

HUNGARIAN HISTORICAL NARRATIVE AND ITS REPRODUCTION IN CONTEMPORARY HUNGARIAN CINEMA IN CASE OF "THE NOTEBOOK" AND "THE EXAM" MOVIES

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Abstract

The present study will investigate the audience's perception of messages in contemporary Hungarian cinema encoded by the ruling Hungarian party. Particularly, it will use the examples of two movies that received state funding for their production and distribution: "The Notebook" and "The Exam". The thesis will show that despite the universal aspects of these films and their orientation towards international cinema arena, "The Notebook" and "The Exam" were perceived by Hungarian audiences as being concerned with Hungary's historical past and the periods of the Nazi and Soviet occupations. Thus, it will argue that the chosen movies primarily support the Hungarian historical narrative about the two occupations and victimization of Hungarians in the face of Nazi and Soviet aggressors as imposed by the ruling party Fidesz in order to sustain its power and provide Hungarians with a positive historical identity. Moreover, it will show that while the period of Soviet occupation was interpreted in the same negative way by all the respondents, the period of Nazi occupation was perceived as much more ambiguous and controversial.

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Introduction

Media culture today is the dominant form with which culture is articulated in society (Kellner, 1995). It penetrates all spheres of human life and influences people's identities, values and views. It bursts into our daily life and shapes our vision of class, gender, ethnicity and other categories that form the basis of our image of the world and its social order. Moreover, it influences our behavior, constructing people's lines of actions by providing them a 'tool kit' of symbols, habits and skills (Swidler, 1986). Thus, the role of media culture and its products in the process of the reproduction of existing social and political order is undeniable.

In addition, media culture is a powerful tool in the hands of the ruling parties that exercise their power through all kinds of media products and spread sentiments favorable for them in society. By encoding political messages in the media products, the dominant impose their ideology in order to reinforce their power and relationships of subordination. That is why Stuart Hall argues that the scheme of communicative process (which, according to him, consists of production, circulation, distribution/consumption and reproduction) reproduces the dominance structure in society (Hall, 1973[1980]).

One of the most striking examples of this process is the case of modern Hungary. Fidesz - the national conservative party of Hungary that won another two-thirds supermajority in Parliament after the last elections - imposes its political views through various social, political and cultural channels. Changing the legislation of the country and banning democratic institutions, the leaders of this party influence all spheres of public and private life in order to legitimize their power. One of the ways of strengthening their dominant position is the use of nationalistic and religious rhetoric. For example, the new constitution, the adoption of which was initiated by Fidesz in 2011, possesses a number of references to the traditional values, fatherland and

Christianity. Moreover, it argues for the revival of greater Hungary and a special role of the new generations in the process of this revival.

One of the strategies used by the ruling party in order to impose the idea about the exceptional role of the current government in reviving greater Hungary that will unite all Hungarians inside and outside of the country is the falsification of history and spreading a particular vision of Hungary's past. This historical narrative presents Hungarians as the blameless victims of the external oppression and shifts all the responsibility for the crimes to the Nazis and Soviets. Moreover, the period of the "two occupations" is labeled as a time of moral deterioration and economic and social decay.

Doubtless, the most important channel for the spreading of this historical narrative is culture. The conformations of this are, for example, the House of Terror – the museum on the one of the main boulevards of Budapest that is dedicated to those who suffered under the two Hungarian occupations and the monument for the victims of the Holocaust and German occupation, which is currently under construction. Moreover, this narrative that falsifies actual historical facts is actively imposed through other tools, such as education and media production. What is the most disturbing in this narrative is that it to some extent calls people to unite and to act for the sake of the revival of greater Hungary.

As such, it seems urgent and important to explore the channels of imposition used by the Fidesz government to disseminate their populist version of Hungarian history. Particularly, it is important to identify more or less implicit channels, messages of which has become totally accepted due to the fact that they are well hidden under more transnational claims and intensions. Thus, this project will be dedicated to one of these channels – Hungarian contemporary cinema. Like most cultural institutions, the production side of the Hungarian filmmaking was changed and transformed by Fidesz. In 2011 the new Hungarian National Film Fund (MNF) replaced the Hungarian Motion Picture Public Foundation (MKKA) that led to the creation of the one-

channel system of state funding of cinema and facilitated the government control over the movie's production.

Since all the transformations and changes in the sphere of production of Hungarian cinema, as well as in other fields, have occurred only few years ago there has been no research conducted on their impact on ordinary Hungarians. The topic of the spreading of nationalistic and populist views by the Hungarian ruling party through various media channels such as cinema, and their perception by the Hungarian audience stays uncovered in academic literature. The only academic advances in this area is the representation of Hungarian historical narrative in museums, particularly in the House of Terror (Rev, 2008; Frazon, 2002) and construction of the historical narratives through the visual representations, such as monuments, memorials and parks (James, 2005). However, all of them focus neither on the producer of this narrative, nor on its perception by the audience.

Thus, this thesis will investigate the viewers' perception of the Hungarian contemporary cinema funded by the State and the way they decode the movies' messages. Particularly, it will focus on the films "The Notebook" and "The Exam". The first one - "The Notebook" – is the only movie released by that time that was funded by the MNF. The film is based on a famous book by a Swiss author of Hungarian origin, Agota Kristof, and its action takes place in a Hungarian village at the end of World War II (the period of the Nazi occupation, according to the Hungarian historical narrative). The second movie - "The Exam" – was released in 2011 and was funded by Magyar Televizio (Hungarian National Television Company owned by government). The film is set in 1957, after the suppression of the Hungarian rebellion of 1956 (the period of the Soviet occupation).

In order to achieve this goal, mainly Stuart Hall's model of the encoding and decoding of media messages will be applied (Hall, 1973[1980]). Following Bourdieu's theory on symbolic power, the current Hungarian government will be considered as an encoder of nationalistic and

populist messages in “The Notebook” and “The Exam” (Bourdieu, 1985). The decoders of these messages will be the Hungarian audience, particularly young people, whose perception will be revealed through the semi-structured interviews.

The body of the thesis will be constituted of three main chapters and several subchapters. The first chapter will be dedicated to the theoretical framework of the thesis project. Firstly, the issue of the production and perception of the cultural products as distinctive moments of communicative process will be revealed through the theory of Stuart Hall. Due to the shortcomings of his concept, it will be supplemented with the theory of Pierre Bourdieu on symbolic production and symbolic violence. Then this chapter will reveal the problem of the recycling of history and the construction of historical narratives. Special emphasis will be placed on the production of historical narratives as a continuous process that changes over time and the notion of silencing and forgetting in this production. The next subchapter will discuss historical movies as one of the main cultural tool for the imposition of historical narratives. The second chapter will be devoted to methodology, where the chosen methods of research as well as a sample of the respondents will be presented. The third chapter of this thesis will be dedicated to the results and findings of the research. Firstly, the production of contemporary Hungarian cinema will be analyzed and contextualized. This subchapter will explore the current political context in Hungary, the Hungarian historical narrative that falsified the actual historical past, the transformations that occurred during last three years in the sphere of the filmmaking in Hungary. It will also provide information about “The Notebook” and “The Exam”. The next subchapter will move to the perception side of contemporary Hungarian cinema and reveal the interpretation of the chosen films by the audience, focusing on their attitude towards the representation of historical narrative in movies, their main ideas and main characters. Finally, concluding remarks will be presented.

Theoretical Framework

Production and reception as the moments of communicative process

Most of the sociological trends and research that dominate today in the field of mass communication emerged in response to the concept of the “pessimistic mass society” developed by the scholars of the Frankfurt School (Morley, 1992:45). This concept focuses on the audience as passive receivers of mass culture, particularly, mass propaganda and its most effective engine – mass media. According to the leader members of the Frankfurt School (Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse), who mainly studied Germany and its breakdown into Fascism, culture and its products aimed to provide the ideological legitimation of the social order and to stabilize the world of capitalism. They argued that cultural products “simply reproduced the existing society and manipulated mass audience into obedience” (Kellner, 2009:6). Hence, the audience is presented in their theory as passive and suppressed consumers, who cannot create their own meanings of the media products and perceive them differently.

The “optimistic” view on people’s perception of the cultural products was developed in reaction to the Frankfurt School’s conceptualization of the audience. What is common for the both paradigms is that they pay significant attention to power relations and consider culture as a mediator between the dominant and the dominated. However, the “optimistic” theory considers the audience as actively involved (consciously or unconsciously) participants of the process of the perception of cultural products focusing on their social and economic background, interests, values, and position in the whole structure of the society (Morley, 1992).

One of the most striking examples of the theorization of audience as active consumers of culture is the Encoding/Decoding model developed by Stuart Hall – probably, the most influential scholar of the researchers in the Birmingham School that emerged from the Birmingham University Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS). Hall’s theory

combines encoding and decoding of the message in cultural products as “determining moments” of the commutative process (Hall, 1973[1980]:508). This communicative process, according to him, consists of four stages: production, circulation, distribution/consumption and reproduction. The scheme that is formed by these processes is also the scheme of the “complex structure in dominance” (Hall, 1973[1980]:508). Hall argues that codes exist in a specific discourse and they are, at the same time, the vehicles of this discourse and its foundation. The process of the circulation of these codes needs the whole organization of social relations and practices (production) as well as its instruments and means (products). Thus, the circulation and distribution of the product exist in a discursive form, which should be transformed into social practices: “[i]f the meaning is not articulated in practice, it has no effect” (Hall, 1973[1980]:508). As such, before the message would be reproduced in action, it should be decoded in accordance with the “meaningful discourse”. At one “determinate moment” of communicative process, the structure creates the code and addresses the message to the audience through cultural products; at another “determinate moment”, this message is decoded and put into practice (Hall, 1973[1980]:509).

Borrowing the terms from semiotics and linguistics, Hall argues that codes exist on two levels of meanings: the denotative level, or literal, universally recognized; and the connotative level, or associative, contextualized. Both of them are at the same time different levels on which ideologies and discourse are articulated. However, the connotative level of meaning, where the codes and messages are less fixed and more open for the different transformations, is more actively involved in the construction of meanings for the audience (Hall, 1973[1980]).

Another aspect of the Hall’s theory which is important in understanding the perception of messages is that each of the four stages (production, circulation, distribution/consumption and reproduction) is linked to the others, but at the same time, it is distinctive and “relatively autonomous”. Therefore, production constructs the message and influences its perception, but

not directly and explicitly. This creates the phenomenon of polysemy, which argues that the audience can encode one message in different ways depending on their personal characteristics, social background, etc., and, hence, on their understanding or misunderstanding of the code. However, since these stages are linked to each other, each stage shapes some limitations of the reading of the code. Hall suggests three hypothetical positions of the subject in accordance to the text and its decoding: the dominant-hegemonic position, when the audience decodes the message in the same way as it was encoded; the oppositional position, when the message is decoded in a totally contrary way; and the negotiated position, when a viewer decoded the message “with a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements” (Hall, 1973[1980]:516).

The last aspect of Hall’s model that is important for this research is the notions of “preferred meaning” and “preferred reading”. The “preferred meaning”, according to Hall, is the meaning of the text which articulate on the connotative level presenting “sociocultural taken-for-granted meanings”. According to Hall, the meaning, which is “preferred” by the encoders tends to become a reading, which is “preferred” by the decoders (Schroder, 2000:238).

The Encoding/Decoding model inspired many scholars to combine this theoretical concept with the methods of qualitative research in order to the study audience perception of different types of media products. One of the most well-known works that applied this concept in practice is David Morley’s research of viewers of the British news program “Nationwide”, where he mostly focuses on differences of perception based on class. Other influential research based the on Encoding/Decoding model are the studies of the female audience of the “Crossroads” soap opera by Dorothy Hobson and the “Dallas” soap opera by Ien Ang (Sullivan, 2013:144-151).

Thus, the idea that the sphere of culture always involves power relations, emphasized by the majority of the scholars, will be used as a starting point for this project. Another important aspect of this thesis is the concept of the “active audience”, which will be constructed later. Since

different people and social groups possess different social backgrounds and occupy different positions within the social structure, it would be assumed that they could differently interpret cultural codes and create a polysemy of interpretations and responses to it. These two ideas are well integrated in the Hall's Encoding/Decoding model. Applying this model to the case of Hungarian contemporary cinema and its messages, this thesis will primarily focus on the production of movies as the process of encoding of the messages and the perception of the movies as the process of their decoding, which constitute the single scheme and reproduce the structure of dominance. Special attention will also be paid to the way viewers interpret the messages of "The Notebook" and "The Exam" and which position they take in decoding movies' discourse.

It is worth mentioning another important aspect of the reception process - the intertextuality. Jonathan Gray defines this concept as "the fundamental and inescapable interdependence of all textual meaning upon the structures of meaning proposed by other texts" (Gray, 2006:3-4). The notion of intertextuality means that the text as well as its perception never exists in isolation from other texts. Interpreting the meanings, the audience always relates it to other meanings that they recognize from other cultural products. Over time certain meanings that are commonly repeated become similarly interpreted by the similar groups of audience. These similar groups that have similar direction of interpretation of the meanings is called by Stanley Fish the interpretive community (Sullivan, 2013:155). Due to the fact that this project will deal with the two movies that concern with the Hungarian historical narrative, it can be assumed that audience will, in their interpretations of the meanings of these films, refer to other cultural products that possess similar meanings and messages.

However, what is blurred in the Hall's model (which will constitute the theoretical core of this research) is the figure of the decoder. In order to make up this omission the theory of Pierre Bourdieu on symbolic production will be explored. According to Bourdieu, the monopoly over

this production comes as a result of political struggle, in which agents engage with their symbolic capital – “a form assumed by different kinds of capital when they are perceived and recognized as legitimate” (Bourdieu, 1990:129). Agents who possess the majority of symbolic capital occupy the dominant positions in the field of symbolic production as well as the dominant position in social space and have an opportunity “to impose the scale of values most favorable to their products” (Bourdieu, 1990:135). Bourdieu (1985) argues that the holder of the monopoly of symbolic production, as well as the holder of the monopoly of legitimate symbolic violence, is the State, which seeks to reproduce and reinforce a relationship of subordination that constitutes the structure of social space. Consequently, applying Bourdieu’s theory to the case of the production of meanings and discourses in contemporary Hungarian cinema, this paper will consider the State and the ruling party that occupies the dominant position in the social space as an encoder of the messages, which concerns particular vision of the Hungarian historical narrative, in “The Notebook” and “The Exam”.

Production of historical narratives and recycling of the past

The imposition of the specific vision of Hungarian history in which Hungarians are presented as victims in the face of two occupations raises the problem of the production of historical narratives as a form of remembering (and forgetting). Today, most scholars converge in the opinion that the perception of the past determines the practices and experiences of the present, and to some extent legitimizes them (Connerton, 1996; Gathercole and Lowenthal 1990; Trouillot 1995). Moreover, this perception is always influenced by the present and constructed to serve its interests, which means that it changes over time.

This opinion was expressed, for example, by John R. Gillis, who argues that memories (which are usually conceptualized as distinctive from history) are social and political constructions, which are not fixed: “we are constantly revising our memories to suit our current identities” (Gillis, 1996:3) Similarly, David Lowenthal (1985) points out that perception of the

past is always changing due to its dependence on “time, place and other variables”. In his work “The Past is a Foreign Country” the author analyses various resources in order to examine historical narratives from early periods to modern ones and to demonstrate that the same historical periods were differently perceived in different countries and that these perceptions were changing over time. A similar opinion on the changeability of historical narrations is shared by Michel-Rolph Trouillot, who claims that “history is always produced in a specific historical context” (Trouillot, 1997:22) and it is always influenced by this context.

Reflecting on production of history, the author places special emphasis on power relations. According to him, the access to the means of production of historical narrative is unequally distributed in the society, hence different groups and individuals unequally contributed to this production. Trouillot argues that the power in the production of historical narratives primary involves “the creation of facts and sources” (Trouillot, 1997:29). The understanding of historical narratives as political constructions, which involve power relations, is very important for the exploration of the Hungarian historical narrative that falsifies historical facts and constructs a version of history which better suits the current political situation and nationalistic ideology than the actual historical past.

The production of historical narratives also generates the problem of silencing. Thus, shaping historical narratives, those in power not only produce or emphasis certain historical facts, but also muzzles the others. Reflecting on the relations between people’s national identity and history, David Lowenthal makes a similar point. He argues that “[n]ations are unique not only in what they choose to remember, but in what they feel forced to forget” (Lowenthal, 1996:50). Thus, noble events and achievements displace shameful facts in historical narrations, generating “collective amnesia”. However, Lowenthal notes that not only triumphs can create platforms for the historical productions, but tragedies too. Referring to Renan, he points out that “suffering in common unifies more than joy does” (Lowenthal, 1996:50). This is very true in many respects for

the Hungarian historical narrative that places special emphasis on the Nazi and Soviet occupations as the “traumatic periods” and constructs the whole narrative around them.

Despite the fact that the theories of Lowenthal and Touillot in different extent refer to the power relation of the historical production, they do not provide clear explanations of the connections between the historical narratives articulated in society and the relations of dominance. In order to fill this gap, this paper will rely on Bourdieu’s theory (that was presented in the previous subchapter) considering the production of historical narratives as an instrument of knowledge and symbolic production. Applying this theory to the Hungarian case, the ruling party of Hungary will be considered as a monopolistic holder of the symbolic violence and, hence, producer of the Hungarian historical narrative.

Historical movies as a tool for spreading of historical narratives

Media and media products are probably one of the most effective tools of reinterpretation and reconstruction of the popular version of history in a nation’s collective memory. The greatest impact on historical consciousness of society and relations between history, memory and culture is made by historical movies that show the past in a dramatized and semi-fictional way. Historical movies have influenced people’s perception and interpretation of history since they first appeared and follow most of the important historical events up to modern times.

However, most scholars argue that historical movies do not show the past truthfully but reconstruct and reinterpret it. Pierre Sorlin, for example, argues that historical movies create “the historical capital of a society” by shaping “myths about the past” (Sorlin, 1980:21). By being constantly repeated in historical movies and other media, these myths become common sense: they are treated by the audience as truthful historical facts and events. In addition to the construction of these myths, historical movies pay unequal attention to different moments of the past. As Maria Fritsche points out, particular historical elements are “omitted or marginalized,

whereas others are accentuated” (Fritzsche, 2010:4) which creates the problem of silencing and forgetting and, thus, a distorted perception of history.

This historical distortion is always due to the present political context. Derek Elley (1984), for instance, argues that historical movies are more informative in terms of the period in which they were produced than the historical past they are dealing with. They refer mostly to the current political situation and current problems that society faces. Similarly, Justin Smith claims that historical movies are “the reciprocity of currents of feelings of a society” (Smith, 2008) and their analysis can show its current state.

In addition, historical cinema influences identity of the audience. As Marcia Landy (1991) argues, the historical film is a connecting link between national film cultures and the national audience. Since the bases of historical films usually contain motives from national mythology, important events and figures of national history, memorable dates, etc, they have a great impact on the construction of national identity and the catalyzing of patriotism. Moreover, historical films could attempt to handle contradictory issues in national history by reinterpreting historical events and shaping its particular vision. A similar opinion was expressed by Wever (2007) who argues that historical movies construct national and historical identity by reinterpreting the past and affecting perception of history.

The power of historical movies to affect collective memory and the historical consciousness of the people and influence their national identity as well as present history as entertainment has been harshly criticized by many authors. Some of the first critics were scholars of Frankfurt school, who coined the term “cultural industry” in order to emphasize the industrialization, commercialization and commodification of culture. For example, Adorno (1981) argues that modern cinema is more related to the commodity and advertising due to the “emotional melodramatic representation of history” and has nothing in common with a “cognitive rational understanding” of the past. Modern historical movies received a similar critical

response from other authors (Hartman, 1993; Jameson, 1991), who argued that memory has become “alienated from people” and articulated in a form of images, representations and re-narrations.

However, some authors share an optimistic position on the issue of historical movies as mass media products. For example, Zielinski (1980) claims that historical movies and serials help to understand and to evaluate the significance of the certain historical facts. Moreover, they promote the interest of the people in history and important historical events. A relative view was expressed by Sobchak (1996), who argues that a plurality of genres that deal with history and historical representations allows for the achievement of a deep and objective comprehension of the past. Also, he notes the merit of popular historical films based on the fact that they help to understand that “history and its representations are always processes and constructions” (Bear, 2001:493).

Thus, by applying these theories to the Hungarian case, this project will identify the historical “myths”, which are constructed by “The Notebook” and “The Exam” in order to serve the interests of the present and their perception by the audience. According to the theory of Smith (2008), the analysis of the audience’s interpretation of these movies will reveal more about the current social and political situation in Hungary than about the perception of the films’ semi-fictional stories. Moreover, this project will concern with the role of “The Notebook” and “The Exam” in providing Hungarians with a positive historical identity (Landy, 1991; Wever, 2007).

Methodology

The concept of the “active audience” argues that the perception of cultural products always depends on people’s social background, education, personal experience and other characteristics. These differences generate “polysemy” of the interpretations of the cultural messages and codes. Thus, in the analysis of the audience’s perception of “The Notebook” and “The Exam”, special emphasis should be placed not only on attitudes towards the movies, but on person’s social background and position in the structure of the social space.

Consequently, in order to study the audience’s perception of movies, semi-structured interviews were selected. The choice to use this method was made due to its capacity to gain not only an insightful understanding of the respondents’ attitude towards different aspects of the films and to show the whole spectrum of the respondents’ interpretations of their meanings and messages, but also to reveal respondent’s social background and experience. This effect could not be achieved by using structured interviews with a strict sequence of questions that leave less room for the respondents in terms of self-expression and explanation of their vision of the movies. It could be reached with a questionnaire that involves choosing an answer from several proposed options, though this is less likely to occur than when semi-structured interviews are conducted. Moreover, the purpose of the work was not the massive collection of data (when quantitative methods are usually used), but an achievement of an in-depth understanding of the investigated phenomenon. Thus, in order to reveal the perception of “The Notebook” and “The Exam”, ten one-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted

The sample consisted of Hungarians aged from 25 to 29. Young people were chosen due to the fact that they do not possess any personal experience of World War II or the Soviet period of Hungarian history, so their attitude towards these times are mediated through various

cultural, social and political channels. This means that the periods of “two occupations” are perceived by them as a collective memory constructed by the ruling party.

Most of the respondents were selected randomly. Three of them (Adrian, Ester and Kristian) I met in the cinema while watching “The Notebook” and asked them if they could meet with me to discuss this movie. Fortunately, when I met with these people for the interview it turned out that they watched “The Exam” too, so both movies were discussed. In order to find other respondents I asked my Hungarian friend, who graduated from the Film Studies department of ELTE to ask his friends if someone watched these movies. Thus, he provide me with four more respondents (Eva, Marta, Sandor and Gabor), two of whom (Eva and Sandor) work for the commercial Hungarian channel and possess expert knowledge about the current situation in the sphere of production of Hungarian cinema. The other three people were randomly met in a bar (Zoltan) and in the park (Andras and Szilard).

All the interviews were conducted in Budapest in April 2014 in more-or-less quite coffee houses and cafes and were recorded on a dictaphone after the approval of the respondents. The language of the interviews was English. The same guide was used for all interviews. It consisted of four blocks of questions: social background and personal interests; political views; attitude towards cinema and, particularly, Hungarian cinema; and perception of “The Notebook” and “The Exam”. The last block included three main parts: the perception of historical narrative of the movies, the perception of the main idea of the movies and the perception of the main characters. The average duration of the interviews was 75 min. All the interviews were transcribed and coded. During the transcribing, all the names of the informants were changed in order to provide them with anonymity.

Basic information about the respondents—their age, education, occupation, political position/political party and degree of nationalistic sentiments—is presented in the table (see Appendix 1). It is worth mentioning some particular aspects of the information about political

views of the respondents in this table. The political positions of the respondents were identified in accordance with the discussion of their attitudes towards current the Hungarian government and its policies, the social and political problems of Hungary, etc. Most of the respondents were marked as “conservative” or “liberal”, unless they explicitly supported any political party (in that case the name of the party was written in the table). Two of the respondents were marked as “social liberal” since they mostly refer to the social state. The information about the degree of nationalistic sentiments of the respondents was mostly collected from the entirety of the interview.

In order to explore the side of the production of “The Notebook” and “The Exam” the discourse analyze strategy was employed. I have analyzed the Fundamental Law of Hungary, legislation on juridical system and media as well as Act on motion pictures, results of the elections in Hungarian and European Parliaments, a certain number of articles on the current political situation in Hungary and official websites of the Hungarian National Film Fund and Magyar Filmunio (the international division of the Hungarian National Film Fund).

Empirical chapter

The case of contemporary Hungarian cinema: production of the moving images within the current political context

After the national conservative party Fidesz won reelection, seemingly all spheres of public and private life have undergone certain changes and transformations. Most of these changes are related to the increasing and strengthening of state control and concentrating of all power in the hands of Fidesz, which leads to the imposition of their ideology. Part of this is the historical narrative, through all cultural, political and social channels. The production of cinema has undergone deep changes under the rule of Fidesz, too. In 2011 the new Hungarian National Film Fund was established. Since then, the MNF has become the only channel for delivering state funding for film projects.

Since the main purpose of this project is to analyze the perception of the movies funded by the government, two films were chosen in order to reach this goal: “The Notebook” and “The Exam”. Following the theory of Pierre Bourdieu (1985), this subchapter will show that the ruling party of Hungary acts as an encoder of the nationalistic and populist messages in the cultural products and, particularly, in “The Notebook” and “The Exam” (Hall, 1973[1980]). To support this statement, firstly, the political context of contemporary Hungary will be provided; secondly, the Hungarian historical narrative about the victimization of Hungarians in the face of two occupations, which is spread by Fidesz will be revealed; then the transformations of the production side of the Hungarian cinema will be discussed. Finally, the plot and the context of “The Notebook” and “The Exam” movies will be presented.

Political context

According to the last parliamentary election, which was held in Hungary on 6 April 2014, the majority of votes were received by right-wing parties. The victory was given to the

national conservative party Fidesz and its leader Victor Orban, who was the country's prime minister from 1998 to 2002 and again since 2010. The radical nationalist party Jobbik, which is known for its anti-Semitic and anti-Roma positions as well as its use of Nazi symbols, remained the third biggest party having received 20.22% of votes. The second place was taken by MSZP – the Hungarian Socialist Party that received 25.57% of votes. However, on the last election to the European Parliament, which was held on 25 May 2014, Jobbik outstripped MSZP by the number of votes having received 14.29 % that translated into three seats in the European Parliament in comparison with the 9.52 % and two seats of Hungarian Socialist Party¹.

During the rule of the right-wing government, which got a breakthrough in the 2010 elections, the central themes of political platform are Christian values, protection policies of Hungarian minorities outside the country (especially in Romania), and support of traditional industries in economics. Most policies and legislation of the country have been changed, leading to a reformation of many social institutions in order to legitimate and reinforce the party's power. Thus, in 2011 a new constitution, which serves as a basis for all other laws in the country, was adopted. Critics say that the draft of the constitution was prepared without any involvement of the other political parties of Hungary (Breitenbach et al., 2011). "It is a Fidesz constitution, not a Hungarian constitution", Austrian politician Ulrike Lunacek stated (Breitenbach et al., 2011). The new Fundamental Law possesses references to traditional values and traditional family, fatherland, Crown and Christianity, which are in line with the conservative positions of Fidesz. As such, it defines marriages as "the union of a man and a woman" discriminating against homosexuals; and argues that "embryonic and fetal life shall be subject to protection from the moment of conception," which can be regarded as a first step to the ban of abortions.

Moreover, the new constitution reconsiders the positionality of some democratic institutions. Thus, it has dramatically changed the legal and juridical landscape of the country. For

¹ The information about the results of the Hungarian and European Parliamentary elections is taken from the official web-site of the Hungarian national election office http://www.valasztas.hu/en/ep2014/422/422_0_index.html

example, due to the new Fundamental Law, the Constitutional Court – the only institution that can check the constitutionality of laws – lost some of its options, such as the right to review the laws that are related to the budget. Another aspect of juridical transformations is the filling of the new positions created by the government in Hungarian Courts with their own judges; consequently putting an end to the independence of the judiciary (Scheppele, 2011; Venice Commission, 2011). Furthermore, public policy can be reformed and new laws can be approved only by a two-thirds supermajority of the Parliament. This constitutional aspect in fact concentrates all the power in the hands of Fidesz – the only party that has a two-thirds supermajority.

Great transformations has also happened in the sphere of media due to the adoption of the new media legislation. After the Fidesz government took power, two regulatory bodies were created: the National Media and Infocommunications Authority of Hungary (NMHH) and the Media Council. The director of the NMHH and the five members of the Media Council are all appointed to renewable terms of nine years by a two-thirds majority, with no term limits. Because of this, only Fidesz is capable of making appointments to the NMHH and the Media Council. These two regulatory bodies oversee media outlets such as radio stations, for example, that receive government funding and are thereby required to adhere to certain regulations (Newton, 2014). The new media law was harshly criticized by the European Commissioner for Communications. According to the report of the European Commission, “the new legislation raised concerns regarding the respect for the fundamental media freedoms...The problematic provisions related to disproportionate application of rules on balanced information...rules on registration and authorization of media service providers and rules against offending individuals, minorities or majorities” (Taravers, Rui 2013). In fact, new law wind up the independence of media and its freedom, and prevents people’s access to “balanced information”.

As such, the new Constitution and legislation do not provide any changes that would improve people's lives, but aimed to put all the power into the hands of the ruling party and reinforce its ideology. Transformations that the new laws involves pertain to most of the spheres of public and private life of Hungarians and impose the party's views and positions, banning democratic institutions and increasing censorship.

Populism and Hungarian historical narratives

In addition to the changes of the legislation, the new Fundamental Law imposes and legitimizes a certain vision of Hungarian history. The preamble of the constitution states that Hungary was not a free and independent country from 19 March 1944 to 2 May 1990: "We date the restoration of our country's self-determination, lost on the nineteenth day of March 1944, from the second day of May 1990, when the first freely elected organ of popular representation was formed", claiming this historical period as "foreign occupation". Moreover, a constitution's preamble argues that these decades "led to a state of moral decay", denying the cultural and scientific innovations and achievements of this time (it is worth mentioning here that, for example, movies of the 60s and 70s are known worldwide as belonging to the golden age of Hungarian cinema). However, according to the new Law, Hungarian "children and grandchildren will make Hungary great again". In addition to this, the new constitution shifts the entire responsibility for the crimes from the Hungarian ruling class to external powers and denies its participation, presenting Hungary as victims of oppression of the Nazi and Soviet aggression.

This historical narrative legislated in the constitution is actively supported through different channels, particularly cultural ones. For example, in 2002 the House of Terror was opened – the museum dedicated to the Nazi and Soviet occupations of Hungary and the victims of these regimes. This place was established by Fidesz "in order to commemorate these two bloody periods of Hungarian history". The museum consists of several floors, each of which have up to 14 rooms that present various acts and characteristics of the "terrorist dictatorships".

Thus, visitors can find the halls of the Arrow Cross Party, of Soviet propaganda, the Torture Chamber, the hall of 1956 revolution and the like. However, what is interesting is that only three rooms out of thirty focus on Nazi occupation; two more rooms are dedicated to the Double Occupation and the change of the regime (“Changing clothes”); all other halls are about Soviet occupation and its horrors and crimes. Thus, the space of the museum is unbalanced in terms of the representation of two oppressions and much more place is given to the Soviet occupation than to the Nazi one. Moreover, outside the building is surrounded by the photos of the victims of the Soviet terror, particularly, the activists, who died during the 1956 revolution.

Another attempt to victimize Hungarians is the memorial to the German occupation that should be built in the Freedom Square of Budapest. According to the intention of the sculptors Miklos Melocco and Gyorgy Benedek, the monument will have two figures: the aggressive and strong Imperial Eagle that represents the Nazis and the tranquil and peaceful Archangel Gabriel that represents Hungarians. However, some of the Hungarian public figures as well as 39 percent of Hungarians, according to the poll (Hann, 2014), claim that this monument falsifies history. “This monument is an outright lie... [t]hat's a historical falsification”, Hungarian philosopher Agnes Heller claims (Newton, 2014). A similar opinion was expressed by historian Krisztian Ungvary: “It is very wrong to try and pretend that both victim and murderer were on the same side. But this is what is being done” (Ungváry, 2014). Thus, the idea of the monument is to relieve the responsibility from the Hungarian elites who in fact played an important role in the Nazi crimes and shift it to the Germans, presenting Hungarians as victims of the external power.

As such, this historical narrative, which is actively promoted and imposed by Fidesz through various cultural and political channels, falsifies history and presents Hungarians as eternal victims of oppressions that led to “moral decay” of the country in more than 40 years. It aims to provide Hungarians with a positive historical identity in order to shape and reinforce

their national identity by shifting all the blame to the Nazi and Soviet terror to the external ‘others’ (Lowenthal, 1996). Furthermore, it claims that Hungary deserves a better future and that the country should be once again great and powerful, as it was before the occupations. This to a certain extent determines people’s practices and aims to provoke them to action (Lowenthal 1985; Trouillot 1995).

Hungarian National Film Fund

Political transformations provided by Fidesz also effected the sphere of cinema and filmmaking. In January 2011 Andrew G. Vajna – an American film producer with Hungarian roots who emigrated in 1956 - was appointed as head of the government commission on the Hungarian cinema and aimed to create a new system of state supported filmmaking. The same year the new Hungarian National Film Fund (MNF) replaced the Hungarian Motion Picture Public Foundation (MKKA) at his behest. According to the MNF official website, “the fund is a public institution governed by Hungarian law and its activities”, which have an aim “to support production and distribution of Hungarian films and co-productions that provide art and entertainment for moviegoers and achieving significant success both domestically and internationally” (MNF, 2014). The Film Fund provides professional and financial support in the production, promotion and distribution of movies, the amount of which depends on the fulfillment of the cultural and production criteria specified in Act II of 2004 on Motion Picture (with the latest modifications of December, 2013). Thus, according to this act, a cultural content of the movie should possess a significant “historical, mythological or religious aspect” and present “Hungarian or European traditions and lifestyles or promote certain elements of these traditions and lifestyles” or “present certain significant Hungarian or European values” (Act II on Motion Pictures, 2004:43). The document indicates these values as “...cultural diversity, respect for cultural traditions, respect for the institution of the family, solidarity, equality, protection of minorities, tolerance, environmental protection” (Act II on Motion Pictures, 2004:43). The

decision on state funding of the films is made by the committee, which consists of five Hungarian film professionals.

The changes that happened in the Hungarian film industry and the establishment of the Hungarian National Film Fund received contradictory responses and comments from professionals. Since the MNF is the main funding institution of the film sector in the country, which is going to ‘supervise’ movies and ‘double-check their progress’, according to Vajna’s statements (Kozlov, 2011), the main line of criticism was aimed at the lack of independence and freedom. Thus, for example, the head of Hungarian Filmmakers Association Bela Tarr mentioned that this Film Fund creates a “single-channel grant system” instead of a “multi-channel system of subsidies” and “winds up forever the self-governance of our profession” (Holdsworth, 2012).

In order to analyze the perception of the contemporary movies by the Hungarian audience and examine the way political messages are decoded by the spectators, two films funded by the Hungarian government were chosen. The first one is “The Notebook” (“A Nagy Fuzet”), which is the only film released movie funded by MNF at this time. The second film is “The Exam” (“A Vizsga”), which was funded by Magyar Televizio (Hungarian National Television Company owned by government). The promotion of both movies was done by Magyar Filmunio – a company that was founded by the MKKA in 1992. Since 2011 it operates as an International Division of the MNF.

“The Notebook” (“A Nagy Fuzet”)

“The Notebook” is a drama made by Hungarian film and theater director and screenwriter Janos Szasz in co-production with Germany, France and Austria. The movie premiered in July 2013 at the Karlovy Vary Film Festival, and was released in Hungary in September 2013. “The Notebook” is the screen adaptation of the novel written in 1986 by Agota Kristof – a Swiss writer of Hungarian origin, who emigrated in 1956 after the suppression of the

anti-communist uprising. Together with the books “The Proof” (1987) and “The Third Lie” (1991) written by the same author “The Notebook” constitute a trilogy.

The film won several awards at the Karlovy Vary Film Festival and Haifa International Film Festival. Overall, it was shown in more than 15 different Film Festivals in different countries, such as La Rochelle International Film Festival in France, Hamburg Film Festival, London Film Festival and so on. In addition, “The Notebook” presented Hungarian cinema in the category Best Foreign Language Film at the 86th Academy Awards in 2014.

The action of the movie takes place at the end of the Second World War in a village on the Hungarian border. The story is about thirteen-year-old twin siblings, who were forced by their parents to live with their maternal grandmother, someone who did not have any connection with her daughter for 20 years. The Grandmother’s hostility is carried over to the twins, whom she treats with disdain and cruelty. Thus, surrounded by the harshness and aggressiveness of the War, their grandparent and other people in the village, the brothers decide to train themselves to overcome cold, hunger and any other feelings in order to survive. As such, the only person in the village with whom the twins manage to establish a friendly relationship is a girl named Harelip, who is raped to death at the end of the movie by the soldiers of the Soviet army. During the time when the siblings lived in the village, they were writing down everything they learned, saw, heard and did in the diary – the Notebook.

On the international scene the film was positively received by the most critics. “It is a crime that “The Notebook” wasn't nominated for the Oscar... [it is] one of the greatest and most unique World War II films in history”, Joshua Handler believes. According to her, “The film itself is a testament to the resilience of children in the face of great evil. During World War II, entire countries fell due to weakness and fear. In a short period of time, the twins conquered what many countries failed to conquer: fear of pain, death, and evil” (Handler, 2014). A similar opinion was expressed by Taylor Sinople - cinematographer, writer, and film historian, who

argues that “...this isn’t a story of children hiding from the Nazi’s and escaping battle. Their ability to survive the war has nothing to do with the threat of a bullet but of starvation, cold, and capture...This unique perspective illustrates a broader perspective of war – it’s not the axis or the allies that are the enemy but war itself.” (Sinople, 2013) Rob Dickie concludes his review of “The Notebook” for the Glasgow Film Festival stating that “[d]eath is arbitrary and suffering is universal” (Dickie, 2014). Accordingly, the movie was perceived by critics in a universal sense as a film that shows horrors of the war and its effects on both children and adults.

“The Exam” (“A vizsga”)

“The Exam” is a historical thriller directed by Peter Bergendy. It was released in Hungary in October 2011 with the tagline “Don't trust anyone. Don't trust yourself”. The director of “The Exam” won the Gold Hugo at the Chicago International Film Festival in 2012 for this movie in New Directors Competition. The film was shown in various Film Festivals, including Karlovy Vary Film Festival, Portland International Film Festival, Toronto European Union Film Festival and others.

The action of the movie takes place in Budapest in 1957 right after the suppression of the uprising of 1956. The focus of the movie is spy games and the issue of double agents and secret police. After the events of 1956, the State Security Department decide to test the loyalty of the agents of the system and ‘crosses their paths’ in the exams trying to figure out who can be trusted in the future. “The Exam” is designed in a way that the whole truth about what is happening reveals in the last minutes of the film. The story tells about the teacher Jung, who also working as an agent and watching the spy Marco. However, on Christmas Eve, Jung is placed under the State Security Department’s exam without realizing it. He is also being watched by higher-level agent Marco. Everything goes well until Jung is visited by his lover Eva – the activist and the freedom fighter of the 1956 rebellion. Marco becoming doubtful about Jung’s loyalty. However, by intensifying surveillance, Marco becomes aware that she is an agent, too. He

becomes more and more interested in the story of the couple, and begins to sympathize with them. On the final day of surveillance, when the decision is to be made, Marco tries to protect the couple and gives them opportunity to escape. However, in some hours they all meet again in the office of the Chief, where Jung and Eva provide a record of their last conversation with Marco. The Chief claims that Marco did not pass the exam and he is losing his job.

As well as “The Notebook”, this movie got mostly positive responses from critiques. It was described as enjoyable, engrossing and intriguing. Moreover, it was common among critiques to compare “The Exam” with other spy films, such as “The Lives of Others” directed by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck. For example, in the report to the 2013 Cluj Film Festival Sheila Seacroft argues that “it [“The Exam”] covers similar themes to ‘The Lives of Others’, of love and personal betrayal under a communist dictatorship, and the point at which decent people cannot help but allow human feelings to outweigh duty” (Seacroft, 2013). Similar idea about the movie was expressed by the other critique M. Ferdinand, who points out that “‘The Exam’ shows how oppressive regimes tend to eat their own tails by focusing on loyalty tests that were mandated for even the most zealously pro-Communist operatives in government” (Ferdinand, 2012). Comparing “The Exam” to “The Lives of Others”, which focusing on the spies of Nazi, critics to some extent compare the two regimes and their common problems. Hence, the main idea of “The Exam” is seen by them as more universal and typical for ‘dictatorship’ regimes.

Perception of “The Notebook” and “The Exam” movies by the Hungarian audience: decoding of political messages and historical narratives.

Historical films play an important role in people’s perception of history and their historical identity. Interpreting different historical events, these movies shape certain myths about the past by the reconstruction of historical facts and its falsification. Justin Smith (2008) considered historical movies as “the repository of current feelings of a society” arguing that they

refer more to the actual situation than to the real historical events and, thus, can tell more about the current time than the past.

The Hungarian historical films “The Notebook” and “The Exam” also shape certain historical images that are more relevant to current events in Hungary than the true historical past. Although the MKKA and the Hungarian National Film Fund as well as its promotion division Magyar Filmunio that were actively involved in the production and distribution of the chosen films, aimed to enhance the cultural legitimacy of the Hungarian cinema on the international level (apparently within the concept of the restoration of ‘great Hungary’ and increasing its moral level ‘delayed’ during two occupations), these movies fit well with the current policies pursued by Fidesz. Undoubtedly, “The Notebook” and “The Exam” are in many respects the universal films, which refer to the past shared by many countries during the war and common for spy issues of post-communist countries. However, this paper will argue that despite these films universal claims and proposition of human values (as, for instance, it was presented by critics), “The Notebook” and “The Exam” primary relate to the supporting of the existing Hungarian historical narrative about the two occupations and victimization of Hungarians in the face of Nazi and Soviet aggressors.

In order to support this argument, the perception of “The Notebook” and “The Exam” by the Hungarian audience will be analyzed. Firstly, the next subchapters will focus on the attitude of the spectators towards the historical narrative and the accuracy of its representation in the movies. Then it will move to their understanding of the films’ main ideas and messages that the scriptwriters and/or authors wanted to convey using a certain historical period. In addition, the perception of the main characters and their role in the movies will be explored.

Representation of the history in the movies and its perception by the viewers

Despite the fact that “The Notebook” and “The Exam” are historical movies and the stories they tell take place in a certain historical period (the end of the World War II for “The

Notebook” and the Christmas Eve 1957 for “The Exam”), their historical narration was taken for granted by all interviewed respondents regardless of their social and cultural background and political views. While talking about the movies, no one raised the issue of history and the historical interpretations in the films themselves. More attention was paid to the plot, the main characters, visual effects and the atmosphere of the movies. It can be assumed that this happened due to the unconscious, background understanding and perception of the history of these periods that has become common sense because of its constant representation through different cultural channels and mediators. Since respondents do not possess any life experience of the war or communist period due to their age, one of the most accessible ways to obtain some knowledge concerning these periods is to use these channels and mediators that represents history in a favorable light for the ruling party.

However, the questions of the interviewer about the historical periods presented in the movies provoked respondents into some considerations on this issue. Reflecting on the historical narrative of “The Notebook”, most of the interviewees agreed that it was “true”, “accurate” and “right”. However, talking about the truthfulness of the historical interpretation, some of them were referring to the two Hungarian occupations and aggression on the part of Nazis and Soviets. Hence, the “accurate” representation for them is the representation that coincides with the one imposed by the ruling party. This fact shows that “preferred meaning” of the message has become its “preferred reading” (Hall 1973[1980]). For example, the following opinion was expressed by an office worker of the commercial sector Szilard (26 years old):

I think in terms of history the film is pretty balanced. It takes place in 1944-1945, when Hungary changed the occupier: before it was Germans and after it was Russians. And now we hate both. We had Nazi and then we had Soviet communists. Both of them were bad for us.

A similar statement was made by Sandor, a 27-year-old scriptwriter on a commercial TV channel. The historical narrative did not provoke him to question its truthfulness. The representation of it was accepted by him due to its typicality in existing Hungarian rhetoric:

There is a common agreement on what happened in the past, what was there. They [movies] just confirming historical tradition. They didn't generate debates on history at all. They didn't argue against or for it.

Furthermore, some of the respondents (Marta, Eva, and Gabor, two of whom getting PhD degrees now in Film Studies and in Liberal Arts, and another possess MA degree in history) expressed the similar position with the critics and claimed the “timelessness” of “The Notebook”. According to them, this movie does not relate to the certain country and certain historical period of this country, but to the war in general. The war was a period of suffering and grief; so, it is universal and transnational film. However, talking about the end of the movie, when Soviet tanks entered the village, the same respondents extrapolated these episodes to the Hungarian reality and developed the theme of the Soviet occupation. Thus, the period of the end of the war and Nazi occupation were more silenced by them in accordance with the period of the Soviet occupation. As Marta mentioned after, it was due to the fact that Nazi period of the Hungarian history is more controversial for her, than the Soviet one, and its representation imposed by Fidesz raises some questions and doubts:

Everybody knows that what was happening in 1956, for example, but 1944-1945 is much more controversial....Government wants to say that only Germans were mistaken, the Holocaust is only their fault. It is not true....We were a free country and we joined without any occupation. That's a problem.

In contrast with “The Notebook”, while discussing “The Exam” some key words about the perception of this historical period such as “trauma of communism”, “traumatic historical era” appeared before more concrete questions about history were asked. Thus, it can be assumed that it was easier for the respondents to evaluate and reflect on the period of Soviet occupation, as it was with the some respondents in case of “The Notebook” movie. Similar to “The Notebook” discussion, most of the respondents agreed on the truthfulness of the representation of the historical period shown in the movie; and similarly, talking about an “accurate” and “balanced” interpretation of history, they mostly compared it to the historical narration

supported by Fidesz. For example, Andras a manager of a commercial company, argues that the historical narrative of the movie is not only truthful, but it is also very precise:

The director catch the real atmosphere of the communism. Everything was a lie in this film, like during the communism. You can't trust people during that time at all

However, two out of ten respondents (Marta and Eva) suggested that the historical representation in the movie is “one-sided” and biased. They argued that the movie focuses only on negative characteristics of this period and again raises the topic of secret police and double agents without contributing new facts or generating debates about it. Moreover, Eva mentioned that both movies gave a greater consideration to the topic of Soviet occupation than the Nazi one:

Historically “The Exam” is a bit one-sided, because it takes the period right after the revolution, but everything wasn't like they show that time...It is like in the Terror Museum. You see only Soviet terror, and there is nothing about Nazi occupation. These movies talks only about Soviet occupation too.

Thus, before the specific questions about the historical narrative in the movies were asked, it did not cause any doubts and questions and, in fact, remains unnoticed by the respondents due to its total acceptance. None of the respondents questioned its veracity. The routine and continual reminding of the two occupations and victimization of the Hungarian people shapes a certain historical ‘myth’, which maintains the power of the ruling party. The application of this stereotype to history became typical and habitual. Thus, the “preferred meaning” of the movies and their messages on historical narrative has become their “preferred reading” (Hall 1973[1980]). As such, “The Notebook” and “The Exam” reinforce the Hungarian historical narration, giving it further validation through reproduction. However, after the attention of the respondents was focused on this issue, most of them more readily opine on the topic of Soviet occupation than the Nazi one. They easily extrapolated the historical context of the movie to the reality and made judgments about it.

The main ideas of the movies and their messages to the audience

Another aspect of the perception of “The Notebook” and “The Exam”, on which this paper will focus, is the respondents’ interpretations of the messages and basic ideas of the directors, which they put into their movies. Reflecting on this issue, it was easier for the respondents to deal with “The Exam” and to figure out what the director wanted to say to their audience. The perception of the main idea of this movie was unambiguous and did not motivate much deliberation from the interviewees. Following the tagline of the movie - “Don't trust anyone. Don't trust yourself” - most respondents suggested that the main idea of this film is that during the communist period of the history you could not trust anyone and you could not be sure of anything. Moreover, most of the respondents totally accepted this idea and did not question it. For instance, Kristian – a 27-year-old office worker, argues that “The Exam” shows the nature of communism:

The message is that this was the worst in the communism. You cannot trust someone: your son, your family – everybody could be double agents, you never know. It is like in Korea nowadays.

Sandor expressed a similar opinion, but with a more direct reference to the Hungarian context and the historical period in which the movie takes place. He points out that the movie provide the answer to the question about the situation in the country after the suppression of the rebellion:

The film questions what happened after 1956: most of the people that time gave up with their dreams and become double-agents

Some of the respondents (Zoltan, Andras) have a more positive perception of the director’s message. According to them, this movie is about people who can stay honest and brave even under the pressure of a dictatorial regime, and that even in “bad times” there might be the good people. However, extending this idea, they reflect more on “bad times” than on “good people”.

Reflections on the main idea of “The Notebook” were more diverse and the identification of what precisely it meant caused problems for the interviewees. For example, two respondents - a 29-year-old musician Zoltan and 26-year-old service worker Ester - told that they could not identify the author’s message because, according to them, the movie is too complicated and multilayered. Some other respondents suggested that “The Notebook” makes more universal claims about the war, survival and suffering of people during the war. This perception goes in line with the opinion of the critics, given above. However, extending their ideas these respondents directly or indirectly referred to the issues of the occupation and the lack of freedom. For example, reflecting on the idea of “The Notebook”, Andras suggested that it is about survival techniques, which are incomprehensible for the generation that grew up “in a free country” with freedom of speech (however, the lack of freedoms, particularly, freedom of speech, is linked more to the issue of the occupation than war):

Maybe this movie is about survival techniques. What should I do in this situation? The whole life I lived in a free country without any real fear, I always can say my opinion free, so we can't imagine it. Maybe this is the message that there was a period in history, when the most important was only survival...The general message is never repeat it, be careful.

Two other respondents (Szilard and Kristian) considered the idea of the film in a more focused and less transnational sense. They supposed that “The Notebook” is a movie about Hungary and Hungarian history, more precisely, about the moment, when Hungarians “changed [their] occupier”. Moreover, reflecting on the main idea of “The Notebook”, both respondents claimed that the period of Hungarian history presented in the movie as the most dramatic, because it ruined the hope of freedom and only worsened the life of Hungarians. Hence, the Soviet occupation was recognized by them in a more negative way than the Nazi one from the very beginning. Such an opinion, for example, was expressed by Szilard, an office worker of the commercial sector:

This movie is about Hungarian history and, probably, the most sad period in Hungarian history, when it changed the occupier, when our dreams of promised freedom died and everything become much-much worse.

Thus, there are some common tendencies in the understanding of the main ideas of “The Notebook” and “The Exam”. Firstly, in the both cases, respondents directly or indirectly were referring to Hungary and to the two occupations of Hungary (even claiming universality and transnational character of the movies). In an attempt to simplify the statements of the respondents, the main theme of both the movies was to show the dire circumstances experienced by ordinary Hungarians during the war, especially the last year in which the “The Notebook” is set, and during the years of communism. Thus, the perception of the movies’ meaning is to some extent related to the problem of the two Hungarian occupations. In addition, according to the understanding of the films’ ideas, the respondents tend to consider Soviet occupation in a more negative way than Nazi one.

Perception of the main characters of the movies

The last aspect of the perception of “The Notebook” and “The Exam”, which this paper will explore, is the respondents’ attitude towards the characters of the movies. What is common for both movies in this sense is that most of the respondents assumed that there were no positive characters in these films. According to the interviewees, every movies’ figure had something unpleasant in their personality. However, some of the characters were perceived in less negative way than others, and got greater or lesser justification from the respondents. This justification was largely given to the figures presented in the movies as victims and sufferers.

Thus, in “The Notebook” this is the case, for example, of the Jewish shoemaker killed by Nazis, the harelip girl raped by Soviets, and the Hungarian soldier who ran away from the front and died in the forest. Additionally, while the figures of the shoemaker and the girl were perceived by the most of the respondents only as a movie characters, the figure of the Hungarian soldier was extrapolated to the real historical figure and was justified not from the movie plot, but from real life and historical conditions. This fact shows that the perception of this character and his historical analogue goes in line with the historical narrative imposed by Fidesz about the

victimization of Hungarians and that the movie supports this historical narrative. Consequently, viewers can make parallels with the past and refer to it in cases in which they see the similarities between their perception of the movie figure and the real historical figure. Thus, for example, the respondent Zoltan assumed that the Hungarian soldier was not negative character even despite the fact that he was doing unacceptable things. According to him, Hungarian soldier was blameless victim of German aggression:

The Hungarian soldier wasn't bad, he just was afraid of the Germans.

The similar opinion was expressed by respondent Ester, who suggested that the figure of the Hungarian soldier and his actions during the wartime were “representative” in the movie. Reflecting on this issue, she also shifted the responsibility for the actions of this character on external powers:

He [the Hungarian soldier] was ok. It represents this historical period well. We did things because we were afraid of bigger nations. I think that it was very representative.

Another character of “The Notebook”, who encouraged respondents to reflection, was the German officer, who stayed at the house of the twins’ grandmother from time to time. Most of the respondents agreed that he was a negative rather than positive figure in the movie, in spite of his protection and help offered to the siblings. Referring to the fact that the German officer was presented in the movie (as well as in the book, on which the film is based) as homosexual and pedophile, respondents assumed that he supported the twins due to his own interests and aims, but not the interest of the children. Such an opinion was expressed, for example, by Adrian, a student:

The only thing I remember about the German officer that he was pedophile and gay, this is why he was so kind and nice with boys.... But, maybe it is more interesting than typical German soldier.

Moreover, reflecting of the figure of the German officer, some respondents were referring to the specific ‘stereotype’ of the German soldiers reproduced by the movies about the

World War II, and argued that in “The Notebook” the German officer is not “typical”. Revealing this “stereotype”, the interviewees claimed that usually Germans are presented in a more “masculine, aggressive” and “dangerous” way. However, according to the respondents, in “The Notebook” the German officer was “more silent and polite”. Thus, Kristian, for example, suggested that due to this atypical representation this figure does not cause strong negative emotions:

The German soldier in the movie is not so negative as general opinion...He was less typical. He was more silent and polite.

Thus, the figure of the German officer in “the Notebook” was perceived by the respondents contradictorily. On the one hand, most of them assumed that he was not completely negative figure in the movie: he was acting as an attentive protector of the siblings in the movie. However, he was not positive, according to the interviewees, because the reasons of such a behavior were rooted in his own interests, rather than in a desire to help. As such, this representation is also comparable with the Hungarian historical narrative spread by Fidesz about the Nazi oppression and their ulterior motives and actions that were for the sake of their interests while “helping” Hungary to survive.

The only characters of “The Notebook”, who were perceived by the respondents in an unambiguously negative way were the Soviet soldiers who appeared at the end of the movie. Everyone assumed that these characters were antagonists. As well as with the figure of the German officer, the interviewees referred to the specific stereotype of the Soviet soldiers as barbarians and marauders. However, unlike the German character, the Soviet ones totally fulfill this stereotype, as it was assumed by the respondents. In spite of different attitude towards this representation (for example, Eva and Marta took it in a more ironic way, while Zoltan and Ester took it more seriously), nobody question its truthfulness. Most of the interviewees extrapolated the figures of the Soviet soldiers on the real historical ones and changed the topic of the

discussion from the perception of the movie figures to the reflections on Soviet occupation. In addition, special emphasis was placed on the fact that they came under the guise of liberators and occupied Hungary. In the eyes of the respondents, the promise of freedom that accompanied the liberation of Hungary by the Red Army gave way to yet another, worse, occupation. Such an opinion was expressed by Andras:

The Russians raped the girl. That's popular question in Hungary, because after the Red Army won, they say that this is the freedom, they liberate Hungary. That was official, but that was an occupation... That was the true: Russian soldiers liked girls and usually didn't ask. So, if they found the girl it was not good for the girl.

As such, most of the respondents were agreed in their opinions on the Soviet soldiers as negative figures and made the direct parallels between movie figures and real historical ones. Moreover, some of the interviewees made clear statements about Soviet occupation and their unambiguous perception of it as a much worse episode in Hungarian history than Nazi occupation. This representation of the Soviet occupation and Soviet soldiers corresponds with the positioning of Fidesz party as anti-communist and anti-Soviet one and with the policy pursued by it.

The perception of the characters of “The Exam” movie was more consentaneous among respondents; they all took a similar position on these characters. As mentioned above, interviewees suggested that there were no positive characters in this movie because, as it turned out, all of them were agents of the secret police. However, as well as in the case of “The Notebook”, there were some characters, who were perceived by the interviewees in a more positive way than the other figures.

Thus, most of the respondents argue that the perception of the main characters was changing with the development of the plot, and characters who were spied on were perceived as more positive than the agents of the secret police. For example, such an opinion was expressed by Kristian, who claimed that he sympathized with Jung and Eva, while he did not know that

they were spies. By the end of the movie he changed his opinion and began to sympathize with Marco, who showed less loyalty to the Soviet system, although was also a spy:

At the beginning you think that the Jung and Eva are good and all others are bad. But then it turns out that they are bad and Marco is not so bad, because he is more conscious and not so conformist to the system.

The view expressed by Kristian was the most common and typical opinion given by the interviewed respondents. Another common aspect of the perception of “The Exam” characters is that with the appearance of sympathy with Marco, the respondents tend to justify the fact that he is a secret agent as well as Jung and Eva. The most common ways of this justification are claims that he “did not have a choice” and he was “under pressure of the system”. Most of the interviewees appreciated his desire to break the rules and to express disagreement with the system. For example, Szilard argues that Marco was a secret agent because there was no other choice but to be a spy (however, Jung and Eva did not receive such justifications for their actions):

Marco just didn't have a choice. Nobody had a choice, because the power didn't gave them a choice. From historical point of view, it is pretty fair piece

Hence, in perceiving the main characters of “The Exam”, respondents tend to justify figures who express less loyalty to the Soviet regime “based on spy system” and to make them the victims of this regime. Contradictory opinions or “polysemy” of readings about the characters of this film were not presented by the interviewees.

As mentioned above, the victimization of Hungarians and their representation as blameless sufferers of external forces and occupations is integral to the concept of the Hungarian historical narrative supported by Fidesz in order to provide Hungarians with a positive historical identity. The perception of the movies by the interviewed respondents shows that this narrative is totally accepted by the Hungarian youth and in most cases goes unnoticed. Despite the fact that

some respondents referred more directly to Hungarian history, the others were more implicit in these references, the “polysemy” of interpretations was not presented, which means that all the respondents perceive the movies in a similar way. The representation of the historical narrative, the main ideas of the movies, and the representation of the characters that have analogues in the actual historical past were not questioned by the respondents. Thus, the “preferred meanings” encoded in “The Notebook” and “The Exam” have become the “preferred readings” due to the fact that they were taken for granted by the respondents. Reflecting on the three main topics that were discussed during the interview (the historical narrative, the main idea and the characters), respondents made parallels with the actual past and referred to it, because, according to them, these issues were “accurately” represented in the movies. Moreover, it was clear from the interviews that it is easier for the most of the informants to deal with the Soviet period of Hungarian history than with the Nazi period. For example, the idea of “The Exam” did not give the respondents any reason to doubt and was negatively perceived, as well as the figures of the Soviets in the both movies, while the German character in “The Notebook” and the historical representation of the last years of the war were labeled as “contradictory” by some respondents (particularly by the respondents who possess higher level of education, or education which is related to the cultural sphere). Thus, the encoded historical narrative in “The Notebook” and “The Exam” is successfully and preferably for the ruling party decoded by the Hungarian audience and totally accepted.

Conclusions

This thesis paper was concerned with the viewer's interpretations of the Hungarian contemporary cinema and encoded in it messages. Particularly, it examines the manner in which the Hungarian historical narrative imposed by the government is supported through movies and perceived by Hungarian audiences. The case of the two films funded by the state were chosen for this purpose: "The Notebook" and "The Exam".

Since the production and the perception of the movies were considered here as different moments of the single communicative structure that also reproduce the power relations (Hall, 1973[1980]), the paper raises the issue of the producer of the existing Hungarian historical narrative and its further encoding in the cultural products, particularly, cinema. Following the Bourdieu's (1985; 1990) concept of symbolic power, this work shows that the Hungarian ruling party imposes its views in all spheres of human life through public institutions. One of the examples of this process is the Hungarian National Film Fund that in fact has become controlled by the government.

The work also reveals the essence of the Hungarian historical narrative addressed through the chosen movies to the audience. It shows that this historical narrative falsifies the actual historical past by presenting Hungarians as the blameless victims of the Nazi and Soviet occupations and by shifting all the responsibility for the horrors of these occupations to the external oppressors in order to provide Hungarians with the positive historical identity, which is closely connected to the national consciousness of the people (Lowenthal, 1996).

However, in the center of the thesis is the issue of the perception of "The Notebook" and "The Exam" by the Hungarian audience and the way this audience decoded messages of the movies encoded by the ruling party. The present thesis shows that these movies were perceived by Hungarian audience as being primarily concerned with the historical past of Hungary, despite

the films' universal claims. The analysis of the interviews demonstrates that the historical narrative was totally accepted by the Hungarian youth. Reflecting on the topics about the movies raised by the interviewer – the representation of history, the main idea of the movies and the attitude towards films' characters – respondents argued that from the historical point of view these movies were made in an accurate and fair manner. The discourse of the two Hungarian occupations and the victimization of Hungarians imposed by Fidesz was taken for granted and did not cause any questions about its truthfulness. Thus, all of the respondents share similar a position on the film's interpretation, demonstrating "preferred reading" of the encoded messages (Hall, 1973[1980]). In addition, the interviews revealed certain differences in the respondents' perception of the two occupations. It was much easier for most of them to deal with "The Exam" (in terms of the interpretation of the main idea and attitude towards characters), which concerns with the Soviet past, than with "The Notebook", whose story takes place during the last years of the Second World War. Some of interviewees claimed that the period of Nazi occupation for them is much more controversial than the Soviet one. While the Soviet period of Hungarian history is clearly and unambiguously negative and tragic, the period of Nazi occupation still causes some questions and doubts.

This thesis presents both theoretical and empirical contributions to the study of production and perception of media products. Using Hall's model and combining it with the theory on symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1990) it reveals the figure of the encoder of particular messages and shows how it uses various channels in order to spread its ideology and influences people's interpretations of the present and the past. It also applies this theoretical framework to the reality of contemporary Hungary and demonstrates the way Hungarian nationalist conservative party Fidesz uses cinema in order to impose a certain vision of Hungarian history.

In order to foster greater understanding, further studies on the production and perception of the messages in contemporary Hungarian cinema, particularly with movies funded

by the Hungarian National Film Fund, could address other stages of Hall's model of Encoding/Decoding and examine the actions people take in relation to the decoded messages. Another research direction is to extend the sample of the respondents and to analyze the way different social groups and classes in Hungary interpret the messages encoded in the films that received the state funding. Furthermore, the sample could be extended to the people of different nationalities and the comparative analysis of the perception of Hungarian and non-Hungarian audience of the movies could be made.

Appendix

Information about the respondents

Name	Age	Education	Occupation	Political position/ political party	Degree of nationalistic sentiments
Adrian	25	MA: Software Information Technology	Student	Conservative	High
Andras	29	BA, MA: Economics	Manager of a Commercial Company	Liberal	Medium
Ester	26	BA: Psychology	Service Worker	Conservative	High
Eva	28	BA, MA: Liberal Arts PhD: Film History (ELTE)	Works on a Commercial TV Channel	Social liberal	Low
Gabor	28	BA: Communication (ELTE) MA: History (ELTE) MA: Territorial development	Office Worker of the Commercial Sector	Liberal	Medium
Kristian	27	-	Office worker	LMP	Medium
Marta	27	BA: Liberal Arts; MA: Film Studies; MA: Aesthetics PhD: Aesthetics	Student	Social liberal	Low
Sandor	28	BA, MA: Liberal Arts (with the specialization in Film History and Film Theory)	Scriptwriter on a Commercial TV Channel	Liberal	Medium
Szilard	26	MA: International Business Law	Office Worker of the Commercial Sector	Liberal	Medium
Zoltan	29	High school	Musician	Fidesz	High

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