányi's portrayal of the big city as a sad reminder to Skylark's parents of the futility and mundanity of their provincial existence. This existential and altogether emotional void, whereby the parents' one week of breaking their small-town habits by pursuing experiences they perceive as extraordinary, only highlights their loneliness and their inability to progress toward substantial change. In this scenario, Papp explains, the small town is a topos, a place where time stands still, and meaningful change is elusive. This sense of stagnation is emphasized through the characters' ultimately superficial attempts at deviation that only intensify their sense of isolation.

Magdolna Gucsa's study of the Hungarian-Jewish painter, poet, and theorist Emil Szittyá focuses on Szittyá's contribution to the postwar avantgarde and modernist movement in Paris, which coincided with the evolving xenophobic and anti-Semitic tendencies of the Parisian sociocultural elite. In her essay, Gucsa explores the spatial settings of Paris as a symbol of internationalism in contrast to the homogeneity of the French nation-state, where foreign artists, like Szittyá, could encounter and interact with one another, contributing to the cultural transformation of the pre-, mid-, and post-war France. This contribution is noteworthy for several reasons. Firstly, it sparks new discussions on the experiences of double consciousness, the internal struggle of being both a participant in a new culture and an outsider, concepts deeply related to the immigrant experience. Additionally, Gucsa highlights Szittyá's decision to avoid publishing or exhibiting his works before the Second World War, which may shed light on his quest for legitimacy amidst the cultural biases present in France. Viewed through the lens of national or racial identity, Szittyá and his fellow immigrants navigated a culturally hybrid space, their identities influenced by both their homeland and the host country. This internal and external conflict set the stage for a cultural transfer that was both aesthetic and political, reshaping Paris from a nationally homogeneous city into a cosmopolitan melting pot. This transformation of the big city's art scene is noticeable in Szittyá's advocacy for the *École de Paris*, a group of foreign artists, which, despite its representation of a

form of assimilation in a much depoliticized and neutralized way, was an attempt to merge the foreign and the local into a novel artistic expression. Thus, the essay powerfully sheds light on Szittyá's role in advocating the immigrants' artistic legitimacy while struggling with the limited interpretative tools available for his own work, subject to racial and national stereotypes in the pre-war milieu.

Issues of gender, historical commemoration, civility, and political liberty are pillars of the book's second section. In 'Place, Space, Gender and Narrative Agency in Margit Kaffka's *Colours and Years* (1911, 1912) and Magda Szabó's *The Fawn* (1959)' Éva Federmayer traces several intersections, including bereavement, guilt, age, nationhood, womanhood and ethnicity in the two novels by Kaffka and Szabó. The author argues that while both female authors occupy a distinctive position in the twentieth-century Hungarian literary canon, an intertextual analysis might illuminate the gendered dimensions of the spatial and temporal experiences of socio-political shifts. In her essay, Federmayer discusses the exploration of womanhood in these two novels through the lens of specific geographical and historical contexts. Both novels are centered around specific locales: a private garden in a provincial town in *Colours and Years*, and a historic garden cemetery in Budapest in *The Fawn*, settings that are fundamental in shaping the heroine's identities and lived experiences. By employing Foucault's theory on heterotopia, Federmayer argues that both the private garden in the provincial town of Nagykaroly and the garden cemeteries of are typical yet diverging physical places where conventional societal roles are questioned and critiqued. These locations provide a refuge from patriarchal structures and allow the characters to defy the restrictive roles that society has assigned to them. As Federmayer explains, while at some points in the novels both heroines navigate the complexities of city living, their longing for a rural existence makes their challenges of fitting into an urbanized, often alienating society, even more tangible.

Árpád Bak's essay titled "Told and Untold Histories of Oppression: Hungarian Romani Composer János Bihari's Memory Sites in Budapest under State Socialism" elaborates on the artistic responses to the anti-Roma gaze by analyzing the legacy of Bihari from 1947 to 1988. As a founder of the "verbunkos" musical style in the early nineteenth century, today Bihari is celebrated for his contribution to the Hungarian musical Romanticism. In his essay, Bak critically reassesses the institutional practices of commemoration before 1945 and during the period of State Socialism, claiming that both the observable neglect of Bihari in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the attempts to make him into a "good Hungarian" presuppose an anti-Roma attitude, which either omits or "whitewashes" the cultural heritages of Roma artists. These distorted narratives, prevailing in the collective Hungarian historical consciousness, are in this respect particularly dangerous, as they not only undermine the heterogeneity of public memory but perpetuate the idea that Roma

contribution to national culture is only valuable if it can be appropriated to serve a nationalistic and “white” image. By sanitizing Bihari’s ethnic/racial identity in public memory, these narratives risk losing sight of the history of the discrimination and persecution the Roma community faced, allowing these atrocities to persist in more systemic and politically substantiated ways.

The concepts of civility, military education, male bonding, and sociopsychological growing into adulthood in Géza Ottlik’s novel *School at the Frontier* (1959) are revisited by Ferenc Höcher. Today, a compulsory reading in the high school curriculum, *School at the Frontier* is celebrated for its deep investigation of the dynamics of authority and control, as well as the ways totalitarian systems manipulate individuals into complicity and submission. Written three years after the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, it is stirring to see how Ottlik managed to navigate the limitations of political censorship, opting to explore the inner lives of his characters instead of making explicit declarations. Höcher underlines that while Ottlik chose silence over speaking out, his moral understanding of individual and collective freedom, along with the biofictional elements in the novel’s military school settings in Kőszeg and Buda, prompted him to decipher the vulnerabilities of oppressive regimes and grasp civility as the antithesis to ideological warfare. As Höcher explains, under the veil of staying reticent on political matters, Ottlik’s narrative suggests that civility as a veneer of an educated urban population can unmask the underlying brutality of totalitarian regimes and, as such, serves as a marker of liberty. Accordingly, the tension between the urban and the rural lies both in the heroes’ resistance to the oppressive nature of military control and in their emotional attachments to the idealized small-town life, fostering resilience and enabling them to maintain civil habits and values as a means of resisting oppressive forces.

The book’s third section reassesses themes of collective memory, contemporary re-narrations of cultural and ethnic heritage, post-socialist visual representations, transgenerational care, as well as alternatives in contemporary cinema to the traditional filmic stereotypes of aging. In the opening chapter of this section, László Munteán presents a visual analysis of the remaining small inscriptions of the Arrow Cross, a Hungarian far-right political party accountable for numerous atrocities, including the mass deportation of the country’s Jewish population during the Second World War, found within the urban landscape of Budapest. By contrasting the physical existence of these inscriptions with the prevailing populist narratives that promote their potential to construct narratives reinforcing a heroic image of the city, the author argues that such politically affiliated myth-making is dangerous as it obscures our less noble historical past, downplaying the complexity of historical narratives and hindering genuine reconciliation with the past. In Munteán’s approach, the very existence of these symbols signifies a disparity between the official political

narratives on Hungary's wartime heroism and the marginally acknowledged historical realities, whereby physically attributable remnants of the past might confront populist memory politics. Thus, the physical endurance of these symbols offers a dialogical commemoration rather than a simplified whitewashing of history fueled by populist propaganda, encouraging critical analysis of the lingering effects of totalitarian ideologies and the multiple ways they can be addressed and reinterpreted within the landscape of urban memory.

The differing political discourses on cultural memory and the quest for new identities by the post-1989 Hungarian generation form the crux of Ágnes Györke's 'Budapest in Noémi Szécsi's *The Finno-Ugrian Vampire: The Grand and the Peripheral*.' By examining Noémi Szécsi's debut novel *The Finno-Ugrian Vampire* (2002), Ágnes Györke traces the disparities between the urban and the rural in the book's post-socialist Budapest settings. As Györke highlights, the term 'Finno-Ugrian' as indicated in the novel's title, holds particular significance. While it points back to the oriental roots of the Hungarian people, it also serves as a form of rebranding traditional notions of national identity. In this respect, Szécsi's narrative provides a much-multilayered idea on the conflicts between the periphery and the center, whereby the Gothic representations of vampires as the exotic East European 'others' facilitate a translocal navigation between cultural landscapes across which several disparities inherent in the Hungarian national pride and grandeur are revealed. As Györke explains, in Szécsi's novel, Budapest appears as "a city in transition" which, after the fall of Communism, engaged with several global influences and cultural exchanges, it had been previously cut off. In *The Finno-Ugrian Vampire*, there are two contrasting narratives that the reader should deal with: one from the gender-ambiguous young vampire, Jerne, and another from Jerne's grandmother. The grandmother embodies an old, nationalistic vision of the city and its people, steeped in the grandiosity and nationalism associated with the past. In contrast, Jerne's narrative adopts an ironic distance from these ideals, emphasizing global interconnectedness and offering a cosmopolitan, progressive alternative to the polarized cultural memories that emerged after 1989. However, Györke claims, the novel's final lines hint at the rise of the ideological fervor by political populism that threatens to evade and overpower Jerne's cosmopolitan ideals, implying that in a world marked by right-wing extremism, progressive visions of global unities may struggle to endure.

In "Three Postcards of Budapest: Paradigms of the Urban Imaginary in Post-communist Hungarian Cinema," György Kalmár explores the cityscape of post-socialist Budapest in contemporary Hungarian cinema. For his analysis, Kalmár concentrates on three feature films, Ferenc Török's *Moszkva tér* (Moscow Square, 2001), Nimród Antal's *Kontroll* (Control, 2004), and Kornél Mundruczó's *Jupiter holdja* (Jupiter's Moon, 2017). Spanning three key moments in Hungarian history,



the fall of communism in 1989, Hungary's accession to the European Union in 2004, and the 2015 refugee crisis, each film captures distinct mindsets, deeply tied to the cultural images of Budapest. Accordingly, while *Moszkva tér* evokes the general euphoria and the sense of freedom that the fall of the Iron Curtain brought about in Hungary, with shifting ideologies and social spaces, the Budapest of the new millennium in *Kontroll* resembles some postmodern Wasteland, with its urban underworld subways and metro-line ticket inspectors behaving like dim caricatures of agents of the state security and intelligence in the communist era, signifying that a sceptical shift in the belief would trigger much change in Hungary's social and political system. In tone and subject matter, the 'snapshot' of the capital shows its darkest shades in *Jupiter holdja*. As Kalmár argues, the Budapest in Mundruczó's film stands for the dystopian subaltern space of Eastern Europe, a place of an illiberal bureaucracy, where any attempt to revolt against the system proves futile, only underscoring the total and irreparable breakdown of democratic and liberal values.

The volume's closing chapter, Eszter Ureczky's study "Old City: Ageist Crime and Transgenerational Care in Kristóf Deák's *The Grandson* (2022)" delves into the socio- and biopolitical debates on ageism and care in the urban environment. Ureczky remarkably starts her essay by acknowledging the emerging trend in contemporary films of so-called "greying societies," addressing aging through an intersectional lens that includes familial, social, psychological, and medical dimensions. This trend often challenges preexisting stereotypes that associate aging solely with physical and mental decline. Both international films, such as Richard Eyre's *Iris* (2001), Aisling Walsh's *Elizabeth is Missing* (2019), and Ryusuke Hamaguchi's *Drive My Car* (2021), and examples from Hungarian cinema, such as Károly Makk's *Szerelem* (Love) (1971) and Dániel Hevér's *Some Birds* (2023), illustrate how the themes of aging and caregiving have become central in film narratives. As Ureczky explains, Kristóf Deák's *The Grandson* (2022) is particularly noteworthy in this regard, since it not only draws up demographic and biopolitical aspects of old age and care, as well as old age and social isolation in the Hungarian big cities but it does so by raising awareness of and offering novel discussions about these issues. In this regard, *The Grandson* is both undeniably local and translocal at the same time, whereby the issues of ageism and the marginalization of the elderly may vary depending on regional factors, while still addressing broader, global themes of aging and care. As Ureczky suggests, while the film has some plot inconsistencies, which might prompt further discussion on the portrayal of care in today's social and cultural contexts, it stands out for its progressive and empathetic depiction of aging, its critique of public welfare institutions, and its rejection of the notion that aging is something to be "cured."

By all means, the eleven chapters in this volume offer a remarkable contribution to urban studies, inviting its readership to reflect on the intersections of

national identity, memory, and the urban experience. In so doing, the book might generate further critical conversations about both personal and collective histories, as well as their implications for the present and the future, empowering readers to dive critically into the urban narratives that have influenced Central and Eastern European cultures.

