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Iron Curtain in Reality and Mentality – Border Crossings in Hungarian Films after the Change of the Regime

Miklós SÁGHY
University of Szeged

Abstract

During the cold war, Eastern and Western Europe were separated by the so-called Iron Curtain. From the Soviet Empire controlled Eastern Block, the Western countries seemed to be the land of freedom and wealth. Even if the official communist propaganda tried to refute this idea, its materialization is to be witnessed in several Hungarian films made during the 1980s. The democratic transformation that followed the fall of the Iron Curtain seemingly opened the Western world for people from Eastern Europe. Many Hungarian films, made in the 1990s and 2000s, depict the experience of Hungarians in the desired Western countries after the political changes. In my paper I intend to show: 1) the travels from the East to the West after the collapse of the Iron Curtain forced Eastern protagonists to face the incongruences between the imaginary and the real West 2) the disappointment and deception these travels bring about originate in the Eastern, communist upbringing and its consequences: unethical social reflexes and behaviour. Briefly, via the analyses of several examples taken from Hungarian cinema, I would like to instantiate how deeply the former separation of the East and the West – an imaginary Iron Curtain – still existed around 2000s in the mind of Eastern people.

Keywords

Hungarian film, border-crossing, Iron Curtain, change of the regime

1. Introduction

During the establishment of the Communist dictatorship and the escalation of the Cold War, at the end of the 40s, the western borders of Hungary and those of the entire Eastern bloc were closed off by the Iron Curtain, by laying land mines, putting up barbed wire and setting up an electronic signal fence. During state socialism, the geographic and topographic borders of a certain area became saturated with metaphorical and symbolic meanings. The Iron Curtain functioned as the *limes* between a free and a dictatorial world and between societies built on surplus and shortage economies. The distinction between free

and dictatorial worlds was never formally recognized by the official state propaganda in the Eastern bloc, the dichotomies mentioned above had, however, become common knowledge, at least by the 1980s.

Megáll az idő (“Time stands still”, 1981), a popular movie by Péter Gothár, one of the best known Hungarian directors, uses rapier irony to stage contemporary conceptions of the West. An illustrative example of this is a scene from a party in the film where one of the adolescent protagonists (Péter Wilman), in a quasi inebriated state, hands a bottle of Coke to a school friend, Pierre, urging him to taste this mind-blowingly delicious drink, brought directly from London by his father. Or, as the story in the movie unfolds, cool, good things, come from the West, including electrifying rock’n’roll music which actually is vital in creating the distinctive atmosphere of the movie. It is also not surprising that the rebel student, who cannot stand the suffocating air of the contemporary society, Pierre, wants to escape to the West by breaking through the boom gate at the border crossing.

Or, to take another cinematographic example, in Lívía Gyarmathy’s *Szökés* (“Escape from Recsk”, 1997), both the real and the imaginary roles of the Iron Curtain as *limes* between the two worlds are brought to the fore powerfully, also as a result of its topic choice. The protagonist, Gyula Molnár escaped from one of the most terrifying prison complexes of the Communist regime in Recsk. He can only be *free* after literally cutting his way through barbed wire, under heavy fire arriving in Austria. A couple of days preceding these dramatic events, Molnár suggests to his peer who escaped from prison with him not to go into hiding in Hungary but to go on to the West. But, in doubt, he retorts, “but what on earth would we do beyond the Iron Curtain?” Surprised by the obtuseness of his fellow, the protagonist responds, “what do you mean what we would do? We will be free.” It is no coincidence that right after the images depicting the risky and life-threatening border crossing, the film immediately cuts to Molnár standing under the colorful logo of Radio Free Europe (the radio station that used to broadcast in Hungarian from the West), in the blue halo of the word *free* [Picture 1]. Molnár uses this medium to spread the news about the atrocities of the dictatorship to his compatriots. This way, the concept of *freedom* is unambiguously linked to the world beyond closed borders in the film.

The inevitable question is how the protagonists from the East actually faced the tangible reality of the imaginary West after the fall of the Iron Curtain and the change of the political regime. Or, in other words, how were the images of the West created in previous decades

rewritten and overwritten by the new possible border crossing experiences?



Picture 1. – Radio Free Europe

2. The period of change

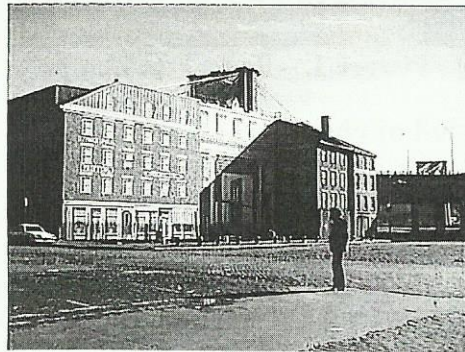
Péter Gothár's *Tiszta Amerika* ("Totally America") was released in 1987. The movie tells the story of a defecting father, Frigyes, who visits New York with his family on a two week-long officially organized trip, who ends up leaving his son, his wife and the complete group of tourists behind and who defects to the United States.

Starting with the opening frames, the two basic stereotypical images of the West mentioned earlier are conjured up: conceptualizations of freedom and prosperity. The former plays a major role in a scene where Frigyes and his son are swimming in a steaming lake and the son asks his father, "Is America far away?" Frigyes responds, "Stop yammering and start swimming if you don't want to drown here." Obviously, they are not having a swim in the Atlantic Ocean, so the demonstrative "here" must be referring to the Hungarian reality. The pun contrasts America, the land of the free, where life actually is possible, with the *here* of the East, where suffocation, not living, is the only possibility. In another scene, the cabin guy at the swimming pool asks Frigyes (leaving shortly for America) through the rails of the changing room door to bring him a piece of flint ("that famous flint"), chronically out of stock in Hungary. The scene refers to the opposition between shortage and surplus economies.¹ As it can be seen here, America, the land of freedom is taken to be the terrain of prosperity and abundance.

When Frigyes and his family arrive in New York, the 'capital' of the world, the local tour guide welcomes the Hungarian tourists by

¹ Based on the context of the (soft) oppression of the eighties and the all-knowing way of talking of the cabin guy, the expression „that famous flint” conjures up the (metaphorical) ‘flint stone’ and it may set light to the revolution in the interpretation of the viewer.

declaring, “welcome to New York, where everything can happen.” Understood indirectly in the framework of the East-West divide, these words can mean that the actions of the travellers are not bound any more by the limits of the Communist oppression. During his illegal stay in New York, Frigyes, however, is forced to experience the sufferings of the deprived and the homeless instead of the Western liberty and prosperity. He roams the streets of dilapidated neighborhoods in the cold, rainy, and windy weather, lonely and abandoned [Picture 2].



Picture 2. – Frigyes is lonely and abandoned

Beyond images of chaos and losing ground, Frigyes is being further alienated by linguistic isolation as he doesn't speak English. His new friends, an African American prostitute and his brother take pity on him and take him with themselves but they themselves are out of the bounds of law and society. They cannot help the protagonist experience freedom as they themselves are not, as two strange people are constantly on their, and now on Frigyes' heels too. As it later turns out, the two men in long trench coats constitute a fatal threat to the siblings. According to these images, deprivation, persecution, and a lethal threat await the protagonist in the land of freedom, that is, the polar opposite of what he had imaged or could have imagined in Hungary about America.

As an interesting twist, his father-in-law arrives in New York in order to take him home. “Daddy” (as Frigyes calls him) is on a “business-like private trip” and he obviously has solid Communist party connections. He functions as a living and breathing collection of shallow, Eastern-European clichés. His character, the model citizen who identifies more or less completely with the socialist world order, is forced to face the land of freedom and prosperity while on a ‘hunt’ for his son-in-law. His way of speaking highlights constantly the ideological (and counter-ideological) discourse of Communist

Hungary. For example, while eating scrambled eggs in a diner, he identifies America as, “This is really America. Look at the size of this portion. Not one bit stolen.” Or, the consumption of larger portion constitutes the essential experience of the West, whereas, in his way of thinking, the East is where stealing is a common practice. The humorous effect of the father-in-law’s little remarks often stem from the misplaced use of Communist party discourse on capitalist relations. Take, for example, his use of the word ‘hero’ when referring to the diligent personnel on an aircraft. He declares solemnly that the Americans are “a hard-working people, a great nation, and they have living heroes,” evoking the Communist collocation: ‘A Hero of Socialist Labor.’ In another scene, at a crowded hairdresser’s salon, the old man complains about the multitude and cries out – in the common parlance of the day – “there are as many of them as Russians,” using the well-known high number of ‘friendly’ Russian troops occupying Hungary to describe the crowd at the hairdresser’s. Finally, when he starts planning his night out on the town, he expresses his expectation about “surely a decaying capitalist country must have brothels!” And the list of similar examples is long.

Eastern European behavioral routines kick in in the Western context as well. In the crowded hairdresser’s salon mentioned earlier, daddy waves a season’s pass for Budapest public transport while making his way to the front through the crowd shouting (in Hungarian, of course): “season’s pass, season’s pass.” And when his son-in-law calls him out on it, asking why he is making a scene, dad responds without any hesitation: “this is the way it’s done.” So the Eastern European way is to elbow your way in and to try to find loopholes.² In a clothes store, Frigyes’ father-in-law puts on several items of clothing and tries to leave without paying, proving his theory from before, according to which, in Eastern Europe, everybody steals whenever opportunity arises.³

² György Kalmár’s paper *Inhabiting post-communist spaces* focuses predominantly on Nimród Antal’s film *Kontroll* (2003) and it offers an insightful analysis of the different techniques aimed at finding loopholes in authoritative systems in Eastern Europe, or, in other words, how obedience and avoidance (in guerrilla ways) can both be experienced at the same time in the post-communist era as a memento of the past and what consequences these practices may have in the politics of identity in the region. The father-in-law of Frigyes is a great example for the conclusions drawn in the paper.

³ When people from the East are in the West, they have an ‘urge’ to steal. This ‘mania’ will also play an important role in films to be discussed later,

Frigyes and daddy spend their first night in New York by partying all night, and in the morning they go to the beach (Coney Island) where they start chatting about the differences between America and Hungary. Dad openly asks his son-in-law, "Do you like this [America]?" Frigyes responds, "No way. I thought I'd get used to it. To this here, too. I've already got used to it a little. Here, you don't say what you want but what you can." Jumping on Frigyes' critical words, dad tries to persuade him to leave New York and board an airplane with him, "So come home with me." Frigyes retorts, "You understand nothing. I am not interested in America. It isn't like I thought would be. Tell Feri in the steam bath, if anybody thinks they are too cool at home, they should come here. There is no American dream, no. There is nothing here. But it's not the same. The question is not *where* it would be better to live." Dad interrupts, "But it is. It is always the question." Frigyes continues, "The question is whether it is *possible* to live anywhere."

In the scene on the beach the protagonist's disappointment in the American dream is explicitly expressed, as nothing turns out to be how he had imagined at home. His actual experiences, therefore, overwrite his conceptions about the free world, or, more specifically, about the United States. His journey beyond the Iron Curtain, that is his attempt at settling elsewhere, is a major disillusionment for Frigyes. As there is no turning back towards the Eastern world, which is embodied by his father-in-law, it should come as no surprise that death seems to be a possible way out. There is a strange smile on his face when he looks back on his murderers and his father-in-law, petrified, right before falling into the East River. The smile can signal his understanding of his complete situation [Picture 3].



Picture 3. - a strange smile on Frigyes's face

especially in *Moszkva tér* ("Moscow Square") and *Itt a szabadság!* ("This is freedom").

Zsötem (“Je t’aime”) by András Salamon released in 1992 also highlights the act of crossing the border (permanently), or in other words, the act of emigrating. A criminal, Laci, takes two of his girlfriends, Anita and Szilvi to Vienna to sell them as exotic dancers in a peepshow and the three of them plan to lead a good life in the Austrian capital using the profit. On their way there in their convertible car, Anita recites an interesting quote by a famous Hungarian writer, Sándor Márai: “Always go west. And never forget you came from the East” (2004: 12).⁴ As a response, Laci swears and admits he deliberately wants to forget where he came from. But just like New York did not accept Frigyes, Vienna doesn’t accept them either. They live as illegal immigrants due to their lack of language skills and work permits, they don’t meet local citizens and can only establish relationships with criminals. Rather, Laci is the only one with relationships, as the girls only address their environment through the mediation of Laci.

Like the protagonist of *Tiszta Amerika* (“Totally America”), they also lead their lives in spaces on the outskirts that cannot be identified as characteristic parts of the well-known Vienna. The underpasses, underground parking lots, apartment interiors, and bars where they turn up can be understood as transitional, in-between spaces, that cannot be linked unambiguously either to the East, or to the West, as if the protagonists had been exiled to the no man’s land in their chosen ‘new’ homes. The narrator of the story, Anita, understands the depth of her homelessness and alienation when Laci gets incarcerated and Szilvi disappears without a trace because without her partners she has no idea where in the Austrian capital their apartment is, the apartment where she has been living for months with her boyfriend and her friend. Her disorientation is both spatial and psychological as Anita has no notion of what she could do in Vienna on her own.

The heroes in *Zsötem* (“Je t’aime”), therefore, are capable of living more freely beyond the Iron Curtain only when it comes to prostitution, pimping and other criminal activities as other forms of existence possible in Vienna are not accessible to them. It turns out from the conversations of the two girls, and should come as no surprise, that they would like to move on from Austria to Italy or Switzerland. It seems as if the life they long for is always beyond an *imaginary* border, independent of real countries or places.

Péter Váradi’s *Itt a szabadság!* (“This is freedom!”) was released in 1990, the year of the change of the political regime. It is in

⁴ My translation.

fact an Eastern European road movie about four strange guys who stuff themselves into a Russian-made car, a Moskvitch, and set off from Budapest to Vienna as subcontractors of a major smuggler to 'transport' electronic devices from Austria to Hungary. In Hungary at the time, this type of semi-legal smuggling used to be quite popular as a means of making money.

In the visual illustration of this journey spent with sometimes surreal and sometimes absurd dialogues close-ups of faces, shot from narrow, frequently distorted and unusual angles are preponderant. The bizarre disproportions of the visual of the film are in harmony with the skewed dialogues, or rather, the balderdash of the wacky protagonists. Four miserable, quarrelsome men are rushing towards the land of freedom where a wealth of goods and illegally obtained profit await them.

Several moments in the film make it clear that these protagonists are not the only ones to place their hopes in such an undertaking; they all are part of a fashionable communal pilgrimage.⁵ In one of the scenes, Figaro, one of the passengers in the Moskvitch warns Sanyika, another passenger to behave and let Uncle Karcsi (a third passenger) be, otherwise he'll be thrown out of the car and will be forced to take a bus to Austria. As a visual illustration, the images following the threat display the interior of a bus travelling westward carrying passengers who have business interests, too. The view is disheartening as they are all drunken, screaming, singing vulgar songs, brandishing fried chicken legs and sausages. Some are forcing the driver to pull over, threatening him that they would urinate



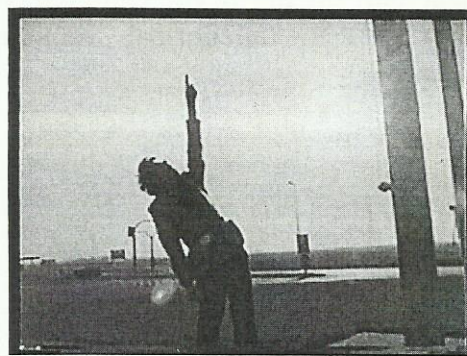
Picture 4. – repugnant and grotesque faces

in the bus if he doesn't comply. In one word: there is total chaos in the bus. Similarly to the representation of the car travelling towards

⁵ As borders were opening up, thousands of Hungarians set out towards the West to spend the little foreign currency they were allowed to have on electronic goods and sweets. Counting today, it meant a couple of hundreds of Euro.

Vienna, the visual representation of the chaos is determined by distorting, claustrophobic close-ups and by strange angles which render the repugnant faces even more bizarre [Picture 4].

Having survived the frazzling moments actually crossing the border, the passengers of the Moskvitch finally arrive at the 'land of freedom'. The scene of their 'entrance' is accompanied by some triumphant music, which is quite ironic especially if one knows that no sooner had they crossed onto the other side of the border than their Soviet car broke down. While the driver, Imre is repairing the car, Sanyika recites with great concentration one of the best known Hungarian poems about freedom, *Nemzeti dal* ("The National Poem"), under the Hungarian flag which signals the border. He boisterously emphasizes with an uproar the returning question asked in the poem "Rabok legyünk, vagy szabadok?" ("Shall we be slaves or free?"), and, the poetic answer given: „Esküszünk, / Esküszünk, hogy rabok tovább / Nem leszünk!” ("We vow, / We vow, / that we will be slaves / No longer!"⁶) Finally, Sanyi promises with an elongated howl (and quite a bit of theatrics) to the Hungarian flag soaring high that he himself will never ever be a slave again [Picture 5]. The film creates a parody of the stereotype of the *free*-West as it links the over the top recital of the poem by Sándor Petőfi and the act of stepping over the Iron Curtain.



Picture 5. – we will be slaves no longer

In an Austrian parking lot where they stop for a bathroom break, one of the passengers, Karcsi remarks that it even feels better to go to the bathroom in the free world. Then we are witnessing a special, symbolic moment: Imre tears a large loaf of bread into two and the currency hidden inside falls to the ground, or rather, it flies all over the place. We see all this in slow motion, with the tunes of the

⁶ László Kőrössi's translation.

Hungarian national anthem playing in the background. The emphatic incident of breaking bread can also invoke the sacred moments of communion, the imitation of the holy act, however, is linked with the profane event of smuggling money. The scene mixes, therefore, uplifting associations and magnificent music with vulgar activities. The mingling of registers results in the ironic tone of the scene. At the same time, it also becomes clear during the scene of breaking bread that the land of freedom is not some abstract, grand idea for the protagonists, but a place with banknotes galore and an immeasurable supply of goods above all else.

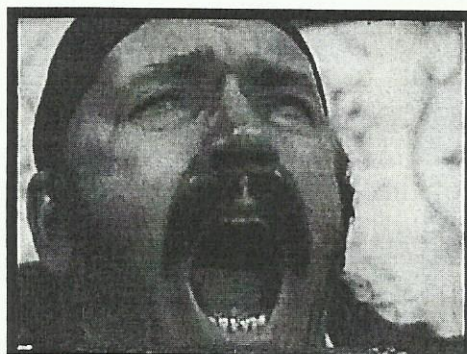
Having arrived in Vienna, the foreign soil becomes a real labyrinth for the protagonist, Imre, when, in hope of a better business deal, his 'friends' mug him, leave him alone and his car is towed away by the police for a parking violation, with Sanyika, his last ally still in it. Imre, desperate and having lost everything runs amok: he gets into a fight with the shop assistants in a Hungarian shop, he rapes a woman, he murders, and he spends the rest of his money in pubs and in a Russian brothel. The illustration of the protagonist's hellish adventures in Vienna are partially determined by surreal scenes and partially by shots and compositions which bring about a grotesque effect similarly to the previously mentioned staging decisions. The vision-like scene where the protagonist wanders the narrow streets of Vienna with a black bag on his head, completely lost and blindly trying to find his way is the allegorical summary of the spooky Viennese night [Picture 6].



Picture 6. – Imre is completely lost in Vienna

Imre eventually escapes back to Hungary with the help of a Turkish truck driver. When in Hungary, he enters the first bar where he finds himself in the middle of a horrific (East-European) party where repugnant men in bad clothes are having a shouting contest for the grand prize of a woman in a G-string who is being carried around

on the shoulder of a fat, bald man in the bar decorated with a string of lights. A grotesque style is, yet again, characteristic of the depiction of the events through the use of distorted close-up shots of faces and unusual perspectives. Imre is sitting at a table, all alone. First, he adjusts his knife to his wrist as if he is about to commit suicide, then he is staring at a bug on his table, struggling on its back. In one of the shots, the struggling little black bug is being photographed on the protagonist's face. Imre recognizes his own hopelessness in the bug on its back and he eventually opens his mouth to let out a silent, desperate cry [Picture 7]. The pictures representing a terrifying world suggest that his only way out of the hell of the free world is to a back to another hell, from where he hoped to evade after the collapse of the Iron Curtain into a better life.



Picture 7. – Desperate cry

Moszkva tér (“Moscow Square”, 2001) was Ferenc Török's first feature film. The story stages travels to the West as well after the change of the regime, the fall of the Iron Curtain. This movie depicts the two protagonists', Petya and Kigler's trip to Paris. The boys board the train in Budapest with counterfeit tickets as they would have been unable to afford an expensive international ticket to the free world, beyond the Iron Curtain. While they are waiting for a connecting train, they spend a couple of hours in Vienna where they witness the so called Gorenje tourism (the expression originates in the practice that the moment Hungarian families crossed the border, the first thing they bought was a Gorenje freezer, which they eventually transported home on the top of their car), the same commercial pilgrimage illustrated with dark tones in *Itt a szabadság!* (“This is freedom”) from the inside. As they want to do some shopping, Kigler and Petya enter a store where Kigler starts to steal without any reserve so he gets caught. Petya has to continue his journey towards Paris alone. After having spent only one day with his girlfriend, and having, in general, a good time, he suddenly

returns home because he is utterly worried as his grandmother doesn't answer the phone when he calls. Petya's decision is unfounded dramaturgically speaking, as when he decides to return home, he acts both against his heart (he is obviously in love with the girl) and, to some extent, against his mind as well. The only explanation for his action is that the Parisian environment is completely alien to him; he has no linguistic or cultural skills, this is why he has got to go. Or, in other words "when the young hero finally sets foot in the West, he loses his orientation and returns home" (Strausz 2011: 23). Petya's foreignness is probably expressed by the blurred (subjective) images shot with rapid camera movements, which we can only see in the depictions of Vienna and in Paris. These images suggest that the given cities affect the observer as a blurred chaos. In short, neither Petya nor Kigler could get far from the Iron Curtain. The latter was alienated from the Western environment by his Eastern-European reflexes in the Austrian capital.

The title of the movie is evidence for the considerable role spatial poetics play in the movie. The title highlights Moscow Square (now Széll Kálmán Sq), an existing place with cult status in Budapest. It bore the name of the Russian capital, which was a major power center on the right side of the Iron Curtain, so the square named after it can be identified as a symbolic space of Eastern-Europeanness. The plot starts with scenes on Moscow Sq and it ends, while the narrator summarizes the ten years that passed since the journey, there as well. This frame structure suggests that the circle closes on itself, it is impossible to escape one's East-Europeanness and there is no way out from the reflexes established in the fettering Communist dictatorship.⁷

3. In the middle of Europe

From the perspective of the Hungarian films of the 2000s, neither Hungary's accession to the European Union, nor the millennium seems to bring about significant changes in terms of the imaginary reconstruction of the western side of what once was called the Iron Curtain. Szabolcs Hajdu, one of the most talented Hungarian directors, highlights the experience of crossing the border in several of his films; *Bibliothèque Pascal* (2010) is one of these. The protagonist of the story, Mona, comes from Transylvania and is sold as a prostitute by her father

⁷ In his analysis of *Moszkva tér* ("Moscow Square") and *Fehér tenyér* ("White palms", to be analysed later), László Strausz claims in the paper cited above that „the protagonists leave Hungary around the time of the change of the regime (but not necessarily because of it). They are looking for possibilities, their identity, but in the movies they cannot be free from the identity they left behind” (2011: 25).

in the West. After several adventures of being sold and bought, she ends up imprisoned in a high-class brothel in England.

In this film by Hajdu, there is a sharp dividing line between the worlds of the East and the West. People from the East (Romanian or Transylvanian) believe in superstitions, they are able to do magic, interpret dreams, and so on. In the West, as exemplified by England, however, culture serves the goals of prostitution and the titillation of lowly desires as the prostitute-prisoners have to act as literary figures. Visually speaking, the digitally over-saturated, vivid tale-like quality of the East is contrasted with England, painted in metallic and dull colors. It should come as no surprise that Mona, the protagonist manages to escape the Western brothel only with the help of an Eastern miracle (the heroes in the dreams of her daughter, who stayed behind in Romania, set her free from captivity). So, the land of freedom, the other side of what used to be the Iron Curtain, on the one hand, prostitutes culture, and, on the other hand, it encourages the exploitation of poor disenfranchised women; at least, from Mona's point of view, this is how this side of Europe looks like.⁸ The Hungarian protagonist of *Viktória – a zürichi expressz* (“Viktoria: A tale of grace and greed”, 2014) by Men Lareida undergoes similar experiences. Her work in the West forces Viktoria to realize that her precursory dreams and expectations are very far from her actual experiences in Switzerland. The colorful visions she created at home about the world beyond the now obsolete Iron Curtain are crushed by the cruel reality of forced prostitution in Switzerland. The fact that she is directly exploited not by the Swiss but by her compatriots (a man with a gambling problem and a greedy Roma woman) does not alleviate her negative experiences about the West because, indirectly, her sad fate is determined by affluent Western demand and need.

Fehér tenyér (“White palms”, 2005) by Szabolcs Hajdu also stages the story of crossing the border in a wester direction and its possibility and impossibility at the same time. Contrary to the previously mentioned films, *Fehér tenyér* (“White palms”) chronicles a successful immigrant story, even though in the beginning the protagonist is restrained by his particular Hungarian, or, Eastern-European reflexes: Miklós Dongó gets into trouble in Canada where he starts to work as a gymnastics coach because he handles his students too aggressively. The film suggests that the reason for this is

⁸ An exciting argumentation by Mónika Dánél (“Kihordó természet, kultúra, nők – belső gyarmatok [Pregnant nature, culture, women – internal colonies]”) sheds light on the cinematographic manifestations of stereotypes about the Eastern and the Western side of Europe and on their possible causes.

his own experience in Hungary in the 70s and 80s where he had to endure a lot crueller methods to be able to become an athlete. The narration contrasts sharply the worlds of a Communist dictatorship with a North American democracy of the 2000s. Dongó has to transcend this temporally displaced imaginary border so that he could become a successful coach in Canada.

Interestingly, there is a strange 'break' in the storyline of the film. The young protagonist at the age of 11-12, liberated from his own cruel coach, joins an acrobatic team, but during his first show, he falls from a great height and crashes in the ground. The images of the dramatic accident are juxtaposed with those of Dongó's adult gymnastics competition, creating a considerable amount of tension in this section of the movie. It is, however, quite difficult to understand how Dongó can perform at such a level 20 years after a serious accident, most probably causing permanent damages in his childhood; or, how is it possible that he is able to do gymnastics? The dramaturgical paradox cannot be resolved, I believe, on a causal level, only in a symbolic space. By symbolic space I mean not the 'real' world of the movie but the reality in the mind of the protagonist. Dongó has to exceed his own childhood self (socialized under Communist oppression) in order to be able to succeed or, at least, to be able to live in an unfamiliar, North American context. The fall and the serious accident can be interpreted as the symbolic death of the (traumatized) childhood self of the protagonist, so when the adolescent Dongó hits the ground, he lays on the circus stage as if all life was drained from him [Picture 8]. This mental event, or, in other words, *rupture* is the prerequisite of the actual crossing of the border between his oppressive childhood and the Western world of his liberated adulthood.



Picture 8. – The symbolic death of the childhood self

Dongó eventually manages to 'cross the border' and the plot of the film concludes with images of his more or less successful American life. It also needs to be mentioned that the movie, *Fehér tenyér* ("White palms"), does not paint too vivid and too alluring a picture about the

West. The North American cities appear in the film as dehumanized jungles of blocks of flats, as noisy networks of roads with heavy traffic. They are captured in the movie through the help of gray and cold blue hues. Therefore, it may seem that Miklós Dongó is accepted by America, the land of freedom, however, does not become his home.

4. Conclusions

During the Communist regime, the Western world was closed off with the Iron Curtain and with a mine field. In the region ruled by Moscow, the power center, it was constructed as an idealized living space. After the fall of the Iron Curtain, it became possible to actually cross the border and to travel and these experiences highlighted the rupture between what had been imagined as the West and what was really experienced. In the 90s this contradiction might not have been surprising, as, in the hold of Communist oppression, in forcibly closed quarters, Western Europe was, inadvertently, imagined to be a lot more colorful than it really was. Interestingly enough, the 2000s did not bring about a radical change in the illustration of the West in auteur films by Hungarian directors. In these latter, the Western world is portrayed as the gray land of human trafficking and the devaluation of culture, as illustrated by examples above. Four or five films are obviously not necessarily enough to draw conclusions without any risk, but these films do seem symptomatic among those movies that feature the topic of border crossing released in the 2000s. Their perspective of depicting the world beyond what used to be the Iron Curtain does not differ fundamentally from that of the movies about the same topic released in the 1990s. It may seem, therefore, that the conception of the West in auteur films, has barely changed in the approximately two decades since the change of the regime because the middle generation of contemporary directors (Ferenc Török, Szabolcs Hajdu, Kornél Mundruczó, György Pálfi and others) were socialized in the milieu of the Communist regime, as proven by *Moszkva tér* ("Moscow Square"). Or, in other words, the spatial poetry in their works, draws and redraws the mental image of a divided historical Europe.⁹ Besides, the West that came to Hungary in the form of liberal capitalism after the change of the regime was not as appealing as it looked from afar, through the Iron Curtain. People who lost their jobs and experienced social injustice did not find the new Western world any better than its predecessor. Moreover, at the end of the so-called

⁹ Cf. „Wherever we look, we can see the same in all Hungarian films released at the end of the century: the past cannot end and the future cannot commence” (Schubert 2002: 12).

Kádár-era (named after the communist leader, János Kádár), in the second half of the 80s' 'soft dictatorship', the security of the socialist regime already started to come with a certain degree of freedom. In comparison, the new social order and economics taking over from the West was a disappointment to many in Hungary.

At the same time, it is also possible that a new generation of cinematographers will shortly take the stage, for whom the East-West divide of what used to be the Iron Curtain will be completely replaced by a hassle and angst free, freely traversable border crossing experience. The protagonist in *Van valami furcsa és megmagyarázhatatlan* ("For some inexplicable reason", 2014) by Gábor Reisz, a young director, understands Lisbon to be similarly livable to Budapest. It is possible to fall in love there, to do the dishes, to work, all in all, to be able to live as in one's own country. In order for that to happen, Budapest, of course, has to feature in the movie in question just like any European metropolis: as the integral part of Europe, where there are no real or imaginary borders.

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