Everybody is a fool: rural life, social order and carnivalesque marginalization in a Hungarian television series

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Abstract

The chapter provides a case study on A mi kis falunk (Our Little Village), a popular Hungarian comedy series. The analysis highlights the interplay between emphatic and disciplinary humour, ridicule, satire, and moral assessment. It claims that in Eastern Europe, due to the weakness of the middle class and to the legacy of socialism, village communities and rural life are targets of internal othering. The ambivalent portrayal of the village articulates the feeling of anomie. This is specific to the region in that, due to the post-socialist condition, nostalgia for community is fused with the ambivalent acceptance of neoliberal values.

Keywords

comedy series, ridicule, post-socialism, working class, village life, Hungary

Pilisszentlélek is a small, picturesque, multiethnic village, inhabited by a few hundred people, surrounded by the mountains of Pilis. It is situated 40 kilometres from the capital, Budapest, close to the Danube and the Slovak border. Since 2016, this has been the shooting location for a popular fictional series on the market-leading Hungarian commercial TV channel, RTL Klub. The series, entitled A mi kis falunk (Our Little Village, RTL Klub, 2017–present), and the location where the filming takes place were in the crossfire of heated political debates a couple of years ago, when Krisztina Morvai, a former member of the European Parliament from the Hungarian right-wing opposition party Jobbik, argued strongly against the shooting that she claimed disturbed the village. Critics have also claimed that the production violates not only the law and privacy of the inhabitants, but also national pride and the spirit of a sacred place which has special importance to the Hungarians. Pilisszentlélek (literary ‘Pilis Holy Spirit’, or ‘the holy spirit of Pilis’) is very near to the centre and symbol of Hungarian Christianity, the city of Esztergom. Not far from the village are the ruins of the only monastic order founded in

Hungary, the Pauline monastery. Furthermore, Pilis mountain is the 'sacral centre' of contemporary Hungarian neo-paganism or neo-mythology, and one of its peaks, Dobogókő, 'Thumping Rock', is often considered by them to be the heart chakra of the Earth. Thus, the attacks against the series and the location of its filming emphasized that it is a disgrace to a sacred place and instead of presenting the beauties and values of the Hungarian countryside, each episode is full of cheap, silly jokes suggesting the downplaying of the village and rural Hungary.

Debates over the location of shooting a film or television series happen quite often. The case of AMKF provides another example of the social power of images and symbolic meanings associated with places. The intensity of the debate is well illustrated by the furious sentences of a pro-government journalist, who drew a comparison between the defence of spiritual values and the border barrier which was built in 2015 to block migrants' and refugees' entry to Hungary: "Perhaps the biggest problem is not what filmmakers do in the village and how, but that we tolerate humiliating people, trampling on our national values, our history, and passing on to our children values that are the complete opposite of all that which is important to us. But I think that after a successful defence of the physical borders, the spiritual defence will follow. We will protect our values, our children, our society" (Jurák 2018).

Who is in danger here? Who is being humiliated in their his/her dignity? What does this series threaten? Is it the national imagery, the cultural traditions, and the villagers who preserve them, that are under attack?

It is worth approaching the topic from a little further away, and asking questions of contemporary neoliberal assessment culture, as well as the social, cultural, and geopolitical divisions. Critical discourses of media-related shaming practices usually focus on Reality Television programmes and highlight the ambiguities around the moral assessment of poor people and the underclass (Skeggs 2004, Ouelette and Hay 2008, Skeggs and Wood 2011, Kavka 2012, Skeggs and Wood 2012, Hirdman 2016, Eriksson 2016, Reifová 2019). AMKF portrays the everyday life of a fictional Hungarian village, a kind of "village of fools", and depicts stereotypical characters such as the incompetent policeman, the drunken public worker, the hesitant priest, or the agile innkeeper who is hopelessly in love. This "village of fools" and the portrayal of its inhabitants has its roots in folk culture, but can also be an example of humour with disciplining potential.

The context and background of the following analysis are the broad questions of contemporary media representations of poverty, class, and social division (Butsch 2008, Deery and Press 2017). The chapter will discuss the dynamics of, and the interplay between, emphatic and

disciplinary humour, ridicule, satire, and moral assessment, and will examine what values this portrayal represents, and to what extent it can be interpreted as a kind of normative, regulatory discourse. It starts from the assumption that the depreciation of ordinary people in popular culture does not necessarily take place within the framework of a shaming narrative or "poverty porn". Because of this, the chapter concentrates on different aspects of the media representation of low-status groups, rather than drawing only on the rich body of scholarly publications discussing the questions of media-related shame. The focus will be on ridicule, a process that often overlaps with, or is related to shaming but moves other dynamics. Consequently, the chapter examines different genres (drama series instead of Reality Television), milieu (the countryside and the village instead of an urban setting as a typical setting for working-class people) and discusses the representation of the community rather than of individuals.

In the first part of the chapter, I will show why it is interesting and relevant in an Eastern European post-socialist environment that the focus of the research is not on the urban working class, but a small rural community. My claim is that regulatory discourses require the presentation and construction of marked otherness. In Eastern Europe, due to the weakness (or lack) of the middle class and the legacy of socialism, village communities are ideal targets of internal othering (Stewart 1996, Kay, Shubin and Thelen 2012), along with the working-class people. The "other", then, is not necessarily created by divisions of class, wealth, or labour. The village community as the "other" is constructed in terms of lifestyle, values, and habitus. Furthermore, examining the humorous depiction of the village community, the chapter is not informed by the supremacy theories of humour (which are easier to connect to the questions of shame and assessment culture), but rather relief and incongruity theories of laughter, humour, and comic portrayal (Billig 2005). The claim here is that, instead of an attitude of superiority and a shaming narrative, a more ambivalent and sympathizing form of ridicule prevails in the series. There is a striking ambiguity in the depiction of the series. On the one hand, the village is presented as the comic "other", a group of people with low social and cultural standards. However, on the other, the village is portrayed as an active and sympathetic community. The chapter assumes that these ambivalent and divergent representation dynamics can be reconciled with the post-socialist position of the region, especially regarding disillusionment with the values of neoliberalism and regime change. The series articulates an ambivalent and contradictory situation and the feeling of anomie, the perplexity of values. This perplexity is specific to the region in that, due to the post-socialist condition, nostalgic longing for community is fused with the ambivalent acceptance of neoliberal values. Additionally, the chapter shows how village life is portrayed as a system of bargains and tricks, but also the extent

to which this irregular, hedonistic life can soften social divisions and conflicts. Hence, the wording of the title of the series, Our Little Village, can also be read as a peculiar and ambivalent, postmodern national allegory that lightens social conflicts through humour and introversion.

From socialism to post-socialism: dismantling the working class and the missing middle

When discussing the neoliberal discourse regarding self-invention and the middle class, we must take into consideration the legacy of socialism which placed the working class at the privileged centre of the social order. Political changes and the fall of socialism almost necessarily led to a crisis of narratives tied to the working class. In the hectic years of post-socialist transformation, the working class left its privileged position and other social groups, namely the old/new bourgeoisie and entrepreneurs, came into its place (Burawoy and Verdery 1999, Kennedy 2002).

Comparable to the situation and transformation of the working class, the question of the middle class is a cardinal issue. The middle class, of course, is a controversial term, an "empty sign" (Kalb 2014), or "a class category without class theory" (Scheiring 2019: 93). As Kalb and Scheiring summarise, instead of being defined by social inequalities and the division of labour, definitions of the middle class are organized according to the issues of consumption, projecting the values and lifestyles of international and local elites onto society. In the context of post-socialism, the definitions and the positions of the middle class are even more problematic. In a recent sociological study Éber (2020) discussed the growth of social, economic and cultural inequalities and the strong polarization of Hungarian society. He described the structure of Hungarian society as a stretched droplet whose upper part is much longer and narrower than its lower piece. Éber emphasized the duration, continuation and importance of a process that he claims has been going on since the 1970s, resulting in an increasing polarization of the society where inequalities are exceptionally strong, and social mobility is extremely low.

As questions of neoliberal governmentality are strongly connected to the topic of the middle class and usually focus on individuals, the problems of the polarization of Hungarian society and the missing middle class highlight the need for a different approach regarding the discussion of social/internal othering. Therefore, the focus will not be on the concept of the "entrepreneurial self" (Bröckling 2016), but on how the community experiences and reacts to the challenges of change, modernization and development. Accordingly, the analysis will pay attention to the habits of trickery and the hedonistic rites of the community that can soften social conflicts.

Focus on the countryside

The chapter started from the assumption that the depiction of the countryside and village life can shed an exciting light on the dynamics of the post-socialist transformation of Eastern Europe, as rural communities and the rural environment are a kind of condensation points for post-socialist socio-cultural change, cultural imagination, the formation of values, and the shifts in national and community identification. As Cloke (2006: 19) argued, "while the geographic spaces of the city and the countryside have become blurred it is in the social distinction of rurality that significant differences between the rural and urban remain". Countryside, rural milieu, and the village are not interchangeable categories, not used everywhere, and each has its important local (geopolitical) value and context. Hoggart, Buller, and Black (1995) pointed out that rural discourse always appears in a specific national context. In Eastern Europe, the rural is usually associated with the agrarian lifestyle and villages. However, with the waves of transformation and modernization in the 20th century, the term has been placed in the background. The city is usually imagined in the context of modernization, as an enlightened space, connected to the West and Western values, while rural areas are conceived as patriarchal and traditional, either as idealised and idyllic, or as an aggressive and closed world and system of values. These (self)-exoticising practices and internal othering are closely connected to the shaping of national identity and the imaginations of the nation (Kay, Shubin and Thelen 2012). Over the second half of the 20th century, Hungary (similarly to other parts of Eastern Europe) has been transformed from a traditional agricultural economy and rural society to an industrialized society. Although Hungary followed the Soviet model of collectivization of land, there were significant alterations. Thanks to reforms and the so-called second (or subsistence) economy (which, however, was also based on a high degree of self-exploitation) the Hungarian model of socialist agriculture was interpreted as a success story and was regarded as a substantial aspect of the ambivalent "peasant embourgeoisement" (Szelenyi 1988). However, as the Hungarian geographer and economist, György Enyedi (1992) described, there were strong marks of the critical attitude of the state-socialist regime towards villages and village life: "the promotion of the working class and the supremacy of cities, the real benefits of the urban population in public services, and the redistribution of social goods, distrust of the rural population" (Enyedi 1992: 39).

Enyedi also mentions that at the time of the regime change there was a general belief that the new political system would value villages and the rural population much more favourably than the state socialist system. Yet, this turnaround did not happen. Decades after the political

changes, social and spatial differentiation (coupled with ethnic segregation) is increasing. Agriculture and the local economy provide a livelihood only for a limited number of people. This has resulted in a sharp image of a lagging, isolated, and socially rather homogenous rural area with relatively passive or at least politically conservative populations, and therefore, as having little of positive value to contribute to such transformations (Kovács 2012). The countryside continued to have a mostly negative connotation, mainly in the mainstream media and popular culture. These places were usually associated and linked to scandals or were discussed as examples of the impossibility of an 'easy change'. The countryside, and especially the 'village' as a socio-cultural phenomenon was portrayed as the biggest obstacle to EU accession and modernization (Kovách 2012). This image naturally invites and provokes stereotypes – both of the unfamiliar or strange, and the traditional or idyllic portrayal of the rural place and the countryside. This is the basis for linking the issues of the countryside and low social status.

Representing and (re)imagining the rural

Although we live in an urban society and the process of urbanization does not seem to be slowing down at all, the representation of the rural and the countryside remains an ongoing challenge. In her theoretical overview, Melanie DuPuis (2006) discusses the problem of a rural-urban dichotomy using a critique of modernity, highlighting the forces and motivation factors of desire: making impossible or unattainable dreams come true.

Recent waves and scholarly debates of cultural geographies raised again the issue of the rural imaginary. The representation of rural communities in television fiction has a long and varied history, especially in the case of US television. Rural sitcoms and the role of offensive/ridiculing stereotypes in the portrayal of southern characters (self-reliant Hillbillies; poor white, ignorant Appalachians) is a well-discussed topic of US television history. (Reed 1988, Slade and Narro 2012, Worland and O'Leary 2016, Deery and Press 2017) More recently, Fulkerstone and Thomas (2016) coined the term urbanormativity, referring to the portrayal of the countryside from the position of urban values as normative and privileged. The dynamics of village representation are, of course, not only an important and recurring topic of debate in American popular culture but also in Eastern European culture, including Hungarian culture. Laughing is universal. Laughter at foolish villages/villagers is also.

Laughing at/in the village

Gotham (England), Abercregan (Wales), Teterow (Germany), Mols (Denmark), Kampen (Holland), Belmont (Switzerland), Rátót (Hungary). What these villages have in common is that they are targets of traditional local village mocking stories (Davies 1998). Local examples of this flexible genre of popular/folk culture can be found everywhere in Europe. According to Davies, humorous stories and jokes about fool villages have the same function as ethnic jokes: to furnish the social universe, to shape identity, to qualify the separation of us and them. Although this approach shares aspects of the superiority theory of humour, Davies also warns that we should not mistake appropriate humour for hostility or aggression, and highlights that this concept has nothing to do with power dynamics. As Davies describes, joke-telling is rather a play of rivalry. Foolish and ethnic jokes target those who live at the edge of a society, nation or culture. Thus, it is not against strangers, but rather the "imperfect versions" of the joke-tellers (Davies 2009: 9). He claims that the anxiety of living in a rational and highly individualized modern society evokes the coping strategy of humour, putting the urban individuals and "stupidity" of incompetent rural communities (or "outsider" ethnic groups) in stark contrast with each other. There is also an obvious ambivalence here: urban individuals laugh at the hedonistic villagers, but at the same time they envy their liberation. So, Davies links the character of these jokes to the stability (or remoteness) of rural life.

Village-mocking stories are important pillars of Hungarian popular humour traditions with a strong link to folklore motifs and folk tale characters such as servants and landlords, Gypsies and priests, lazy bohemians, and unfaithful spouses (Géró and Barta 2016). Character types and structural positions are stable, but their representatives are changed according to historical changes (the soldiers are replaced by the policemen, the aristocrats and landlords are replaced by the village judge and then by the mayor). These stories do not claim authenticity and thanks to their flexibility, a rich variety of them can be found under different political systems. Their modernized Eastern European versions were popular during the socialist decades such as the Czech Ondrej Sekora's The Chronicles of the Town of Kocourkov (1947) or the Hungarian György Schwajda's The Pregnant Mother of Rátót (1985) from which a popular film adaptation, a strange mockery of the socialist system, was made in the years of the regime change (Dezső Garas, The Pregnant Papa, 1988).

Our Little Village and domestic disorder

The way that ridiculing discourse articulates the rural identity and low-status people will be exemplified by analyzing the Hungarian series A mi kis falunk (AMKF). AMKF is a Hungarian adaptation of the Slovak *Horná Dolná* (In the Sticks) which was produced by the locally

market-leading TV Markíza. Horná Dolná was the most popular domestic television series ever (more than 100 episodes and 11 seasons were produced). The title of the Hungarian version A mi kis falunk (Our Little Village) calls to mind Jiří Menzel's gentle and very popular comedy, Vesničko má, středisková (1985) (My Sweet Little Village), which was a success in Hungary also. AMKF was launched in Hungary in 2017 by a leading commercial television channel, RTL Klub, and has received high ratings ever since. It is one of the most popular pieces among the contemporary local boom of (television) series. In the autumn of 2020, a fifth season has now begun, and the series is already past its fiftieth episode.

We have already mentioned that the title of the Hungarian version refers to Menzel's emblematic comedy, replacing the personal pronoun with the plural. In addition to the cultural reference of the title, it is important to highlight the motif of community and belonging. The title of the Slovak series means the upper and lower part, thus thematizing both the spatial structure and the social hierarchy of the village. It worth noting that it is not the opposition and contrast, but the juxtaposition of the different (social) registers that are elaborated in the series. Yet it is instructive that the Hungarian version, via its title, narrative, and the relationships between the characters, emphasizes the experience of living mundane experiences together.

The Hungarian version was made with a larger budget and this is not only significant because of its production values, but also because it elevates the whole world of the village and the story, making it look better. The village is situated in the mountains, which among other things, may be due to the fact that it is easier to create a feeling of isolation from the world, and to avoid too many associations with the Great Plain, an archetypical scene from Hungarian (rural) culture and the national imaginary. Post-socialist realities and both national and local cultural patterns are mobilised, transformed, and remodelled in the series.

Remoteness and nostalgia

The fictional location of the series, Pajkaszeg, is a dead-end village that can only be approached from only one direction and there is no onward road from the settlement. This symbolic representation of remoteness is further strengthened by story elements. No one wants to, or can get here, but the locals don't know and don't want to leave either. There is no church in this god-forsaken village. The priest wants to leave this place, where he has to hold masses in a building shared with an aerobics club. This village is a self-contained and self-centred special microcosm. In the episode entitled Census (S02E06) there is a danger that Pajkaszeg will lose its independence and will have to join the neighbouring rival village, but this threat can be avoided by the new postman settling in the village. A recurring, general conflict in the series is

that the village world is threatened by some external antagonist. This threat can be a beast, an epidemic, a lost Turkish trucker, a tax inspector, or a burglar: what is constant is that residents respond to challenges with ambiguous and wrangling cooperation.

The fictional village of the series can be called nostalgic but not in the sense of the traditional image of the Hungarian villages. This village is not even marginal. Nostalgia is a strong element of the series but cannot be characterised along with the three types of rural idyll (pastoral, nature, sport) which was described by David Bell (2006). The world of tiny jokes, cheats, trickery, and double-dealing is what provides the familiar atmosphere and the feeling of nostalgia in the series. It's not a vulnerable village living in deep poverty, although people here don't roll in money. It is also not a village that makes a living from traditional agriculture. There are no peasants, nor farmers here. We rarely see a single animal in the series, and not even a domestic vegetable garden around the houses. We don't even see people working. There are only two characters working hard: the innkeeper and the mayor's secretary. Both are determined female characters. Everyone else just avoids work.

The village of the series can be called the subject of nostalgia primarily because it presents the village as independent from (or, at least resisting) globalization and especially interconnectedness. Thus, this version of nostalgia has a slight flavour of isolationism. The village and its small community represent a different pace, a different way of thinking, and an attitude. They live according to their logic and world. The root of the nostalgia mobilised by the series is the desire for a small and self-governing community. Thus, it is not a longing for the vanished world of the traditional village and rural life (indeed, the lack of these aspects, which would fit into a traditional national image, is the engine of conservative criticism of the series). The village as a hedonistic and sovereign small community is the main object of nostalgia. Each of these three aspects (hedonism, sovereignty, and small community) are important in themselves, and in their combination.

Hedonism, sovereignty, and small community

In the unique microcosm of the village, nothing has any serious consequences. Pajkaszeg is the embodiment of jolly incompetence and communal hedonism. Hedonism and the enjoyment of life are present in almost every episode: drinking and making jokes together, gossiping, laughing at each other, and ourselves. The locals often fight each other, respectively (to hold a funeral or a football match at a given time (S01E08)), but in the end, it all ends in a shared carnival and drinking. There is always an opportunity for having some fun together – be it a feast after an election rally (S01E01), dinner following the killing of a wild boar which

threatened the village (S01E04), a soccer match with the neighbouring village (S01E08), the end of the epidemic and the lockdown (S02E03). It is also not a problem if the expected guest (the minister) does not arrive: if they are already prepared for a carnival, there should be a party (S01E06). In their analysis of Slovenian sitcoms, Jontes and Trdina (2018) use the term "righteous authenticity" and claim that the protagonists of the Slovenian sitcoms are represented as they are, true to themselves and their position in the society. In their understanding, this is a sign and an articulation of the post-socialist condition, and could be connected to the legacy of egalitarian ideology (Jontes and Trdina 2018: 57). Regarding the Hungarian series, I would rather highlight the community solidarity of the village and not the aspects of an egalitarian society. Bakhtinian ''joyful relativity'' (1984) permeates the series.

In addition to hedonism, another key issue is sovereignty, which includes the aspects of remoteness and isolation, but the focus is on the undisturbed order of everyday life and jovial hedonism. The community of the village is trying to benefit from modernization without making any cardinal changes in everyday life. They do not resist modernization; they just want to do everything their way. They want to spend the money received for the development of the village on what they like. It is especially important for the mayor that the village seizes every opportunity: to build a beach on the shore of a stinking fishing lake (S01E05), make a worthy exhibition place for the church relic (S03E11), and even shoot a film in the village with a star in the lead role (S04E11).

The third component of the nostalgic appeal of the series is the small community itself. As mentioned before, it is not the pre-modern village community, but a group of people who know everything about each other and who live everything together. The series' small community is the scale of everyday life and familiarity. The women are gossiping about each other and bickering with each other. On the village day in the goulash cooking competition (S02E04) they ruin each other's cooking with the same tricks (secretly salting or sugaring the rival's food). Nevertheless, this episode also ends with a big feast and happily for the community. There is one contestant who doesn't look like she's good at cooking, so no one spoils her food. Thus, at the end everyone can devour themselves to death. The narrative in which, despite the battles and envy, the community reaches the joyful carnivalesque finale, can be read as a clear national allegory. Moreover, given that the series was originally licensed from Slovakia, it is an even broader allegory and may apply to Central Europe.

We do it in our way

As was discussed in connection with sovereignty, the villagers like to do everything their way. Almost everything that happens here is done undercover, in a tricky and clandestine way. The mayor usually obtains state or European Union money for the development of the village or to boost the community and sports life through some well-meaning project. Then this money is somehow used for a completely different purpose. A recurring conflict, however, is that inspectors or representatives will arrive "from outside", so the mayor and his secretary must figure something out (S01E06). When, however, newcomers arrive from the city, they discover that internet service in the village is so slow that it is almost unusable and that the cell signal is so weak that no call can be made from their house. Then, the mayor finds out that free money is available from the European Union for that specific purpose. He is quite ready to take advantage of it, although most of the people in the village have no interest in the internet (S03E17).

While the mayor is a master of the special use of public funds, the innkeeper also likes to solve problems skilfully. She is always looking for ways to get some cheap supplies that she can use or sell in the pub: she secretly cooks poor quality brandy (S01E01), serves stolen fish from the village's fishing lake as a bargain cheap menu (S01E03), and tries to rob a Turkish truck that has crashed in the village (S01E02). Her character is a compelling combination of (often dubious) local characteristics and customs (solving the problems wisely and under the table) and a special form of entrepreneurial spirit. This is far from the fair and puritan logic of Western capitalism but a locally or regionally familiar form of self-management, agility, and cleverness. The mayor and the innkeeper are mirror images of each other: they both work to line their own pockets, but they also (willingly or unwillingly) entertain the community.

Ambivalent representation of gender dynamics and social divisions

Another compelling aspect of the ambivalent depiction of the village and the mixed character of its humour is the depiction of gender relations and social division. These divisions are organized along with spatial proximity and distance, as well as hierarchies of power. Next to the mayor's office, the other centre of the village is the pub and its courageous and daring innkeeper. Just as women usually gather around the mayor and the priest, so the pub is a gathering place for men. There is the patriarchal and paternalistic order on one side and hedonistic pleasures on the other. These are the central poles of the village life.

The agile female figure is even more interesting because the series is embarrassingly rich in sexist jokes. The stories of offended and hurt masculinity, the loser commandos of low-class men who threw themselves into gangs, enjoy macho jokes and collective drinking, are recurring

clichés of Hungarian popular films of the 1990s and 2000s. However, in these films, the sense of community between the protagonists and the portrayal of their loveable idiocy softens the harsh tone of offending jokes. There is only one character in the series who is like these figures, meanwhile, AMKF portrays several agile, independent, and autonomous female characters. The most important of them are the innkeeper and the mayor's secretary. Yet, and it is a clear sign of the ambiguity of the series, both are doing their job enthusiastically and in a smart way. However, the narrative portrays them as those who need a man and marriage the most (the innkeeper is hopelessly in love with the priest, and the secretary has been trying in vain for years to get her partner to ask for her hand). In the worldview of the series, female sovereignty and agency and the traditional image of a patriarchal family and social integration seem to be peacefully reconciled.

Nevertheless, there are further ambiguities in the portrayal of the village as a remote place that exists and works well in itself. This also shows that the issue here is not the display of poverty and low-class living conditions, but the presentation of the hectic, comic, and carnivalesque every day in a small community. However, an essential element of this world is the system of material and social differences – including the weak and underprivileged. No one has essential needs here. One of the public workers was sent away from home by his wife, and we don't even really know where he spends the night (after the pub closes), yet, these men are also always fine. More importantly, the village is ethnically completely homogeneous, not a single Roma character shows up in the series. All this cannot be attributed to distancing from sharp social problems, but rather to the pursuit of a traditional, reconciling and pacifying narrative. The display of ethnic homogeneity and the village community as a national allegory is even more striking and direct in this way.

The role and portrayal of public workers who represent the poorest members of the village refer to the distinct and current local context of the series and is particularly interesting. In 2010, the Hungarian government renewed the public employment policy, producing a huge growth in public works. The participants must accept any kind of job offer from the municipality, regardless of their education or skills. The labour market reintegration function of these programmes has been questioned several times, and the scheme was even called modern slavery. The three public workers avoid working and are constantly looking for alcohol. But this laziness is just as characteristic of the mayor, who is mostly fishing on the lakeshore when he would be doing his job. Even so, the public workers may seem to be the main target of ridiculing representation. In this respect, the Hungarian series is characterised by the same strategies that Jontes and Trdina (2018) discussed concerning a Slovenian sitcom. Their

appearance is embarrassingly schematic: dirty skin, incomplete teeth, torn clothes, broken and Sellotape-bonded glasses, as "comical or embarrassing deficiencies of working-class characters are attributed primarily to their appearance or performances related to body, not to their character in general." (Jontes and Trdina 2018: 51)

On the other hand, and this is the specificity of the Hungarian series, closely related to its carnivalistic, hedonistic worldview, the clumsiness and stupidity of these men also go hand in hand with a total rejection of authority. Public workers are accountable to the mayor, but they never get sanctioned for not working. More typically, there is a recurring clash between public workers and the local policeman. This guy, the deputy local policeman, is the epitome of all police jokes, he is an unskilful buffoon. The public workers regularly make fun of him, as they steal and disappear his bike (S01S05). Furthermore, besides the embarrassing and ridiculing presentation of their body and appearance, another recurring characteristic of these men is their close and intimate relationship with drinking. The humorous portrayal of alcoholism is also contradictory and ambivalent in a country of remarkably high alcohol dependence. But this motif can also be understood within the framework of the release theory of humour, as an example of coping with a socially and culturally traumatic problem. Norman K. Denzin, in his book (2007) about drinking and American films, distinguishes four generic themes regarding the relationship between alcohol, drinking, and comedy. Two of these themes are relevant to the series, namely the relieving function of alcohol and the socialising, benevolent impact of drinking. Still, the problem here is the way AMKF links heavy drinking to the lower class. Public workers are the regulars in the pub, and the series uses drinking and their irresponsible behaviour as a fundamental and principal mark of their characterisation, while the doctor who also drinks his homemade brandy is portrayed in a much more nuanced way, and his drinking habits rather represents the stereotype of "cultured alcoholic".

However, the series portrays a whole community and public workers are presented as essential and indispensable participants of this community. The mocking portrayal of the entire community transforms and diffuses the flow of ridicule: in a community where everyone is a fool, class-specific shaming and ridicule are much more dispersed.

In the critical crossfire

The humorous portrayal of the community as a village of fools triggers a different possible perspective of critique, that of the disrespectful portrayal of a rural community, which implies an ideologically motivated assessment of the series. In this case, exposing class differences is replaced with ridicule of the redneck and low-brow village inhabitants, and the overall values

regarding identity and the national, cultural imaginary come into focus, as we have seen in the introduction. AMKF and the allegorical representation of the village, for different reasons, was not sympathetic to either conservative politics and the middle class, or a left-liberal critical scene.

As we have seen in the introduction, conservative critiques of the series focused on the moral and ideological aspects of representation. For them what is geographically (or socially?) peripheral is symbolically central, thus they felt that the representation in the series is an attack on the national cultural imaginary repertoire. Liberal/elitist critiques targeted the low-brow aesthetics, the shaming and disrespectful portrayal of poverty, and a lack of direct social criticism. As Kuipers (2006) reminds us, humour, as it blocks other emotions, combines badly with such feelings as sympathy or embarrassment. Good humour evokes amusement and switches off moral considerations, but if the dynamics do not work properly, inappropriate humour provokes outrage. However, the decision as to whether (which kind of) humour is appropriate is vague – and is strongly connected to class boundaries. As Friedman and Kuipers argued (2013) class differences play a particularly important role in the assessment of popular comedies. Thus, while we cannot claim that AMKF would explicitly stage class differences, ridicule, and denunciate working-class characters, class differences as symbolic boundaries are very much present in the reception and public assessments of the series.

Conclusion

This chapter explored the local cultural contexts within which the portrayal of rural everyday life, and the presentation of a "village of fools" in the most-watched contemporary Hungarian television series can be analyzed. The analysis showed distinctive features of the series, such as the hedonistic and self-centred portrayal of the village, the traditions of trickery and double-dealing as a means of survival and an "alternative" to self-confident and self-sufficient (middle-class) embourgeoisement, and the ambivalent representation of gender dynamics and social divisions. Furthermore, the series can recall the (nostalgic) memory of a one-time community and lifestyle, and thus it can ease the troubles of present-day hardships and the challenges of global capitalism. Ambivalence relating to the social transformation of the decades following the change of regime and disappointment in the neoliberal values perpetuates nostalgia for traditional lifeworlds and small communities. Yet, this nostalgia does not appear as a longing for a traditional rural peasant society and village life, but rather as a nostalgia for a community of its own, resisting external regulatory forces and living a hectic but hedonistic life. That is, instead of, or in addition to shaming, ridiculing, and mocking members of a small village

community as those who behave “strangely” and/or break social rules, the feeling of (moral) embarrassment is also mobilised.

We can say that this is all about taste. What else would it be, in a series where, in the very first episode, a statue is inaugurated in the centre of the village? A sculpture that intends to capture the trademark of the village, a chocolate brioche. However, due to blind luck or the mastery of the sculptor, it looks exactly as if there is a large piece of (albeit beautifully shaped) excrement in the palm, instead of the brioche. This trope exemplifies how the series handles rural identity: not with vitriolic shaming and scorn but rather through embarrassment. Such substitution, however, does not imply that the moral boundaries constructed between “them in the village” and a civilized, globalized “us” are any thinner.

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