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GEOCULTURAL ASPECTS IN CONTEMPORARY NOVELS

Abstract: The problems investigated in the present paper deal with the way space is structured, as well as with the role of cultural and linguistic alterity in the novels Bodor Ádám: Sinistra körzet (The Sinistra Zone; translated by Paul Olchvary) (1992), Corin Braga: Claustrofobul (The Claustrophobic, 1992), Jože Hradil: Slike brez obrazov (Photos without Faces, 2012) and Dan Stoica: Ţara secuilor (The Land of the Szeklers, 2010). Emphasis is also laid on the geocultural features that define the text of these novels and on the relationship between the texts studied and the multiethnic framework of the depicted regions (i. e. Transylvania and the Prekmurje region). Stereotypes that appear when facing linguistic and cultural alterity and the characters' attitudes towards the majority-minority problem are also analysed. How do social and political changes influence the image of others?Stereotypes are analysed based on Hans Georg Gadamer's work Truth and Method. Based on Deleuze and Guattari's terms, tendencies in minor literature towards territorialisation, deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation are followed.
Braga and Bodor lay emphasis on the dehumanising effects of dictatorship. The characters are hybrid and space gains a distinct role in their novels. Characters move in a broader space in Stoica's and Hadril's novels, where peaceful coexistence between nations and national confrontations are equally present.

Keywords: Image of the other, interculturality, geocultural aspects, changing Central Eastern European societies, contemporary Romanian, Hungarian and Slovenian literature.

Introduction

The studied texts are Ádám Bodor's *Sinistra körzet* (*The Sinistra Zone*, 1992), Corin Braga's *Claustrofobul* (*The Claustrophobic*, 1992), Dan Stoica's *Ţara secuilor* (*The Land of the Szeklers*, 2010) and Joze Hradil's *Slike brez obrazov* (*Photos without Faces*, 2012). Each analyzed novel deals with the possibilities of action of the Central European man, placed in a mixed ethnic environment, exposed to the vicissitudes of history, in the second half of the 20th century or at the beginning of the 21st century. In the novels of Corin Braga and Ádám Bodor the sequences of the plot, which sometimes are not easy to follow for the – intentionally confused – reader, but can be inferred from the references, take place in a confined Transylvanian region. The novels of Stoica and Hradil study the fate of the people of a single larger region (Szeklerland and Prekmurje respectively), but the threads of the plot linked to the particular characters reach farther, as far as the capital and the American continent as well.

Approach

In the analysis of the listed works geocultural determinedness offers itself as a possibility of interpretation. "In the prose works drawing on intercultural experiences, born in an intercultural border space, the heterogeneity of the cultural space comes to the foreground, therefore it is not only the space concept unfolding in the texts due to the represented cultural heterogeneity that gets into the focus of interpretation, but also the way the concept of border identity itself is reflected." – Éva Bányai states (2012, 383). The common geocultural and social aspects seem to display similar novel-poetic processes. What Éva Bányai states about

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Ádám Bodor's prose is true for Corin Braga's novel as well: in their narratives the space, the landscape is not the expression of the essence of national identity, but an aspect strongly related to the hybrid identity formed through different relations. The universe of the novels evokes the inhuman, destructive world of the Romanian dictatorship in the spirit of the Kafkaesque absurd. In *The Sinistra Zone* the author denotes a space by the title of the volume already in such a way that it continuously confuses the reader: it is not known whether the action of the narratives, constructing the chapters, takes place at an existing, geographical place or in the nowhere land of Orwellian utopia, in the hell of the dictatorships of anywhere. The most important metaphor of the text is the border. It appears already in the initial sentence: "Two weeks before he died, colonel Borcan had taken me to a land inspection to the barren hills of the forest zone of Dobrin." (Bodor, 1992, 5) The toponyms refer to the region of Maramureş, near the Romanian-Ukrainian border. The forest of Dobrin lies on the frontier; colonel Borcan is approaching the border of life and death. The heroes of the events abounding in irrational turns are in an existential border situation, vegetating on a subhuman, half-animal level of defenselessness. The hero bearing the family name of the author and narrating mostly in the first person singular comes here in order to help his foster son, Béla Bundasian, to escape, but finally he has to run away from this penal camp like "nature reserve" without carrying out his task. (As it becomes subsequently obvious for the reader, the son's lover is subjected to forced medication as punishment, whereupon the previously multilingual Cornelia Ilarion, alias Connie Illafeld, forgets to talk, her outlook resembles that of an animal, Béla Bundasian kills her, and then sets fire to himself). The narrator-hero gradually adapts to his terrorized environment, and gets over the moral barriers. In the conditions of dictatorship the heroes do not have the possibility to live a life worthy of man. Their only option is to escape the Sinistra zone. Or they could always die.

The title of Corin Braga's novel also suggests a feeling of confinement. The plot, built up by resorting to the tools of realism, evokes an uncanny, nightmarish, Orwellian world. The work, heavily influenced by Kafka and Bulgakov (the motif of the absurd trial and judgment evokes Kafka's novel, while the doubling and interplay of reality planes or the talking tomcat recall Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*), through the alternation of the external and internal points of view, suggests the indefinability of personality. It is not or not exactly followed what is promised by the subtitles and chapter summaries. Confusing the reader is an important text-constitutive element here as well: it is impossible to decide what is actually happening in reality and what takes place in the hero's imagination. The toponyms (Herina, Branişte) connected to the anonymous town as the location of the plot connote a Transylvanian region not long ago still of mixed ethnicity, Bistriţa. As in Bodor's novel, the plot starts with the hero's arrival at the scene of the action, from where he runs away at the end of the novel and ends up at an experimental station. He also adapts to the environment just like Andrei Bodor. The geologist Anir Margus is appointed there to stop the flood of groundwater, later he becomes the president, and he is sacrificed (or he runs away?). The nightmares and visions which overwhelm the hero placed here come from a settlement sunk below the town, where he falls with an elevator after his arrival. The emergence of ghosts, in my interpretation, reveal that the foreign past, repressed into the unconscious and still surviving in the buildings, as well as the former Saxon citizens of Bistriţa are still there as memories and influence the events.

Anir and his wife, Adela, occur at scenes (prison-like school, hospital functioning in a mine shaft; personality transforming institution called experimental station) which point at the mechanisms described by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977) in the world of the Romanian dictatorship.

The regions belonging together geoculturally cannot effect the referenciality of certain names. This is indicated by the pseudonyms used in the zone of Sinistra, where identification

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is impossible from the start, because everybody gets a "dog tag", pseudonym from the commander of the mountain hunters, and the names of the representatives of power change as well. The all-knowing colonel is also called Izolda Mahmudia or Coca Mavrodin. "The shift, the double or multiple use of names strengthens the presence of border identity (that is, the unstable, intangible nature of identity)" – Bányai writes (2012, 388). The names of Braga's characters also suggest hybridity. Dorli Ostra, Judaniil imply Austrian, Jewish people's names; Joseph Knall resembles Joseph K, the name of Kafka's hero; VroclavVladinski's name creates the impression of being Polish, Anir Margus; the main character's name evokes Albertus Magnus, but also refers to the dream. Some heroes bear several names, they have different names in the conscious and in the subconscious world (Dorli Ostra's equivalent is Luiza Textoris, Judaniil's one is Fulviu Friator).

Jan Assmann in his work *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization* (2011) distinguishes communicative memory, which refers to memories of the near past, and the broader concept of cultural memory shaping collective identity. Both aspects of memory have an important role in the analyzed works. The inhuman relations of the dictatorship cause loss of identity, triggering the intentional effacement of the memories of the near and distant past.

The geocultural experience influences the understanding of the works as well: due to the use of different linguistic and material attributes, distinct, location-related narratives and interpretations are created. The text is interpreted differently by those who are inside and by those who are outside the cultural-linguistic borders. "They [the texts] are read differently by those who dispose of *communicative* memory about the space and time captured in the text, or at least about part of this time, and each name, concept and object opens a past, inner world segment, the readers encountering their own history and their own questions by reading these texts. And they are interpreted totally differently by those who read them without a biographic memory, and their emerging questions are formulated in the course of reading." (Faragó, 2009, 42) The two novels evoking the Romanian dictatorship are interpreted differently by a Romanian, by an ethnic Hungarian living in Romania and by a Hungarian from Hungary respectively, and also differently by the reader who experienced the world of the dictatorship and by the one who got socialized after the change of regime.

The first volume of Dan Stoica's trilogy *Romania, my Nightmare Country* (*România, ţara mea de coşmar)*, entitled *The Land of the Szeklers* (*Ţara secuilor*), published in 2010, and Joze Hradil Slovenian writer's family saga *Photos without Faces (Slike brez obrazov*, 2012*)* are closer to the realist novel poetics. Joze Hradil explores family memories and he studies in connection with memories the issues of the Central European loss of identity, while Stoica creates a new collective myth.

Dan Stoica's novel examines the social-cultural-political life of contemporary Romania. The work reflects on the problems of coexisting ethnicities by presenting a possible ethnic conflict based on the real moral-political situation in Romania, clearly sympathizing with the Szeklers. One can identify less with his political views, but rather with his satire. The main character, Mircea Damian is hybrid: he is a Romanian internal affairs officer, who is demoted after his service in Vienna and Bucharest, and placed – as punishment – to the Szeklers, to be used, without his knowledge, in an outrage leading to an ethnic conflict. It turns out at the end of the novel that the hero, intended to be the scapegoat (who cannot defend himself against the accusation of bombing), loses his own son in the attempt whose target was the bishop claiming the autonomy of the Hungarians.

Stoica's novel, permeated by politics, presents an ironic-sarcastic image of contemporary Romania with the help of scenes taking place in real (Bucharest, Topliţa) and fictitious (Embervár) locations. The all-embracing corruption, nepotism, the games of the secret agencies impede the normal European evolution.

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Stoica also presents the modes of manipulative use of ethnic stereotypes. (For the citizens of Bucharest, hystericized by the media, one shout "Run, here come the Szeklers!" is enough, and everybody panics on the subway. Then the ironic correction follows: "Pardon, the Gypsies!"). The author does not turn to the collective myths of the Szeklers, instead, he creates a new Szekler mythology. However, resistance and patriotism bear special values also in these stories. This is also suggested by the closing image. In the apocalyptic ending the whole Szekler region sinks in a huge earthquake, the villagers are not willing to evacuate the settlement, they rather lock themselves in the church, they want to die at home.

According to Beáta Thomka's paradigmatic statement, "the border situation is a frequent marker of the historical experience and identity of the social micro-communities, ethnic groups and their members. However, there is no need to live on a frontier, or to pass the border to experience this, as history rearranges European borders without the generations living in the given region ever leaving their homeland, as it occurred many times in the 20th century." (Thomka, 2009, 7) The primary scene of Joze Hradil's autobiographical novel is the hometown of the author, Murska Sobota, which belonged to five countries during the hundred-years of the novel's action: the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, the Kingdom of the Slovenes, Croats and Serbs, Hungary, Yugoslavia and Slovenia.

Memory and oblivion, identity preservation and spontaneous or forced assimilation, the unreflective use and tolerant revision of the stereotypes, the cavalcade of all kinds of human distortions caused by exclusionary politics are presented on the pages of the novel. The memories go back as far as the end of the 19th century, the plot starts in the childhood of the main character, Jurij (the narrator identifies himself with his point of view), during the Second World War, and lasts until the present, the beginning of the 21st century. In his book *Truth and Method* Hans-Georg Gadamer (2004 [1960]) speaks about the unavoidability of the stereotypes in thinking. This is presented in an interesting way in the novel. We can follow the examined historical period from two perspectives: in the first part from the point of view of a child, in the second from the adult Jurij's point of view. The wish to understand is a common intention, however, while the child identifies himself unreflectively with the stereotypes, the adult identifies himself with the "foreigner" entering the family. The handshake-chain over generations is a beautiful symbol of this mentality. (The Jewish-Hungarian uncle once shook hands with Jókai and he passes on the handshake to his Slovenian nephew.)

The perspectives are doubled also within the childhood story due to Bagi, the true friend, whose social position and opinion on the political events are totally the opposite of Jurij's. Bagi is poor, Slavophile, sympathizes with the communists and is waiting for the Soviet occupation, while Jurij lives in a wealthy family, his Hungarian father is the administrator of the countess, his brother Vladimir joins the Hungarian army voluntarily – despite his father's protest. Still, they are inseparable. Their debates contribute to the maturization of the main character. (Jurij accepts the stereotyped image of the Jews presented in the newspapers; Bagi warns him that their family doctor, Doctor Farkas is a Jew himself, too.) The symbol appearing in the title of the book and on its cover image suggests the loss of identity.

Conclusions

Deleuze and Guattari's (1986) statement that those undergoing social *deterritorialization* perform the act of cultural *reterritorialization* through literature is valid for each of the studied novels. Stoica's novel suggests: the man-distorting conditions of a dictatorship define reality even after the overthrow of the totalitarian system. Hradil's novel is more optimistic, perhaps because Slovenia's route to democratization was opened sooner. The community may find its place, but the individual is still searching for it.

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