



Essay

# Coping with Permanent Liminality: Social Understanding and Action through Theatre in Late Communist Hungary

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**Abstract:** Theatre is the modern liminoid equivalent of ritual liminality, according to Victor Turner. It is also, like most arts, a Janus-faced phenomenon: on one hand, it is a way to systematically infect the public with mimetic desire and rivalry (this is the aspect emphasised, quite rightly, by Plato and René Girard); on the other, it also enables the public expression of views about the contemporary state of social and political life that otherwise would be difficult to speak about, or even censored. As an example, this article will turn to the 1970s in Hungary, when the communist regime had become much softened, though at the same time generated the impression, in everyone, that it would last forever. More concretely, it will first shortly present and analyse the quite unique story of the Kaposvár theatre, which during the decade changed, through a peculiar combination of 'liminal' factors, from a boring provincial spectacle to the number one theatrical event of the country, avidly followed by students and intellectuals, especially from the capital. An epilogue is devoted to the masterly article by Elemér Hankiss, the most important and influential intellectual living then in Hungary who became, for a time, the consensus president of the Hungarian Television after the collapse of communism. It exposes the infantilising character of communist power by analysing a series of theatrical performances staged in a leading Budapest theatre in the late 1970s. Infantile adults are evidently caught in a permanent liminality, so Hankiss shows how theatre indeed was a main instrument in diagnosing the worst aspect of life under communist rule, its permanent liminality, reinforcing uncertainty and hopelessness.

**Keywords:** liminality; theatre; communism; Hungary; work ethic; totalitarianism



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## 1. The Theatre: From Liminal to Liminoid and Back Again

The term liminality, which by now has become a master concept in the social sciences, was introduced first by Van Gennep ([1909] 1960) and then, fully, by Victor Turner (1967, 1969), through the study of rites of passage. As the term liminality is now widely used, it does not require a lengthy introduction (see Szakolczai 2009; Szakolczai and Thomassen 2019; and Thomassen 2014, for details). Rites of passage mark, help, or celebrate individual or collective passages through the cycle of life or of nature and share a three-fold sequential structure. They start with rites of separation; continue with the middle and central phase, with the 'passage' itself involving a genuine performance or trial; and end with the rites of re-aggregation, celebrating the successful completion of the transition. The middle stage implies an actual passing through the threshold that marks the boundary between two phases, and the term 'liminality' was introduced to characterise this passage.

The values of the term are manifold. It is particularly versatile, combining in one word a series of concerns that otherwise are disconnected. First, liminality was introduced in the study of transitions or passages. Second, instead of considering a period of transition as the move from a stable state to another, liminality conceives of such transitions as being transformative. Third, liminality offers a new way to understand the dynamics of a crisis. Every crisis is a liminal moment, implying the loss of a stable state and the search for new stability; however, not every transition produces a crisis: it is only due to certain modalities of the events that a transitional state becomes a crisis. The fourth point concerns the liminal

void. The void is the starting point of any liminal situation; liminality always implies, at the start, death and destruction. This was emphasised by Arnold van Gennep, who asserted that the most paradigmatic examples of liminality are funerary rites, while Victor Turner rather celebrated the creative and innovative aspects of liminality. Liminality is a kind of 'death situation', involving a void experience; therefore, it is most anguishing, requiring particular attention and care. Finally, liminality captures in-betweenness, in every possible sense: time or space, or a short instance or a lasting condition. Thus, beyond the classical reading offered by van Gennep and Turner, a temporary liminal moment under certain circumstances can be all but permanent. The term has special affinity with the East-Central European region, in general, and especially for the period of Communism, as Communist regimes maintained themselves by perpetuating the liminal conditions generated by world wars, making them in this way permanent (Horvath and Thomassen 2008; Szakolczai 2009).<sup>1</sup>

Rites of passage do not simply have a cognitive-representative function, the way Durkheim and later Lévi-Strauss characterised rituals, but involve an in-depth transformative impact on reality, through emotionality. As such rituals disappeared in the modern world,<sup>2</sup> Turner argued that there—here, now, with us—liminal phenomena no longer exist, being replaced by liminoid or liminal-like processes. Prominent among such phenomena is theatre, as he programmatically argued in a book title (*From Ritual to Theatre*).<sup>3</sup>

Yet, apart from the fact that, arguably, the modern world is full of genuinely liminal and not just 'liminoid' phenomena—as an example, one can evoke travel, which at the same time is a powerful metaphor for the modern condition—the theatre itself had a long-standing and crucial real presence, and effect, in the modern world. In a way, Turner certainly was right: the difference between liminal and liminoid holds; a real wedding is a performative speech act, if one says 'I am', they legally become a wife or a husband, while a wedding in a theatre is just a play, but, still, theatrical presentations, and the presence of theatre as a social practice, have been major factors in forming and transforming social life since many centuries and—indeed, arguably—were a major force in the very formation of modernity (Szakolczai 2013). Even further, if we extend the meaning of liminality to cover large-scale real-world events, like wars, revolutions, and other socio-political or socio-economic crises, then theatre, as a social practice, can be used as a genuine social indicator.

In terms of its real-world presence, and effects, theatre can be said to be Janus-faced: on one hand, it is a way to systematically infect the public with mimetic desire and rivalry (this is the aspect emphasised, quite rightly, by Plato, in *Republic* or *Laws*, and also René Girard (2004)); on the other, it also enables views about the contemporary state of social and political life to be expressed that otherwise would be difficult to speak about, or even censored. Thus—in a similar way to cinema or, actually, desire itself—it can be said to be the most 'conservative' artistic practice, supporting the establishment, while on the other, it is a particularly 'revolutionary'. The contrast between these two aspects is not merely a theoretical issue but, under certain conditions—which could be called the permanent liminality of a 'grey tyranny'—can be particularly real or acute, and these conditions can bring forth theatrical performances producing a unique kind of cathartic effect.<sup>4</sup>

In our days, when not only theatre but also cinema has lost any meaningful social or political relevance, it is difficult even to imagine the possible socio-political significance of theatrical performances. Yet, in hindsight, recalling that Shakespeare, Molière, and Goethe were easily the most important and influential figures of modern English, French, and German culture and that each were primarily playwrights could give some indication about such significance of theatre in the not-so-distant, modern, historical times.

This article deals with the striking rise to prominence of the Gergely Csiky Theatre of Kaposvár in the 1970s and 1980s in Communist Hungary—a phenomenon which could be called comet-like, except that it did not fade away after a short time of brilliance, and which indeed was called a 'phenomenon', and in the non-trivial sense of the word. The first book devoted to this theme (Mihályi 1984)<sup>5</sup> was entitled 'The Kaposvár-Phenomenon'<sup>6</sup> in the specific sense that it was truly phenomenal, indeed a phenomenal success—a genuine, and

astonishing, real-world Cinderella story. Out of a boring provincial outlet, arguably the worst theatre in the country (Mihályi 1984, pp. 19, 61, 63), in hardly more than 3–4 years, the Kaposvár theatre became the leading spectacle in the country, staging performances to which intellectuals and especially students flocked from all around the country. What happened, and what was its exact significance?

This article will show that, under the very special conditions of a consolidated, grey totalitarianism, where the rude and oppressive application of brute force has long since been replaced by a boring, drab, everyday exercise of routine power by an apparatus (Horvath and Szokolczai 1991, 1992) or in a kind of permanent liminal situation, a theatrical company might turn its own marginal, and liminoid, status into a creative ‘liminal hotspot’ (Greco and Stenner 2017) that can, if not challenge, then at least, expose and in this way, help to undermine the intolerable permanent liminality of the ruling regime. This is also because it can reveal, in public, how unaccepted forms of conduct have become standard and everyday, thus making audiences face this situation and the in-depth degradation of everyone around, not excluding themselves, in their own lives. For these reasons, beyond presenting a concrete historical case, this article will argue that, given acute contemporary permanent liminality, this has relevance in the present.

## 2. Why Kaposvár? The Relevance of the Phenomenon

For those who then lived in Hungary and who were not ready, or not yet forced, to resign themselves to the utter boredom and meaninglessness of everyday existence under the late Communist regime, the Kaposvár phenomenon had truly unparalleled significance. This is not an exaggeration nor a matter of sheer nostalgia, rather genuine ‘social data’, a given that requires a sociological–theoretical explanation. In the mid-1970s in Hungary, overt acts of repression were quite rare—although they did occasionally happen—and one could express in private, among friends, any opinion. Still, life remained boring and ugly, hardly offering any meaningful perspective, and the truth about our condition, especially the absence of freedom, could not be uttered publicly. As a telling example for such a sense of hopelessness, powerlessness, and paralysis, the May 1982 issue of *Mozgó Világ*, a main semi-opposition journal, published as an appendix a sheet onto which Péter Esterházy, already a major novelist, simply copied, by hand, the entire text of Géza Ottlik’s *School on the Border*, implying that he, like all of us, had nothing better to do.

It was into this desert, or liminal void, that the Kaposvár phenomenon truly imploded, as these theatrical performances rendered publicly evident, and in a particularly genuine, truthful, and attractive way, what otherwise could not have been uttered, couched in metacommunication, which could not be directly sanctioned (Koltai 2003, p. 8). So, it was not surprising that ‘people’—artists, intellectuals, and especially university students—rushed to their performances, whenever they got a chance.

## 3. Some Background: The Relevance of Communism

As the ‘Kaposvár phenomenon’ emerges out of a particularly boring theatrical setting in Communist Hungary, in the 1960–1970s, it seems to merit little interest, except for two reasons.

First, the communist countries (those behind the former Iron Curtain, the countries of ‘existing socialism’, ‘People’s Democracies’, whatever name we assign to them) fancied themselves as the avantgarde of the world, and critical–Marxist avantgarde intellectuals, from Sartre to Lukács, seconded them in this for a very long time. While hardly anyone now supports such an idea—though such volte-face provoked precious little reckoning in most previous supporters—this article would argue that, in a specific and by no means irrelevant sense, they truly were a kind of avantgarde for our world, showing up the face of the future in which we now all live. This specific sense is permanent liminality: a situation in which nothing is stable; nothing is clear; and everything is changing all the time without anybody having a clear sense of what is happening and why, or where we are going, so one is living continuously under anguishing uncertainty. Of course, the two modalities of permanent

liminality were quite different: if a way to characterise our present, and its unacceptability, is the revealing idea of ‘cut-throat competition’ (after all, are we all really supposed to be living, following the dictates of economic theory, as little better than criminals? Is this truly a necessary fact of life, especially in a modern, liberal, democratic, enlightened world?), the permanent liminality of communism was a world of utter boredom. In that world, people were certainly not competing with themselves, in fact were hardly allowed to do anything except perform routine acts required of them. If anybody wanted to do something unusual—whatever, by no means politically chancy—they were immediately stopped by their superiors who claimed that if this had been beneficial, they would have for sure thought about it and by friends, colleagues, anybody around, saying why bother, as nothing matters, nothing can be changed anyway—especially because they were afraid that such novelty could upset the petty compromises by which they secured a degree of comfort. By the early mid-1970s, this state of affairs reached a kind of plateau, a *stasis*, where the communist regime managed to secure the belief, shared by everyone, after only about a quarter of a century of rule, that this would indeed never change and that this regime will last forever, at least for a thousand years—a phenomenon on whose meaning social theorists should intensely reflect upon.

While after 1989, the entire phenomenon of communism was quickly, even all too quickly, relegated into the dustbin of history—suspiciously too quickly, given that it was the Benjamin of the intellectual avantgarde for a long time—it arguably gained new relevance through the developments of recent years, especially the combination of neo-liberal managerialism and neo-authoritarianism promoted by Davos, that with COVID-19 disease prevention became a possible prelude to neo-totalitarianism.

Second, art, especially theatre and also the closely connected cinema (‘moving theatre’, or movies), always had a particular political and intellectual importance in the communist countries, just as for fascism, and on both sides of the Janus face, as a propaganda tool and as a way to resist it. It is not accidental that some of the most famous film directors in the 1960–1970s came from Communist Eastern Europe (Jancsó, Wajda, Forman, Polanski, Tarkovsky, and Mikhalkov), just as avantgarde and absurd theatre had a strong East-Central European streak.

However, Hungarian theatre was in a particular vacuum. The vacuum is itself a liminal phenomenon, the liminal void, that by its very absence can act as a stimulus to produce something new. Theatre in Hungary was in a double void: first, though such generalisation is always chancy, playwriting and theatrical performances, in contrast to poetry and novels, were never a *forte* of Hungarian culture, and second, by the 1960s, theatre in Hungary became particularly boring, even by contemporary standards, there being an increasingly vocal public discussion about the sad state of the theatre and the need to produce less boring theatrical spectacles, which were being simply abandoned by the public (Mihályi 1984, pp. 127–30, 144–53).<sup>7</sup> Not surprisingly, the guest performances of Peter Brook created almost a riot, with people assailing the ticket outlets, posing widely the question of what must be done with Hungarian theatre after the visit of Peter Brook. The 1973 reply of a main theatre figure, Károly Kazimir, was telling, revealing the eternal establishment mentality: nothing should be changed (Mihályi 1984, p. 148); ‘our’ theatre should continue just as it was before.

It was into this void that the ‘Kaposvár phenomenon’ made its entry—but by no means suddenly. We have to reconstruct the slow and painful process, and work, by which it became possible.

#### 4. Kaposvár Theatre, before Becoming a ‘Phenomenon’

The Gergely Csiky theatre of Kaposvár was one of the smallest and most remote theatres in Hungary, arguably *the* most remote. Kaposvár was a very small place, even by contemporary Hungarian standards, to maintain a standing theatre, having a population of about 40,000 in 1960, 60,000 in 1970, and 70,000 in 1980–1990. Even the most popular performances could hardly run more than 20–25 times, with directors and actors being

forced to try new play after new play and having little time for rehearsals, also because they were very often on the road, forced either by the need to bring the theatrical repertoire to the broader countryside or because such gigs were important sources of additional income.

Working and living conditions then, there, almost defy belief for us now. Actors and directors were overworked and underpaid. Actors lived, often with partner and child, in small rooms, where in cold winters, they were hard pressed for fuel. The following citation must of course be taken with a pinch of salt but could not have been that far from truth: 'At nights, when I started to undress, this really meant to take on some more cloths. Then, lying down on the bed, I covered myself with the curtain, and looked around for a tablecloth to put on' (Róbert Koltai, as in Mihályi 1984, p. 60). As for entertainment, the town had one restaurant—so actors spent most free time in the theatre bar, making alcoholism a permanent and widespread problem. Another recurrent feature of such a suffocating environment was pervasive internal fights and intrigues, practically for every role in any play, forcing directors, especially the overall manager, to spend most of their time on troubleshooting. Local commitment was minimal: actors kept their home in the capital, came down to town as little as possible, and were trying desperately to escape—as with virtually any provincial doctor or teacher. Working in a provincial town was a kind of exile—a sign of a lack of talent or a lack of proper connections.

One can imagine the quality of the performances under such conditions. Actors enacted the same stock roles from performance to performance, and within a few years, if they could not escape, became ossified into them. As Zsámbéki stated, if such performances were 'now' re-enacted (now of course meaning the 1980s, implying for 1960s performances), it could create a world success, as would be taken as its own irresistible spoof (Mihályi 1984, p. 44).

The effects of the Kaposvár performances are easy to understand. It is much more difficult, and interesting, to try to explain what rendered the entire phenomenon possible.

## 5. Reconstructing the Kaposvár Story

At a first approximation, the 'Kaposvár phenomenon' was the result of a series of accidents and coincidences.<sup>8</sup> If this were the full truth, this would make it little if at all interesting for contemporary sociology, but of course, as always, it isn't: what seems and sounds like a mere chance hides developments that are significant and truly eye-opening, also for theoretical reasons. As in similar cases, the right people happened to be at the right place in the right moment but this was by no means evident at the start, and the 'right' people had to work, and suffer, in all the meanings of the term, for quite some time at the place where they happened to be to make it the 'right' one.

Into the hopeless environment presented above, some genuine accidents brought the possibility of making a difference. Let's start with 1971, when a new overall director was appointed to the theatre, István Komor, who had good connections and was evidently destined for a better fate but for various reasons was demoted to Kaposvár.<sup>9</sup> More importantly, indeed crucially, he had no interest in local political and career games and was not opposed to talented people—even happy to promote young directors around himself, instead of suffocating them due to jealousy, as was standard practice (Mihályi 1984, p. 48). This turned out to be a particular blessing as, and this is the second and even earlier initial accident, in 1968 Gábor Zsámbéki ended up being appointed as theatrical director at Kaposvár, after finishing art college. Zsámbéki was a 'son of art [*figlio d'arte*]', as his father was a well-known director-actor of Vígszínház, a top Budapest theatre, who for a year (1956–1957) had become artistic director at Kaposvár theatre, so he also had a somewhat special status. But even more importantly, already during his college years, Zsámbéki had the idea of founding a Summer Theatre in Szentendre, to stage plays in a manner different from main Budapest theatres (Mihályi 1984, p. 39), so doing something potentially important and relevant. Thus, when for a series of reasons, he did not receive an offer in Budapest after graduation and had to move down to Kaposvár, he brought with himself some actors

(especially Róbert Koltai, a fellow graduate who shared his interests and enthusiasm, and who was already protagonist in a play *Zsámbéki* staged during college years).

It is here that the story starts to gain theoretical interest, concerning how marginality can turn into liminality. Kaposvár, this is clear enough, was very marginal in Hungarian theatre. The appointment of Komor and the arrival of *Zsámbéki*, with his small group, were in themselves just isolated accidents. Yet, the combination of such accidents created a situation in which the marginality of Kaposvár made its transformation into a creative liminal hotspot possible.<sup>10</sup> The question now concerns how this actually did happen.

The central issue is very simple: opportunities, when they emerge, must be grasped. This is not different from the ancient Greek idea of *kairos*, and indeed, liminality has several classical Greek equivalents (*apeiron, metaxy*). But it is easier said than done; opportunities first had to be recognised as such, and then, they had to be acted upon—and acted upon in the provincial Hungary of the 1970s, when and where hardly anybody had another idea than just trudging along. So, and again: what made Kaposvár theatre different?

## 6. The Kaposvár Work Ethic

‘Kaposvár is a strange place. It is questionable whether theatre has a *raison d’être* here; yet, good theatre could only be made here.’

(*Zsámbéki* 1973, as in [Mihályi 1984](#), p. 422)

Understanding the ‘Kaposvár phenomenon’ requires combining the anthropology of van Gennep and Victor Turner (liminality and *communitas*) with the historical sociology of Max Weber (the charismatic spirit of the Protestant work ethic) through the anthropological sociology of Marcel Mauss (the foundational primacy of gift relations; see [Mauss \[1924\] 2002](#)), the latter two read through the prism of Agnes [Horvath \(2021\)](#) (the gift of *charis*, or kind benevolence). While for Weber, charisma was an answer to out-of-ordinary situations, Horvath argued that *charis*, or benevolent kindness, is a central feature of normal, everyday human interaction, close to the importance Mauss attributed to gift-giving, understood as a ‘total social fact’. This idea also corresponds to Turner’s understanding of liminality through *communitas*. Liminal situations, whether in rites of passage or in its modern equivalents like a shared educational or war experience, generate a *communitas*, or a lasting, often life-long sense of companionship. While the dominant contemporary ideology emphasises competitiveness, even ‘cut-throat competition’ as being central for productive achievements, the perspective gained through the works of Weber, Mauss, Turner, and Horvath places emphasis on its opposite, a sense of community, a genuine inclination of mutual assistance, as being conducive to the same results. The ‘Kaposvár phenomenon’, as we’ll see, clearly supports the latter perspective.

The impossible feat of transforming a boring, marginal place into a vital, burgeoning liminal hotspot can only happen if by some or other ‘magical’ ways liabilities can be transformed into assets.

The main, and inescapable, liability of any provincial theatre is audience size. Any play can only be performed a small amount of times, as once ‘everybody’ saw it, a new play must be staged. It means that there is not enough time for rehearsals, performances cannot be properly polished, and thus the overworked actors are forced to continuously fall back on a few standard professional tricks, inevitably repeating them in different roles, which leads to boredom and quick burn-out. Competition offers no solution to this seemingly insoluble problem, except in the sense of every actor competing with every other in trying to escape the provincial dustbin and to gain a contract in the capital.

The Kaposvár solution was to reconfigure the evidently watertight separation between rehearsals and performances. If there was not enough time to prepare properly for a premiere, then performances had to be polished even after, so every performance became a kind of rehearsal, an opportunity to make the play better ([Mihályi 1984](#), pp. 204–17, 428). It was also helpful as many core members lacked art college education, so they again reversed a liability into an asset: ‘it is clear that in the theatre, for want of better, we pursued self-education. We primarily learned from each other’ (*Zsámbéki*, as in [Mihályi](#)

1984, pp. 211–12). Ascher states the same: ‘in everything and always we learned from each other’ (as in Mihályi 1984, p. 420). With such a truly genial idea, the downward spiral was inverted and turned upward: instead of becoming bored by fixation into immature performances and repeating the same mistaken gestures play after play, the day-after-day repeated performances became opportunities for improvement—opportunity for the single actor, for every actor, and for the whole performance.

Still, a logic of kind benevolence, or *charis* logic, must start from somewhere, in the modern world otherwise dominated by trickster logic (Szakolczai 2022) and especially so under a communist regime. Rearranging the balance between rehearsals and performances was only possible if such an improvement was not part of an individual ‘fight for survival’, becoming better only to escape, but part of a *communitas*, a mutual goodwill, not just to improve, but to help others improving, an ethic of perfecting. The answer lies in the fact that the Kaposvár phenomenon indeed relied since ‘the start’—meaning from about 1971 to 1972—on a liminal *communitas*, or a group of people who attended art college in Budapest together. Membership in the group was open, and several persons joined it over the years. They include Judit Pogány<sup>11</sup> and Andor Lukáts; neither of them attended art college. The most important and astonishing point here is that such an ‘inner core’ was not perceived by most others as a closed clique monopolising the ‘goodies’, but widely accepted as a necessary basis for broader success, thus becoming a genuine source of spinning a *charis* logic.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, such successes require something more than mutual benevolence: a certain willingness to improve, to work, a genuine work ethic. A provincial theatre could become the best theatre in the country because (almost) all its members were ready to make extra efforts—and because eventually, the theatre could explicitly recruit people, both actors and technicians, who were willing to make such extra efforts. In Kaposvár, many were ready and willing to work way beyond the line of duty, regularly trespassing trade union rules, in spite of the appalling working conditions. The related chapter title, ‘From morning till late evening’ (Mihályi 1984, p. 98), resumes the character of a regular working day, not only for actors but also the technical staff, who ‘sometimes worked even more than the actors [. . .] it happened that they had to spend the whole night in the theatre’ (Zsámbéki, as in Mihályi 1984, p. 99). Interviewees explicitly stated that theatre members had a particular ‘moral’; that ‘work had a very strong honour, even if we did not talk about it’; that the ‘primary moving force of the theatre [. . . was] conscientiousness’; and that all members were motivated by a ‘striving for perfection’ (Mihályi 1984, pp. 98–99). The ‘company was kept together by work’ (p. 88); Mihályi (p. 103) even starts his related commentary with the sentence: ‘Kaposvár [theatrical] life is characterised by a surprising Puritanism’.

The ‘Kaposvár phenomenon’ seems to offer a clearcut example for Weber’s thesis; yet, this is clearly not so. Theatre members were not working for more money or official recognition—they were well aware of going beyond and outside institutional requirements. But, they certainly did not do so without a good reason—in fact, they had a perfect sense of distinction; they only performed extra work when they felt it important and meaningful: ‘the good thing in the company was that they [. . .] could quite precisely assess what was important and what was not for the theatre’ (p. 100). If Weber connected charisma to individual achievements, then for Kaposvár, Elias’ idea of ‘group charisma’ (Elias 1998) is more applicable. Or, even better, we have to capture a circular, spiralling process: the ‘work ethic’ was based on belief in a meaningful work, which was made possible by an existing *communitas*, with tireless efforts further consolidating the *communitas*, laying the foundations for further, ever perfected performances. In sum, this can be, and *was*, characterised as a ‘shopwork’ (*műhelymunka*) (Koltai 2003, p. 7), a term that in Hungarian collocates both artistic and artisanal work, in contrast to labouring under routine, official, institutional, or commercial settings.<sup>13</sup> Purely individualistic strategies of succeeding were described by non-ethical terms like smartness (*ügyeskedés*) and tricks (*trükkök*), constituting a negative reference point (Mihályi 1984, p. 100).

Meaningful work, as always, creates important, visible results, both inside and outside. The drudgery of meaningless work is a kind of slavery and produces accelerated aging, while in Kaposvár, even the excesses of meaningful work brought the opposite result: instead of aging, tireless work rather rejuvenated people. Even older actors who started to believe in the meaningfulness of extra work became refreshed under the new ethic: ‘in this community somebody could be young even when over 60. Perhaps I will remain an obdurate adolescent for my life. As it is certain that without an adolescent enthusiasm it is not possible to do something really good, and such creative youthfulness does not depend on age’ (p. 89).<sup>14</sup> Like always attracts like: eventually young actors started to search for the possibility of coming down to Kaposvár, instead of loathing provincial life, and the same enthusiasm characterised even technical staff: ‘For me it was surprising and wonderful when suddenly among the decorators there appeared six-seven young lads who lived and died for the theatre. They spent all their time here, hardly even went home’ (p. 97).

The overall outcome was a situation that even now seems beyond possibilities, but then, there, in the utter desert and boredom of late Communist Hungary was truly incredible: step by step ‘we felt increasingly better in Kaposvár, in the community of the theatre [...] Our theatre became an oasis whose inner world and especially its free-thinking intellectuality became so attractive that for example I less and less wanted to go up to Budapest’ (pp. 100–1). Its members found nothing less than happiness in Kaposvár (pp. 332–34). This feeling–experience was transmitted to the performed plays: Kaposvár performances managed ‘to create an idyll on stage’ (p. 287). This was expressed particularly well in the 1974 *As You Like It*, one of the greatest early successes of the company, where at the end of the first act, the four Kaposvár directors appeared together on stage, accompanying, on flute, the singing of the good prince, who was meanwhile distributing bread to everyone, conveying ‘the idyll desired by characters who escaped the dirty fights of the world’. The performance produced a euphoric reception in Budapest, after which the British Embassy ordered 20 tickets for the next Kaposvár performance. The diplomats went down; were absolutely delighted; and after the performance, told Pogány that she should be packed and sent to England, as they do not have such a Rosalind (Mihályi 1984, pp. 294–95).

Thus, the ‘happiness’ found in Kaposvár was not simply a private state of soul and mind but based on broader, social meanings. As a key figure of the Kaposvár phenomenon expressed, while his previous theatrical experiences contained pleasant moments, ‘I could not find any purpose and meaning in those theatres. I hardly dare to say—social purposes. But after all, this was the issue. It was this ‘happiness’ that I found here in Kaposvár’ (p. 335).

This was possible because Kaposvár not only had a (communitarian) work ethic but also an *ars poetica*.

## 7. The Kaposvár Ars Poetica

It was not due to false modesty that Zsámbéki explicitly refused to define the profile of the theatre in a citation placed at a prominent place, the start of the chapter on ‘*Ars Poetica*’, offering instead a quite Socratic–Platonic self-characterisation: ‘we were all in a state of searching, of learning’ (p. 127). Such a quest departed from two clear negative reference points: artistic and socio-political limitations. Concerning the former, the theatre was obliged to play ‘low quality’ works, comedies, and especially operettas, as the overwhelming part of the potential audience wanted this. The solution was to make an asset out of this liability, by ennobling even comedies into poetry (p. 196) and by discovering the meaningful core, the potentially cathartic potential even of operettas. The outcome was something of a revelation, as plays which any intellectual in the capital would only have frowned upon before produced frenetic effects.

This was because it was combined with another magical, or rather enchanting, feat, another turning of an asset out of a liability, this time concerning socio-political background. A theatrical presentation, of course, is not real; it is only imitating, faking real characters and modes of behaviour. However, in a society where everything is make-believe and fake,

whether nothing meaningful and truthful can be explicitly said, a realistic theatrical representation only produces excruciating boredom, or lies as if on a second power. But, just this offers the possibility that the unreal world of the theatre, as it cannot be taken fully seriously, can somehow transmogrify itself and say, even reveal the truth. And, this was the aim of Kaposvár, since its 'heroic age' (Koltai 2003, p. 6): 'to face the world of lies that surrounded us', or to help overcoming what they perceived as bad/evil (Mihályi 1984, p. 129).

Still, this was not all. In itself, it would only have reproduced the traditional 'politically committed' theatre, remaining a general and abstract criticism, and easily taken on board by political figures, against their rivals. The Kaposvár ars poetica added two crucial elements to its uncompromising attitude of truth-telling. First, it never staged a 'purely' political play, attacking directly political forces or figures, local or national, rather politics was always staged without jeopardising artistic standards. Far from recognising a conflict between politically committed and purely artistic performances, Kaposvár managed to be acutely political by being uncompromising in its art. This reached its height in the famous Marat/Sade performance.<sup>15</sup> Second, it managed to be at once truthful and intensely political by presenting the lives and feelings of the simplest persons—anybody, the everyman, the everyman as nobody—but as a tragic nobody, as living in a void, and so cannot help being anybody else but a nobody.

Kaposvár performances moved in a truly enchanting circle in between high-quality art, philosophical depth, and more than sociological realism. They drew on the most important and different streams of modern theatre, jointly incorporating the absurd, the theatre of cruelty, Brecht, Ödön von Horváth, and Hungarian folk-comedy, peppering each with irony. While told about one of the greatest successes of the company, *Tales from the Vienna Woods* by Horváth, the ensuing set of layers applies in general (Mihályi 1984, p. 476): beyond the surface level of everyday cordiality (*gemütlichkeit*), the successive events betray the absurdity of the situation, while eventually reveal the underlying, full horror—though, to render the intolerable endurable for the audience, even if just barely, the terror is shown in an ironic key, so the entire performance always keeps its ambivalence, sliding between various shades and colours. The key, as often, was a question of maintaining a proper balance (pp. 468–69).

Finding such a balance is fundamentally a matter of art, and over the years, the company perfected it in a stunning way. It managed to pull the most amazing stunts, bringing out the tragic fates hidden in operettas and turning the official comedic celebration of the achievements of socialism into a masterpiece of social analysis. But, the performances went even beyond that, reaching philosophical depth by capturing the tragic helplessness of everyday figures, showing both the torments undergone by them and their reflections on their own tormenting (pp. 469–70). Yet, even such a philosophical depth is not sufficient to capture their aims. As Tamás Ascher explained, he was not interested in staging philosophical problems; he was interested in reality: in representing, in the proper sense of rendering present, the real 'defencelessness and powerlessness of people living in a scarce, suffocating (*szűkös*) world, the horridness of their existence, with the stunned fright and desperation of an outsider' (pp. 472–73).

Artistic balance was achieved through permanent oscillation, in the staging of the director and the performance of the actors, between a fully internal and fully external perspective: the actors played the characters from inside, with full humanness, demonstrating them as touchingly likeable, though at the same time revealing their shortcomings, how their conditions eventually resulted in grave errors and distortions of character. Some revealed a stunning stupidity below the sympathetic surface, a stupidity that was not due to a lack of brainpower, but implied personal responsibility—a kind of 'arch-stupidity (*ösbutaság*)' that was a mask of untruthfulness, a mask that was taken up in order to gain security—a fake sense of security (pp. 472–76).

## 8. Master Performances

This type of theatre culminated in an entire series of master performances. This included, among others, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*,<sup>16</sup> that was forced to a small stage, as permission was not granted to play it in the normal theatre; a performance repeated in summers in a Balaton-lake resort, making it possible for the broader public, and especially students, to attend it; and a series of plays by Anton Chekhov and Heinrich von Kleist, directly or through adaptations.<sup>17</sup> *Godot* led to the discovery of Andor Lukáts as a major actor, whose story is an emblematic, astonishing proof of the 'Kaposvár phenomenon'. Born in Kaposvár, raised in an institution and trained as a locksmith, he had no art college education. Yet, he worked himself first into becoming a member of the Kaposvár 'inner core', then a top film actor,<sup>18</sup> and ended up directing one of the greatest ever successes of Budapest theatre, *Portugal*, on repertoire for twenty years (1998–2018) and performed 423 times. Most significantly, the director Ascher placed emphasis on the 'warmth of the heart' that shone through the play, in spite of the surrounding void, evoking the novels of Dickens and Milne's *Winnie the Pooh* as closest parallels to the play (pp. 467–68).

By about 1974, the fame of the performances reached Budapest and the company was invited to stage guest performances in Vígszínház. The success went beyond any expectations—for the second performance, not only were all tickets sold in advance but people, especially university students, literally assaulted the entrances, sitting on stairs and standing at the walls behind the sitting rows (Mihályi 1984, pp. 240, 425). The 1977 Budapest staging of *State Department Store* (*Állami Áruház*), originally a 1953 film celebrating the successes of socialism, with systematically reversing its message, produced particularly chaotic urban scenes. Before the performance, there were literal fights between ticket collectors, police, and the youth that wanted to enter the theatre, while after the performance, the audience refused to move and applauded the performers for half an hour. At the end, actors had to come back in their civil clothes for another bowing (p. 452).<sup>19</sup> Such scenes repeated themselves, year after year, and so the Budapest theatre where the Kaposvár company played was regularly surrounded by a police cordon, as it is now happening in Italian cities during a *Serie A* football game. In Hungary, such success by a provincial theatrical company was both unthinkable and unprecedented—the last time a provincial theatre gained success in Budapest was in 1819 (p. 3).

The most important Kaposvár performance, however, without the shadow of a doubt, was *Marat/Sade*. Here, everything came together, and worked and produced an unprecedented catharsis, that even gained huge international recognition (Koltai 2003, pp. 10–11; Mihályi 1984, pp. 488–89).

## 9. Marat/Sade

The play and its performance have a long background history. It was written in 1963 by Peter Weiss, a German playwright with communist sympathies living in Sweden, about the evident failure of the Revolution—French, but not only. The play immediately gained major attention, in both Germanies and more widely. Peter Brook staged it in 1964 in the Royal Shakespeare Company and, in 1967, directed a film version. Concerning Hungary, the writer Gábor Görgey, descendent of a major historical family who personally suffered persecution in the 1950s, picked up the book in Germany in 1963, immediately realising its potential importance and solicited various Budapest theatre directors for performing it.<sup>20</sup> Eventually, Endre Marton chanced upon directing it in 1966 in the National Theatre, not without serious apprehensions, but the play ended up having a resounding success.

The play is 'super' liminal. It has the revolution, one of the most liminal real-life events, as its theme; 1808 as its temporal setting, so a moment during the French Revolution, but well after the terror, so a genuine period of 'permanent liminality'; and a mental asylum as its location, or a par excellence place of 'permanent liminality'.

It was placed, outside previous plans, on the repertoire of the Kaposvár theatre in autumn 1981. The director, János Ács (1949–2015), graduated only recently yet happened to take part as assistant in the 1966 performance, after which, for a long time, was an

actor in a Budapest amateur avantgarde theatre. Apart from Lukáts (Marat) and Pogány (Corday), protagonists included Gábor Máté (Herald) and Zoltán Bezerédy (Duperret), top Budapest art college graduates who opted to go down to Kaposvár just about a year before; Tamás Jordán (Sade), an established Budapest actor who, with his wife Kati Lázár (Simonne Evrard), went down at the same time; and Eszter Csákányi (Cucurucu), another 'daughter of art' whose father was a popular comic actor but who was not admitted to art college due to her looks (!). The original text was faithfully followed, apart from a few necessary actualising allusions, though improved by a few textual insertions and creative staging, as the dramaturg, István Eörsi, who was a former student of Georg Lukács, asked Mária Ludassy, a fellow Lukács school member and specialist of the Enlightenment, to look up some relevant contemporary texts. Staging innovations include that in a key moment, revealing Sade's overall assessment of the revolution,<sup>21</sup> and when Corday was whipping Sade uttering these words, in Kaposvár, Sade was actually lying on top of Marat.

The start was unpromising: actors could not easily relate to the play, and even the director became unconvinced that, written by a German communist author in Sweden, it has anything interesting to say in contemporary Hungary. However, for a series of reasons and through a sequence of incidents, interest in the play increased, first inside and then outside. A crucial decision was to close the performance by showing an enormous composite image of 'Corvin passage' (*Corvin köz*). The passage was a scene of an emblematic battle of the 1956 anti-Soviet uprising, then defined as counter-revolution and being an absolute taboo. The composite image was only shown for a short time, partially due to its character being not easy to recognise, but in a country like Hungary, news spread like a forest fire and soon 'everybody' knew about it.

The 4 December 1981 premiere was immediately hailed, but the resounding success was helped by another chance incident. Hardly a week later, on 13 December 1981, Jaruzelski staged his coup in Poland, so the play acquired extra political meaning. Suddenly, every gesture gained a further sense—political but also sociological and philosophical, as hospital inmates, whose madness was only accentuated by Peter Brook, in Kaposvár increasingly came to represent the Hungarian everyman, crippled by the grey terror of an absurd political system, while the failure of the revolution increasingly applied, beyond France, not just to Hungary in 1956, but to the Revolution. Audiences increased weeks after weeks; more and more people came down from Budapest; and by early spring, Kaposvár was literally assaulted with convoys of buses bringing down university students, in particular from the University of Economics (p. 487), filling every spectacle. Performances produced a catharsis recalling classical Greek theatre.

Here, two further striking things must be mentioned—incidence and coincidence. On the one hand, in spite of the increasing public impact, the performance was not stopped—in fact, there was no political reaction whatsoever. While this may sound counterintuitive, it can be easily explained: both the Solidarity phenomenon and its suppression by Jaruzelski generated considerable consternation in the region, certainly in Hungary, and the regime did not want to pour oil on fire by escalating repression. Such measures were only considered about a year later, when the 'Corvin passage' image also became open knowledge—as until then, a main policy of the company was that any explicit reference to the image was to be avoided. However, when in September 1982 the prohibition of the play was seriously considered, especially due to the 'Corvin passage' image, another striking coincidence intervened: Kaposvár authorities could defend themselves by saying that the director, János Ács lived there—which was indeed true. Of course, everybody knew that this was not the real reason—yet, the Communist Party accepted the explanation, not because they were that stupid but because this solved their problem: the answer was presentable as a justification, and a main feature of ossified, quasi-totalitarian regimes is that authorities hate to do anything, especially anything troublesome: the best is to do nothing. And why do anything if a director merely puts on stage the surroundings of the flat where he was living?

The Kaposvár phenomenon could survive also because theatre managers always made a priority of cultivating good relations with local people, including authorities. The theatre was never an avantgarde ivory tower; rather, they made consistent efforts to involve local interest. They had the determination and courage to produce theatre there, ‘off the map’ (*isten háta mögött*, literally ‘behind the back of god’), and as a result, local intellectuals, ‘even the leaders of the county accepted us, we even gained considerable authority (*tekintély*)’ (Babarczy, as in Mihályi 1984, p. 234). They were particularly successful with technical high school students, who otherwise had the reputation to be oblivious to high culture. In Kaposvár, while at the start they were obliged to attend plays as part of their official education, by their last year, they regularly became the most grateful of publics (pp. 239–41). The theatre only failed consistently with two groups, teachers and doctors (Szabó 2022, pp. 121–22)—which is quite intriguing, as these two groups were always the inner core of the secular Enlightenment—and, especially teachers, were eternal supporters of the regime. Such efforts, while genuine and central, became an important source of support by local authorities against the criticism of Budapest party officials.

### 10. International Success

*Marat/Sade* also brought enormous international accolade to the company: it triumphed in the 1982 Belgrade International Theatre Festival. This is a major international theatrical event, running on since 1967, second only to the Theatre of Nations. Its prestige is shown by the list of previous winners, which include most of the best-known names of world theatre, including Jerzy Grotowski, Richard Schechner (he also collaborated with Victor Turner; see Schechner and Turner 1985), Ingmar Bergman (the film director), Ariane Mnouchkine, Peter Stein (twice, 1972, 1975), Peter Brook (twice, 1972, 1976), Anatoly Efros (twice, 1974, 1985), Yuri Lyubimov, and Tadeusz Kantor. Already in 1975, Kaposvár was delegated to the Theatre of Nations festival in Warsaw, but then, the group was still inexperienced, and while receiving some encouraging words, they failed to live up to the successes of the Budapest performances.

Belgrade was different. The performance was followed by a stunned silence, and then a lasting, unending, roaring celebration.<sup>22</sup> The audience was not simply clapping and shouting, but literally howling, and for long minutes. The enormity of the success is shown by winning all three major prizes, which before only happened in 1978—and even after, only in 1989, 1991, 1996, 2017, and 2019.

Still, the rest was silence. A theatrical piece is not a book or a film; it cannot be printed or copied, to be enjoyed again, without time limits.<sup>23</sup> The Kaposvár performance was forgotten—even the name of the director, János Ács, is misprinted on the Internet list of winners (though it has only three letters).<sup>24</sup>

### 11. An Epilogue: Diagnosing Social Infantilism through Theatre (Hankiss)

Elemér Hankiss (1928–2014) was the most important and influential social scientist, even intellectual, in Hungary over the past half century or so.<sup>25</sup> Educated as a philosopher, he wrote his first major work on the metamorphoses of *Hamlet* and then brought structuralism into Hungary, generating a huge public, even political debate in the late 1960s. In the 1970s, he shifted to sociology, organising a Centre for Value Sociology—in Hungarian programmatically called ‘*Műhely*’—which was a path-breaker in bringing quantitative sociology to Hungary. Like so many, he was ‘purged’ after the 1956 uprising and, until the late 1980s, was prohibited from teaching—his first teaching assignment being in political science, the introduction of which he again pioneered in Hungary. In 1990, after the collapse of communism, he became consensus president of the Hungarian Television, only to resign in 1993, once any consensus in Hungary evaporated. Still, he kept working, practically until the end, publishing books that ranged between social and political analysis and public commentary, having philosophical and even theological scope and depth, and often selling over tens of thousands of copies.

His broader fame as a 'public sociologist' was established in a series of late 1970s articles in *Valóság* ('Reality'), the Hungarian equivalent of French *Critique* or German *Merkur*, that managed to capture and describe publicly about ongoing social life, in at once plain words and scientific terminology, what others only vaguely felt but were both incapable and afraid to write down. His article on infantilism fell into this lineage—but it happened to trespass certain limits. Already during its presentation at the Institute of Sociology, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, it evoked passionate extremes: for some, it was a new revelation, going beyond, in scope and depth, his previous writings, but for others, it was problematic by questioning the cosy 'us–them' separation, according to which 'we' were all just suffering victims, perfect and blameless, and it was only 'their' fault. Needless to say, for figures faithful to or supporting the regime, it was outright an affront. Not surprisingly, *Valóság* refused to publish it, though it appeared almost immediately, in an edited collection (Hankiss [1982] 1983).

The main argument starts by explicitly claiming that it will use an uncommon source for sociological analysis: literature (p. 421). This is because Hankiss came to recognise that the plays performed in Vígszínház in the 1979–1980 season were practically all devoted to a single theme: infantilism or infantilisation, or the peculiar situation in which adults behave, or are forced to behave, as children. Four of the six premiers of the season were devoted to this theme (Brian Phelan, *The Signorman's Apprentice*; Heinrich von Kleist, *The Prince of Homburg*; Peter Shaffer, *Equus*; and István Csurka, *Deficit*), but it was also central to two plays staged earlier but still on, due to their public success (Ken Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and Géza Bereményi, *Air in Cubic Meters*). In his analysis, all these plays, coming from quite different places and times<sup>26</sup> but staged at the same time and practically together in Hungary, show processes by which protagonists are prevented from growing up.

The analysis can be reinterpreted and its significance further supported through a liminality analysis, especially the term permanent liminality. Growing up is perhaps the most important and ubiquitous transition period in human life, so not surprisingly, the rites of passage organised around it became model of liminality for Victor Turner (1967). Clearly enough, we all must grow up; every adolescent in any culture is supposed to pass the initiation rite to adulthood, so this was by no means a competitive trial. Yet, occasionally some failed—probably due to grave, genetic disturbances. Infantilisation meant the forceful keeping of an entire population in a state of artificial childhood, preventing the normal process of maturity, and is therefore a particularly cruel, almost criminal political offence. To no surprise, so many listeners or readers of Hankiss's paper were offended.<sup>27</sup>

However, the argument has broader theoretical relevance that was certainly not fully—if at all—understood then. First, it can be considered as early intuition of permanent liminality: if initiation into adulthood is a primary liminal process, then forcing to remain there implies permanent liminality—even forced permanent liminality. Second, there are clear affinities between infantilism and mental disturbances—in fact, infantilism is a widely diagnosed and considered mental health problem. Now, the social significance of infantilism as acute mental disturbance was not limited to Communist Hungary, or more broadly, the phenomenon of totalitarianism, but was diagnosed, even earlier, though indirectly, all around the modern world, by recognising the metaphorical significance of 'madness' as a social problem. One only needs to recall *Marat/Sade*, where inmates of an asylum became actors, published in 1963; Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, set in an Oregon psychiatric hospital, in 1962; and the two most famous analyses of asylums, making it a model of modern total institutions, or totalitarianism, *Asylums* by Goffman and *Folie et déraison* by Foucault, in 1961. Thus, the phenomenon Hankiss identified in 1981 through the repertoire of a Hungarian theatre was of much broader relevance: it is the permanent liminality of the entire modern world, a forced infantilisation characteristic of all modern forms of social and political governance—what later came to be called a joint infantilisation and senilisation (Horvath and Szakolczai 2018, pp. 176, 197–98).

The old ‘convergence theory’, about the gradually developing similarities between ‘East’ and ‘West’, so rightly condemned in its old form by the events of 1989–1991, thus needs to be reinterpreted, and understood, though evidently in a quite different key.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See also Szakolczai (1996). An updated version of this paper was published in the online review *Limen* (Slovenia) 1 (2001), 1, ([www.mi2.hr/limen](http://www.mi2.hr/limen), accessed on 8 May 2008), but this site no longer seems to work.

<sup>2</sup> Note, however, that the term ‘performative speech acts’ was introduced by Austin (1962, p. 5) exactly for real effects produced by modern ceremonies, like wedding, a will (testament), or the opening of a session of the parliament.

<sup>3</sup> Turner had in-depth experiences with theatre; her mother was an actress.

<sup>4</sup> For programmatic statements about the importance of art for social understanding, see Horvath (2024), Ingold (2013), and Szakolczai (2023).

<sup>5</sup> This book is not really a research monograph, as it is rather a commented collection of a series of individual and group interviews. As the author conveys, once he collected and arranged all his material, he felt that this speaks for itself, and there was no point for re-telling the story in his words—and probably for this reason, the book remained extremely interesting and timely, an important method–logical point in its own right.

<sup>6</sup> The expression was first used in 1976 by Tamás Koltai (see Koltai 2003, p. 8), the first major theatre critic who devoted special attention to this development.

<sup>7</sup> In 1962 alone Budapest theatres registered a 13% decline in audiences (Szabó 2022, p. 115).

<sup>8</sup> Even Mihályi starts this way; see p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> Among others, he was a notorious womaniser; soon after his appointment, parents flocked to local authorities complaining about his conquests among their daughters (Mihályi 1984, p. 46).

<sup>10</sup> Mihályi (1984, p. 65) all but states this explicitly and also mentions that marginal figures accepting their hopeless status as a price for liberty were preferred stage heroes (Mihályi 1984, p. 132).

<sup>11</sup> With her delicate voice and diminutive stature, Pogány, for long years, hardly received even minor supporting roles. She literally toiled her way up to become one of the Kaposvár ‘stars’. She also married Róbert Koltai, and the Pogány-Koltai couple for decades stayed at the centre of the Kaposvár phenomenon—as they even returned to Kaposvár in 1980, after they left in 1978, together with Zsámbéki and others to Budapest—having received an irresistible offer Zsámbéki could not refuse—a part of the story that cannot be told here.

<sup>12</sup> Both the charismatic character of Zsámbéki and the wide trust in him and fellow leading directors were explicitly recognised (Mihályi 1984, pp. 70–71).

<sup>13</sup> This can also be supported by the widely contrasting etymologies of ‘work’ and ‘labour’.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Vilmos Kun (1925–2015) and Éva Olsavszky (1929–2021), who, in contrast to other established Kaposvár actors and actresses, managed to join the *communitas*—perhaps helped by being a couple. The joint activity of couples is effectively discouraged by the current managerial regime all around the world; however, while politicians indeed appoint their partners to unmerited and lucrative positions, in the arts and the humanities, the added value of such joint work can be tremendous.

<sup>15</sup> According to István Eörsi, Ács was not interested in a politicised message but in the inner form of a work of art, and it was in this manner that he managed to produce the most political theatre of the age; for the source, see notes 20 and 22.

<sup>16</sup> About the decisive impact that the original 5 January 1953 Paris premiere had on Foucault, see Foucault (1994, I: 18, IV: 608). He claims that for him, and for his generation, this play, ‘un spectacle à vous couper le souffle’, represented the definite break (rupture) with the horizon of Marxism, phenomenology, and existentialism (p. 608).

<sup>17</sup> See also the Transylvanian writer András Sütő’s Kleist adaptation, a huge early success. Chekhov and Kleist were widely perceived as having special affinities with the times, in the broader region and beyond; see Milos Forman’s *Ragtime* (1975), Volker Schlöndorff’s *Michael Kohlhaas* (1969), Andrei Mihalkov-Konchalovsky’s *Uncle Vanya* (1970), or Nikita Mikhalkov’s *Unfinished Pieces for Player Piano* (1977). The latter film gained cultic standing in Hungary right at the height of the Kaposvár phenomenon. Closer to

the present, the 2005 Booker prize winning Irish novelist John Banville transposed three of Kleist's plays into modern Ireland (published in 1995, 2000, and 2005). In a 14 October 1994 article in *The Independent* praising Kleist's 'genius', he stated that Kleist 'is one of the great neglected figures of European literature' (see <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/kleist-neglected-genius-tomorrow-in-the-deutsche-romantik-season-at-the-south-bank-john-banville-will-speak-on-heinrich-von-kleist-to-him-the-most-pertinent-and-tragic-german-writer-of-all-1442756.html> (accessed on 16 September 2023)), adding in a 24 February 2010 interview that, sadly, 'Kleist is hardly known at all in the English speaking world' (see <http://www.themillions.com/2010/02/the-millions-interview-john-banville.html> (accessed on 16 September 2023)). Such affinities between Irish and Central-European cultural experiences are also present in Beckett and Ionesco creating the absurd theatre in Paris, in Joyce living and writing in Trieste, or in the attunement between the poetry of Yeats and Rilke.

<sup>18</sup> See *Eskimo Woman Feels Cold*, a 1983 film that immediately became cultic, in which he enacts a mute orphan animal feeder of the Zoo, and that still today preserves its haunting beauty. Kaposvár also cultivated close relations with the best and most courageous Hungarian film directors, like Gyula Gazdag, whose cultic 1974 *Singing on the Treadmill* (Bástyasétány 74), starring many Kaposvár actors, was prohibited for a decade, or Péter Gothár, whose 1982 *Time Stands Still* won the Award of the Youth at Cannes and the New York Film Critics Circle Award for Best Foreign Language Film. Both staged guest performances in Kaposvár (Mihályi 1984, pp. 484–85).

<sup>19</sup> For Gyula Gazdag, this performance was 'a rare theatrical experience [...] a genuine peak. I have never before had such a heated theatrical experience' (as in Mihályi 1984, pp. 452–53). His reference points were Lyubimov and Mnouchkine, but these were productions of single directors, while Kaposvár worked in a team.

<sup>20</sup> See the important interview conducted with Görgey, Ács, and Eörsi before the December 1989 showing of the Kaposvár *Marat/Sade* performance on Hungarian television at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UUp9WXqkwM&t=5s&ab\\_channel=CsikyGergelySz%C3%ADnh%C3%A1zKaposv%C3%A1r](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UUp9WXqkwM&t=5s&ab_channel=CsikyGergelySz%C3%ADnh%C3%A1zKaposv%C3%A1r) (accessed on 16 September 2023). It was customary that every successful theatrical play was shown on TV a year or so after its premiere—not in this case.

<sup>21</sup> 'Now I will tell you/what I think of this revolution/which I helped to make/.../now I see where this revolution is leading/To the withering of the individual man/and a slow merging into uniformity/to the death of choice/to self denial/to deadly weakness' (Weiss 1965, pp. 46–49). This text has striking relevance for our contemporary Davos world.

<sup>22</sup> See Babarczy telling the story during a 2017 public conversation entitled '*Színházi szabadságharc* [theatrical freedom fight]', about the *Marat/Sade* performance, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k\\_lofEQcfDk&ab\\_channel=oszmi](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k_lofEQcfDk&ab_channel=oszmi), at 59'48"–1h02'25" (accessed on 16 September 2023).

<sup>23</sup> However, an original, c.1982 version of the performance can be now seen at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Is2uY55o3QE&t=2705s&ab\\_channel=GoToTv](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Is2uY55o3QE&t=2705s&ab_channel=GoToTv) (accessed on 16 September 2023).

<sup>24</sup> Soros, intriguingly, suggested that they stage performances which 'can be sold on the international market' (Eörsi 2010, fn. 107; note the terminology! The question whether culture is a commodity was widely debated in Hungary around that time, provoked by a 1980 television performance of Jancsó and Hernády—perhaps a first sign of Soros' interest there). But how can a provincial Hungarian theatre work for the 'international market'? Babarczy, reasonably, answered that they do what is needed at home.

<sup>25</sup> The only person of comparable standing was Iván Szelényi, but he was forced to leave the country after finishing with Konrád, in 1974, *Intellectuals in the Road to Class Power* (Konrad and Szelényi 1979), to become a most distinguished sociologist, Professor, and Head of Department at the Universities of Flinders (South Australia), Wisconsin-Madison, CUNY, UCLA, Yale, and finishing as Foundation Dean of Social Sciences, NYU Abu Dhabi (see Szelényi 2018).

<sup>26</sup> Note the presence of Kleist's *The Prince of Homburg*, also staged in 1973 in Kaposvár, an important early success; according to Koltai (2003, p. 6), it was the first key indication that something unprecedented is going on there. See also Mihályi (1984, p. 5).

<sup>27</sup> The point gains further significance through Kant's claim about Enlightenment implying maturity, another allusion also to rites of passage and liminality.

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