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István, a király: Rock-Opera As an Expression of Hungarian National Identity

Despite its popularity – or perhaps because of it – musical is considered, more often than not, an undemanding movie genre. It is usually associated with pure entertainment. While there is little doubt that musicals can be classified as a part of popular culture, the conviction that they only about entertainment is not entirely true. Their success stems not so much from their spectacular nature, but from the fact that they perfectly fulfil the needs of modern audiences and, among other things, are capable of creating a sense of belonging to social groups, that is – a sense of identity.

This idea may seem far-fetched, but only at the beginning. The idea that an addressee can mediate his or her identity through products of popular culture is by no means new. It has already been raised by several scholars. In *Understanding popular culture* John Fiske remarks that popular culture is, just like any other, a culture – *the active process of generating and circulating meanings and pleasures within a social*.¹ He also points out that all available commodities can be used by consumers to form meanings of self, social identity, and social relations.² But there is also a darker side to it: cultural commodities, Fiske claims, bear within them traces of power relationships and reproduce the ideology of the system that produced them. This means that they are never ‘innocent’ or meaningless, but epitomize ideology. Yet at the same time they also carry marks of the struggle between domination and subordination. This is because popular culture is, on one hand, the culture of the authorities, but on the other, the culture of the subordinated who use it to construct their own meanings that often go against official interpretations. It seems then that popular culture contradicts itself, being on one hand the culture of the authorities, but on the other, that of the oppressed society.

But if popular culture is to be popular, it has not only to provide certain ideas, but, more importantly, to be relevant to the immediate social situation of the people, to comfort to their demands and needs.³ Among them, as Fiske believes – to their need to create a sense of self. Similar ideas can be traced in Marek Krajewski’s views on popular culture. What is most significant is his

¹ J. Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, Routledge, London 1995, p. 23.

² *Ibidem*, p. 11.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 25.

claim that the identity of an individual or of a social group is not given but always created and built upon culture. In modern society it is often mediated through products of popular culture.⁴

If this mode of thinking is taken into account, it is possible to think of the musical as a way of constructing and expressing (individual or social) identity. Examples of such well-known movies as *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Hair* or *Rocky Horror Picture Show* support that thesis. Their commercial success was accompanied by ideological movements and general changes in America society, such as the expansion of counter-culture and fascination with hippie culture. *Rocky Horror Picture Show* was – and still is – immensely popular among eccentric communities and we might even say that RHPS has encouraged the creation of its own subculture. Moreover, these movies had an ability to bring their enthusiasts together.

If these movies had so great an appeal as to encourage people to form and maintain fan groups, it might be speculated that a similar mechanism would work on a much larger scale, such as a whole nation. After all, culture and narrative has always been concerned with creating identity. It is also known from the works of such scholars as Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson and Anthony D. Smith that national identity is not a natural, inborn feature but a social construct.⁵ It is always mediated through culture: be it religion, rituals, art, literature or cinema. In academic discourse it is usually high culture that is taken into account, yet reflections of such scholars as Fiske or Krajewski have proven that popular culture can also be used as a tool for the creation of identity. And if popular culture, in general, can, then the musical – as a product of popular culture – also can.

This notion is confirmed by Raymond Knapp's work on American musicals. Knapp, a musicologist from UCLA, believes that the American musical always takes on a formative, defining role in the construction of a collective sense of 'America'.⁶ He explains that this defining role stems from two factors. Firstly, American musicals play to American audiences "who will be acutely aware of anything that challenges their notions of what or who America is or stands for, or of its place in the world".⁷ Secondly, the need to define and refine what it means to be American has always been a great concern of American culture in general. The musical is a specifically American art form which, being available and comprehensible for all social groups, proved to be particularly effective in explaining the concept of 'America'.

Musicals are not, of course, restricted to the United States. The genre emerged in America and was quickly assimilated by other cultures. Yet the social context in which these musicals were played was completely different

⁴ See M. Krajewski, *Kultury kultury popularnej*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznań 2003.

⁵ See: B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, Verso, London 1991; E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1983 and A.D. Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism. A critical survey of recent theories of nations and nationalism*, Routledge, London 1998.

⁶ R. Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2005, p. 103.

⁷ Ibidem.

now. These musical were no longer being played for American audiences, so they had to be reinterpreted to cater to the needs of non-Americans. I am convinced that one of the most interesting assimilations of the genre took place in Hungary. It is particularly visible in the case of one of the most famous Hungarian musicals, rock-opera *István, a király* (*Stephen, a king*).⁸ I find it particularly interesting because of two factors. Firstly, by creating a vision of what it means to be Hungarian, the movie is an open expression of national identity. Secondly, the movie epitomizes the struggle between domination and subordination (as described by Fiske). As I will later show, the fact that it was filmed in 1984 when the Socialist Worker's Party ruled Hungary, had a strong influence on the meaning of the movie.

István, a király, a rock-opera about Stephen I, was created in 1983 by Lev-ente Szörényi and Sándor Bródy. At the beginning it was a stage show but it became so popular That in 1984 it was filmed by Gábor Koltay. The plot of the rock-opera refers to historical events, namely to the emergence of Hungary as a Christian state and to the early years of the reign of Stephen I (also known as St. Stephen of Hungary).

According to Waclaw Felczak, Christianity was known in Hungary from quite an early stage thanks to contacts with Byzantium and Slavs. For a certain period of time, missionaries from both the east and west had an influence on the Hungarians. In 883, Prince Géza, father of St. Stephen, invited German and Italian monks to the country. In the same year, he and his family were christened. Géza's son, Vajk, changed his name to Stephen. Yet that act was not tantamount to christianisation of the whole country. Most Hungarian tribes still worshipped pagan gods and despite the help of German monks and soldiers, Prince Géza did not manage to unify Hungarian tribes. Just before his death in 997 he appointed, as was custom in western hereditary monarchies, his son heir to the Hungarian crown. His decision ran against tribal law according to which the oldest male member of the family should succeed the dead leader. Géza's brother, Koppány, the oldest member of the Árpád family, rebelled against Stephen. Thanks to the support of the German army, Stephen defeated his uncle at the Battle of Veszprém in 998. Koppány was captured and killed, his body quartered and displayed upon the walls of the most important Hungarian castles as a warning for other tribal chiefs. Stephen secured his position and in 1001 he was crowned the first king of Hungary. The process of unification of the country was finally completed.⁹

The plot of *István, a király* is based on this period of history and faithfully follows the events that I have presented above. The movie draws extensively on a whole set of collective notions about the past, referring to the Hungarian psyche and national symbols. All elements of the show, such as music, lyrics,

⁸ I treat rock-opera as a subgenre of musical, even though some critics prefer to see it as an independent genre. To learn more about problems with terminology see M. Bielacki, *Musical. Geneza i rozwój formy dramatyczno-muzycznej*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź 1994.

⁹ All information based on: W. Felczak, *Historia Węgier*, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wrocław 1983, p. 21–26.

choreography and stage design contribute to producing a meaningful whole; a whole which is prone to multiple interpretations and revisions which reflect the present situation of the audience. History as presented in *István, a király* is but a pretext to show the values which are important for the whole nation. Historical events are depicted in such a way that they become symbols of the Hungarian psyche and invite the interpretation of *István, a király* as an expression of motifs which were formative for Hungarian culture and Hungarian national identity.

First and foremost, the fight between Stephen and Koppány is presented as a conflict between tradition and modernity. This conflict is a leitmotiv of the whole musical and it manifests itself on all possible levels: on the level of the story, music, stage-design and costumes. It is worth noting that rock-opera alone can be described as a genre positioned on the borderline between tradition and modernity. Rock-opera is an attempt at bringing together traditional conventions of opera, rock music and modern technology. As a result, songs in *István, a király* are characterised by stylistic pluralism. Each group of characters is characterised by unique music. In Stephen's case, it is melodious pop music – meddled with, and at the end of the movie, the tune of the Hungarian national anthem. Priests and monks sing songs akin to Gregorian chants, pagans and Koppány – dynamic rock numbers, three Hungarian nobles – vaudevillian-like songs.¹⁰ These types of music often interact with each other in order to deepen the meaning of particular scenes. For example, during Géza's funeral, a traditional Hungarian folk melody is firstly blended into, and then vanishes behind, Gregorian *kyrie eleison*. This blending expresses the imminent change; the introduction of Christianity and the transition from the old rituals to the new ones. Moreover, in the movie, historical characters appear together with modern people. While the main characters such as Stephen, Koppány and Stephen's mother are dressed in costumes which are based on medieval designs, the choir and dancers wear regular t-shirts, jeans and pleated skirts. This coexistence of two types of characters demonstrates the connection between the historical, almost mythical past, and the present condition of the audience.

The tension between past and present is also reflected in the antagonists. Stephen can be read as a character that symbolises modernity while Koppány personifies tradition. By doing so, these characters do not just act out the conflict, but also present what it means to be Hungarian.

Koppány is an advocate of the old ways and claims that converting to the new religion would be tantamount to servitude and losing the sense of what it means to be 'Hungarian'. Laborc, one of his staunch supporters, points to it by shouting in one of his songs:

¹⁰ See: *István, a király*, <http://www.zikkurat.hu/istvan/index.shtml> [access: 23.01.2013] and M. Bielacki, *Musical. Geneza i rozwój formy dramatyczno-muzycznej*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź 1994.

*Nem kell olyan isten, aki nem tud magyarul (We don't need a God who does not speak Hungarian)
Szabad magyaroknak nem kell ilyen úr! (Free Hungarians don't need such a lord!)*¹¹

The song emphasizes the importance of language and Hungarian gods; that is – the significance of national culture which is under a threat from foreign influences. On a symbolic level, Koppány embodies tradition and freedom, as well as such values as courage, loyalty to the old faith and determination. It should be pointed out that in Hungary – a country which was for a long time occupied by foreign forces – these values were always held in very high esteem. Koppány also personifies the stereotype of a proud rebel who is ready to sacrifice his life for the independence of his fatherland.

Stephen represents modernity and Christianity. He is presented as a character who is torn between his duty (that is – putting down the rebellion) and his conscience which tells him that he should not kill his uncle, nor other rebels who are, after all, Hungarian people. Still, he realises that the only hope for Hungary to survive is Christianisation (as he sings – *Nincs más út, csak az Isten útja* [*There is no other road but God's road*]) and, to achieve it he must be a strong leader who will unite quarrelling Hungarian tribes. That is why he does not shrink from cruelty and orders to kill Koppány and to quarter his body. Stephen feels, above all else, responsible for his country. That is also why he fights for power – not for power itself, but for the good of Hungary.

One may wonder which of these characters is positive and which negative. This is actually a tricky question, since both Stephen and Koppány are treated on more or less equal terms. They are presented in a way that makes it impossible to talk about them in terms of good versus evil. They are both characterized as patriots who assume responsibility for the well-being of Hungary. The only reason for their conflict is the difference in their visions of Hungary's future. Nevertheless, it does not come as a surprise that most fans of the movie sympathize with Koppány rather than Stephen. It is only natural that rebellious characters are usually more memorable. It is also Koppány who sings the most dynamic songs of the whole movie and, what is more, he is the one personifying universally acclaimed values. On the other hand, the storyline lays bare the shortcomings of this system of values: because of his blind loyalty to tradition Koppány is unable to see that the only way for Hungary to maintain relative independence among Christian countries is Christianisation and renouncement of paganism. At the end of the day, the movie shows, it was Stephen who was right.

The analysis of *István, a király* clearly shows that historical events are interpreted from the perspective of the 20th century. Since, as Fiske claims, popular culture has to be *relevant to the immediate social situation of the people*¹² and since the rock-opera is highly symbolical, it is possible to see it as an allusion to the political situation of Hungary in the early 80s. Such an interpretation

¹¹ *István, a király* (1984). All quotes in the paper are translated by me since the movie was never officially translated into English.

¹² J. Fiske, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

would not only explain how a movie about The Middle Ages can construct modern national identity, but also why the communist authorities agreed to screen a movie that reminds its audience about the Christian roots of the Hungarian state and which glorifies rebellion against the official regime.

In the early 80s, Hungary faced a serious economic crisis. To overcome it, János Kádár introduced one economic and political restriction after another, in an attempt to reorganize and centralize the country. It was vital then to show the people that restrictions were necessary. His situation is reminiscent to a certain degree of the circumstances Stephen finds himself in in *István, a király* and one can actually think of Stephen as a figure standing for János Kádár and Koppány as a personification of the Hungarians.¹³ It is not only the main traits of both characters that make such an interpretation possible, but also the fact that throughout the movie Koppány and his supporters constantly emphasize the fact that Christianity is a foreign religion which is being forced on the Hungarian people. They are highly critical of Stephen who accepts the presence of German soldiers and priests at the king's court and complain about the foreign ideology that is taking over Hungary. Summing up, these elements can be – and were actually seen by the Hungarian¹⁴ – as an allusion to communism and the Soviet Union army which was stationed in Hungary.

Koppány, as I have already said, represents the stereotypical rebel. His hopeless fight against foreign rule harkens back to the Hungarian uprisings of 1848 and 1956. The association between Koppány and the heroes of these uprisings becomes evident when he sings his manifesto, *Szállj fel szabad madár*. The refrain goes as follows:

*Csak annyit kérdezek, a válaszra várva: (I ask only one question, and wait for an answer)
Rabok legyünk vagy szabadok? (Shall we be slaves or free?)*¹⁵

These words are strikingly similar to the lines from Sándor Petőfi's *Nemzeti Dal* (National Song):

*Rabok legyünk vagy szabadok? (Shall we be slaves or free?)
Ez a kérdés, válasszatok! (This is the question, choose!)*¹⁶

This is an important detail. Petőfi, who died during the uprising in 1848, is one of the most important poets of Hungarian Romanticism. He wrote the *National Song* to encourage the citizens of Budapest to join the fighting. Every Hungarian knows the poem, so the words sung by Koppány are instantly recognisable. Together with this recognition, comes an identification with the character and his glorification.

¹³ K. Milun, *Rock Music and National Identity in Hungary*, <http://www.pum.umontreal.ca/revues/surfaces/vol1/milun.html> (access: 23.01.2013).

¹⁴ See D. Matalin, *A magyar rockopera: István-az első és utolsó*, http://nol.hu/kultura/20100821-istvan_az_első_es_utolsó-779481 (access: 15.06.2014).

¹⁵ *István, a király* (1984).

¹⁶ S. Petőfi, *Nemzeti dal*, [in:] *The Lost Rider. A Bilingual Anthology*, Szekszárd 2007.

If we were to treat Stephen as a character that represents János Kádár and Koppány as a symbol of opposition against his regime, then the story would bring to mind the Hungarian Uprising of 1956 which is still one of the biggest traumas in Hungarian history. Also the final coronation scene brings to mind this analogy. In this scene, Stephen is crowned king while Koppány's quartered body represented by red sheets is exposed in the background. The solemn atmosphere of this scene is disturbed by the fact that the new order was built upon the bodies of the rebels.

In *Understanding popular culture* Fiske points out that popular culture must contain both the forces of domination and opportunities to speak out against them, to oppose or evade them from subordinated but not totally disempowered positions.¹⁷ *István, a király* provides these opportunities. From the point of view of a dominant, state-regulated culture, it can be seen as a movie which supports the politics of the ruling class. However, from the point of view of the people, it is a story about freedom, respect for tradition and about a failed rebellion, that is – a story which is very close to their own experience. *István, a király*, then, contradicts itself – it is a very ambiguous show which on one hand glorifies tradition and the fight for freedom but, on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of looking forward to the future. After all, despite the fact that Koppány's ideals were worth admiration, it was Stephen who created Hungary as a state.

It is fascinating that *István, a király*, even after thirty years, is still an important part of Hungarian culture. This rock-opera has not – and most likely will never – become dated. It is still watched and the stage show is still staged in theatres across Hungary. What is more, it is always an occasion to manifest patriotic feelings, especially in the final scene when the national anthem is played. The audience stands up then and listens in solemn silence. Many people bring Hungarian flags to the shows which take place in the open air. This behaviour shows how much *István, a király* has become a part of national culture. Nowadays, the conflict between the main characters can also be seen in terms of, for example, the tensions between Hungary and the European Union or the clash between regionalism and globalisation. It would not be an exaggeration to say that *István, a király* makes it possible to understand the present by referring to the mythical past. The movie presents themes which are not only universal, but also crucial for the process of building Hungarian national identity, such as the myth of origin, the insoluble conflict between the past and present, Christianity, and the valour of the fight for freedom and respect for tradition. These motifs make *István, a király* worth watching not only for Hungarians, but also for all non-Hungarians who desire to understand the culture of Hungary. For them, *István, a király* will be an invaluable insight into the Hungarian mind.

¹⁷ J. Fiske, *op. cit.*, p. 25.