Layered Image

Representations of Hungarian Urban Culture and History

Review of Ágnes Györke and Tamás Juhász (eds.), *Urban Culture and the Modern City: Hungarian Case Studies* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2024)

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The photograph on the book cover—taken by István Szitás—suggests an interpretation of, or at the very least an approach to, the subject of this book, edited by Ágnes Györke and Tamás Juhász: urban culture as it is represented in modern Hungarian art and society. The image features several characteristic elements of contemporary Hungarian urban life: an official state building, pedestrians on the street, posters, electric wires, an iconic yellow tram, and a bar where someone is seated, engaging in a defining ritual of modern urban existence—consumption. Notably, due to the photographer's carefully chosen perspective, these elements appear simultaneously in a blurred composition, where the interior and exterior blend and connect. Of course, the observer's cultural background also influences the interpretation of the image. A Hungarian viewer—particularly someone who lives in Budapest—can identify the location and may associate the place and the building with personal memories, meanings, or contextual knowledge (for example, being aware that the building of the Ministry of Agriculture has been undergoing renovation for years). This is especially true for another significant landmark of Kossuth Square, that is, the Hungarian Parliament Building, which is missing from the photo.

In the Introduction, the editors of the book define the central focus of this collection and highlight the potential challenges of urban cultural studies in East-Central European cities: "[t]hough city studies has become an expanding research field in the past few decades, no volume has discussed the role that art and material culture play in imagining the modern city in Hungary" (10). It is worth noting that the cultural aspects of urban life in Hungary began started to receive scholarly attention around twenty years ago with a conference and a collection of essays entitled *Terek és szövegek. Újabb perspektívák a városkutatásban* (*Spaces and Texts: New Perspectives in Urban Studies*, 2005). The volume was heterogeneous, interdisciplinary, and intended as a "groundbreaking" work in 2005, analysing questions of urban life—particularly its representations—through approaches rooted in anthropology and cultural studies. As the first comprehensive English-language collection focusing on the cultural aspects of urban life in Hungary, *Urban Culture and the Modern City* aims not only to introduce local approaches to the historical, cultural, and social dimensions of Hungarian towns and their representations in art and literature, but also to explore specific aspects of East-Central European urban culture. As Györke and Juhász argue, urban studies have primarily focused on Western metropolises (Paris, London, etc.) or, more recently, on postcolonial cities (e.g. Johannesburg, Mumbai), with the Second World often being overlooked. Thus, the book seeks both to highlight recent trends and results in Hungarian urban studies and to emphasise the need for dialogue among Western-centric, postcolonial, and East-European perspectives.

A key methodological issue arises from the Western-centric framework of urban studies, namely, that the theoretical foundations of the discipline are closely tied to Western urban experiences and their cultural or ideological implications. For instance, it is noteworthy that of the three most frequently cited theorists in the book, one is German (Walter Benjamin), and the other two are French (Michel Foucault and Michel de Certeau). Furthermore, Benjamin's seminal study analysed the urban experience in Paris in the second half of the nineteenth century from the perspective of Baudelaire and the phenomenon of the *flâneur.* All three theorists and their concepts—the *flâneur*, Foucault's "heterotopia," and Certeau's approach to the tactics of resistance—have had a significant impact on Anglo-Saxon cultural and urban studies. Therefore, a book examining East-Central European urban experiences must engage with these theoretical frameworks and methodologies developed in other

cultural contexts, while also emphasising the unique characteristics of Hungarian urban processes and developments.

The book's tripartite structure offers an approach to Hungarian urban life that is not organised around different topics, arts, or genres, but instead follows a chronological framework. This strategy implicitly suggests a historical approach, emphasising changes and/or continuities in certain phenomena. These three sections cover the key periods of Hungarian modernity and modern history: the first focuses on the early twentieth century, the second on the mid-century, including the postwar and communist decades, and the third on post-communist and contemporary urban representations and phenomena.

The Introduction, emphasising the specific role of historical circumstances in Hungarian urbanisation and their cultural impact, outlines a brief narrative from the Compromise of 1867 through two world wars and the communist regime to the post-1989 cultural changes and challenges. One distinctive feature of Hungarian culture is the relationship between urban and rural life and its ideological implications. The modernisation of Budapest was defined (or, more precisely, shaped by its planners and inhabitants) not only in relation to other European metropolises and Hungarian towns but also in contrast to rural villages. After the First World War, this urban-rural dichotomy evolved into a pronounced ideological opposition between the "traditionalist" and "urbanist" positions (15–16). These terms already illustrate the challenges to introducing Hungarian historical and cultural developments to international readers, as the original Hungarian words, *népi* and *urbánus*, carry specific meanings that differ from their English equivalents. In the context of Western modernism, the term "traditionalist" typically refers to conservatism or, as the Introduction suggests (citing T. S. Eliot's famous essay), to the modernist notion of tradition. However, in Hungary, the concept of *népi* is associated with a nostalgic and utopian vision of the countryside and peasant societies, where the "true Hungarian spirit" is believed to reside in contrast to the cosmopolitan—and, from the *népi* perspective, predominantly Jewish—culture of Budapest. Another common translation of *népi* is "populist," though this term carries different connotations, rather referring to political discourse or strategy than to folk traditions or folkish ideology. (For an example of this interpretation, see Richard Esbenshade's essay on this dichotomy and debate.)

The introductory essay outlines the history of this dual approach, which persisted through the communist period, was dynamically revitalised after 1989, and

has once again become dominant in Hungarian political and cultural spheres. However, according to the book's editors, while this narrative remains broadly relevant, a closer examination reveals "patterns that are more complex than the ideologies of the two dominant antithetical positions" (18).

Three essays in the first section focus on some renowned and canonical Hungarian writers from the early twentieth century. The first chapter, by Márta Pellérdi, examines two plays by Ferenc Molnár, perhaps the only Hungarian playwright whose works were successfully performed in theatres overseas. However, as Pellérdi highlights, when these works were staged in the United States, certain aspects underwent significant changes. In particular, the original settings—closely tied to specific locations in Budapest and depicting typical figures of the city in the early twentieth century—were altered to align with the knowledge and cultural background of Western audiences. Sometimes, Western adaptations preserved the original settings; however, the specific cultural meanings associated with these locations were transformed or entirely lost. In some cases, the setting itself was changed—for example, Molnár's *Liliom* (1909) was relocated to the coast of Maine in the musical adaptation entitled *Carousel* (1945) (48). Thus, Molnár achieved success in the Western world by allowing certain culturally specific layers of meaning in his plays to be altered or removed.

In the next chapter, Tamás Juhász examines Gyula Krúdy's historical novel *Primadonna* (1926), which is a fictionalised biography of Pálma Ilkay, a highly popular actress in Hungary in the late nineteenth century. Although this novel is neither Krúdy's most well-known nor his most significant work (and Ilkay's name has largely faded from Hungarian cultural memory), the essay highlights *Primadonna*'s importance by focusing on the representation of stardom and the star cult in relation to the emergence and formation of the nation-state. Ágnes Klára Papp's chapter scrutinises one of the most canonical and widely analysed novels of the first half of the twentieth century, *Skylark* (*Pacsirta* [1924]) by Dezső Kosztolányi. However, the essay approaches the novel in a relatively new perspective focusing on the function of the setting: the fictional Sárszeg embodied some of the main characteristics of a "typical" small Hungarian town. The name itself is metaphorical, formed by the combination of two nouns: *sár* (mud) and *szeg* (derived from *szeglet* or *szegély*, meaning corner, edge, or margin), signifying the town's "in the middle of nowhere" character. (This "in the middle of nowhere" concept is also the title of an important novel of the era, written by Zsigmond Móricz [*Az isten háta mögött*, 1911], which

directly references another famous work of world literature, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, with its archetypal small-town setting.) Kosztolányi was influenced, among others, by Flaubert and especially by Chekhov (whose works he translated and wrote reviews of). However, as Papp argues, his narrative offers an original interpretation of the small town as a chronotope (in Bakhtin's sense), presenting it as a typical scene of stagnation and immobility.

The fourth chapter of the first section is only loosely connected to the book's overall concept, as Magdolna Gucsa does not examine a Hungarian urban location or the relationship between the capital and smaller towns or rural areas. Instead, she explores the place of Hungarian–Jewish painter Emil Szittya within the Parisian art movement, École de Paris. Szittya emigrated from Hungary in the late 1910s and settled permanently in Paris in 1927. Most of his works were written in German and French; consequently, his cultural position within the Parisian artist community was shaped less by his Hungarian roots and more by his cosmopolitanism. As a result, this chapter does not specifically focus on Hungary but rather examines the relationship between French society and Eastern European (or Jewish) migrant artists in general. Through this detailed analysis, Gucsa explores transnational interpretations of urban culture by providing a detailed analysis of migrants in Paris. Nevertheless, Szittya also became a significant figure in Hungarian literary memory. In 1909, he accompanied Lajos Kassák—who would later become Hungary's groundbreaking avant-garde poet—on his journey across Europe. In his seminal poem "A ló meghal, a madarak kirepülnek" (The Horse Dies, the Birds Fly Out [1922]), Kassák claimed that Szittya "was to become a police spy and agent provocateur."[1]

The next section of the book consists of three chapters focusing on the mid-twentieth century, a period shaped by World War II and communist rule in Hungary. The essays examine various aspects of the era's art, including gender, collective memory, and the practices of civility (in both senses of the word). While these perspectives differ significantly, this section does not portray the communist period as a radical break in Hungarian culture. Instead, it highlights certain continuities (or at least similar tendencies) between the socialist era and the preceding period.

The first essay, by Éva Federmayer, offers a comparative analysis of two novels by female writers: *Colours and Years* (*Színek és évek* [1911/12]) by Margit Kaffka and

1 For a comprehensive analysis of Szittya's literary *oeuvre* and his connections with Kassák and other avant-garde movements, see Gucsa (2022).

The Fawn (*Az őz* [1959]) by Magda Szabó. A literary continuity can also be observed between the two authors: Kaffka was part of the same literary circle as Dezső Kosztolányi, a first-generation writer of *Nyugat* (*West* [1908–1941]), Hungary's most significant modernist journal, while Szabó began her career as a poet in *Újhold* (*New Moon* [1946–1948]), a magazine that sought to carry on *Nyugat*'s legacy. Drawing on Foucault's concept of heterotopia, Federmayer's narratological analysis focuses on the novels' use of spatial constructions and oppositions—particularly the contrast between the garden and the town—and, more broadly, the role of nature, the rural world, and urban spaces in expressing female voice and identity.

While the first essay highlights the gendered aspects of spatial representation and narrative voice in works by Hungarian modernist women writers, the second study focuses more directly on recurring patterns of memorialisation in Hungarian culture from the nineteenth century until the end of the communist period. Árpád Bak's case study examines the memory and memorial sites of Romani–Hungarian musician and songwriter János Bihary, whose works (along with some pieces attributed to him but likely composed by other artists, such as the famous *Rákóczi March*) gained symbolic significance in nineteenth-century Hungarian national movements and became important part of national memory. The essay convincingly argues that, although the communist regime's self-image claimed the radical break from the past and especially the nationalist politics (as the lyrics of *The Internationale* stated: "We will change henceforth the old tradition"), it purposefully incorporated the elements of the ideology of the nation state. Consequently, Hungarian communism can be interpreted not merely as an extension of the nationalist tradition; rather, its memory politics had direct links to the reactionary Horthy-regime it aimed to replace.[2]

The third chapter approaches the topic of continuity from a different perspective, analysing one of the most influential Hungarian novels of the twentieth century**:** *School at the Frontier* (*Iskola a határon* [1959]) by Géza Ottlik. It was a seminal work for the next generation of Hungarian writers (the authors of the so-called "prose turn"). Ottlik became a kind of father figure to them, who wrote countless essays about the novel. Ferenc Hörcher's approach emphasises the significance of symbolic relationships among the novel's temporal and spatial structures. The novel's setting—the boarding military school as a closed space, a micro-society with its power dynamics, and the small town on Hungary's western border, never explicitly

2 On the political roots of this strategy and its connection with the Soviet state's national orientation, see Mevius (2005).

named but easily identifiable as Kőszeg—carries some metaphorical connotations and cultural references. Hörcher connects these to certain aspects of civility (such as the contrast between civil and military spheres, the relationship between civility and adulthood, and the concepts of citizenry and civilisation). The functions of the school and Kőszeg are not only to mark an actual and symbolic border between childhood and adulthood, as well as East and West, but also to serve as the site of a significant historical event. During the siege of the town in 1532, the Hungarian defending forces attempted to stop the Ottoman army; although they were ultimately defeated, the Ottomans were unable to advance and conquer Vienna. Thus, this heroic "defeated but in some sense victorious" attitude, associated with Kőszeg as a symbolic space in cultural memory, becomes a metaphor of the characters' mentality in the novel and, more broadly, of a survival strategy in communist Hungary after the failed 1956 revolution.

The chapters in the last section largely focus on two interconnected issues: firstly, the various ways in which the past influences contemporary culture and its material manifestations in urban life; and secondly, the generally unsuccessful struggle of new generations to find their place in the world after the fall of the communist regime. Perhaps because these essays address contemporary or recent historical phenomena, they contain implicit, or sometimes even direct, references to current political affairs in Hungary—particularly, to the problems associated with official right-wing cultural policy and memory politics. László Munteán, in the first chapter, starts with a criticism of a recent Hungarian book, *The Scars of Budapest* (2019), a photo album with some historical essays published by a government-backed foundation. At first glance, it may seem less interesting to a foreign reader, but as the author argues, it plays a significant role in the Hungarian context because the book conveys an official political interpretation of Budapest's past—one that nostalgically idealises the prewar decades and portrays Hungary as a victim of two foreign dictatorships: Nazism and Soviet communism. The most striking example of this historical narrative—and its questionable accuracy—is the Memorial for the Victims of the German Occupation in Budapest's Liberty Square.[3] Munteán introduces a new term and methodology, "*plaster archaeology*," which is an analysis of traces of the (Nazi) past in the walls of contemporary buildings. Through this approach, he demonstrates that beyond this official representation of Budapest as a wounded

3 For a discussion of this issue, see Horváth (2015).

victim city, there are also other, less acknowledged imprints of the past—ones that reference the perpetrators and their inglorious yet persistent memory.

The next two chapters explore different aspects of how post-communist Hungary and its right-wing turn after 2010 are represented in contemporary literature and film. Ágnes Györke's chapter examines Noémi Szécsi's debut novel, *The Finno-Ugrian Vampyre* (*Finnugor vámpír* [2002]), which is an ironic vampire story set in post-communist Budapest. Györke's examination focuses on how the main character interprets her past and present from the city's perspective where the remnants of nineteenth-century grandeur coexist with the decay and marginalisation of an Eastern European post-socialist metropolis. György Kalmár analyses three Hungarian films that depict key events of recent decades: the fall of communism in 1989 in Ferenc Török's *Moscow Square* (*Moszkva tér* [2001]), Hungary's accession to the European Union in Nimród Antal's *Control* (*Kontroll* [2003]), and the 2015 migrant crisis as portrayed in Kornél Mundruczó's *Jupiter's Moon* (*Jupiter holdja* [2017]). Examining the spatial structures of these films and their metaphorical significance—such as the iconic spaces of Budapest and their connection to regime change in *Moscow Square*, the underground microcosm in *Control*, and the contrast between metaphorical wastelands and spiritual awakening in *Jupiter's Moon*—Kalmár sees these films as "time capsules" that mark different phases of disillusionment in Hungary's post-1989 history. In the final essay of this section—and of the book—Eszter Ureczky analyses Kristóf Deák's film *The Grandson* (*Az unoka* [2022]) in the context of global aging ("greying") and its depiction in contemporary cinema, often referred to as the "silvering screen." The chapter highlights the film's ambivalent nature: while *The Grandson* underscores the growing crisis of eldercare in contemporary urban Hungarian society, it presents the issue through a utopian, Hollywood-like narrative.

It is difficult to identify a single central theoretical or historical approach in the book, as it covers more than a century of Hungarian culture. Of course, a collection of essays with multiple authors and perspectives has both advantages and disadvantages. While it encompasses a wide range of approaches, methods, and research fields, this variety makes it challenging to define a singular central theme—unless that theme is precisely the diversity of the field in question. However, certain recurring themes and motifs emerge throughout the essays: relationships (East and West, local and international, small towns and the capital, rupture and continuity, etc.), as well as historical and political issues (the latent survival of older ideological patterns in later phenomena, post-1989 disillusionment, and the cultural

and ideological divisions reflected in urban culture and their representation today, etc.). Through these case studies, the book not only explores Hungarian culture using the methods and theoretical foundations of urban studies but also reflects how contemporary researchers perceive their country's cultural, social, and political issues, along with their historical roots. Like its cover, the book presents a layered image of Hungarian history, where the new and the old, the observer and the observed, coexist simultaneously.

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