

# Look Behind the (Animated) Pictures. Notes on the Role of the Aesopic Language in Hungarian Animated Film<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** The essay explores a certain tendency of Hungarian animated film related to a strategy of constructing meaning. The so-called Aesopic language, which can be found in Hungarian animated film, is interested in creating ambiguity, hidden meanings, especially against oppressive political systems. The paper approaches the development of the Aesopic language in Hungarian animated film based on two factors. The first one examines the characteristics of the animated film in general, focusing on the *double sense* of the animated image. The second one is a historical approach, considering how the Communist regime affected artistic freedom, and how the Aesopic language became general in Central and Eastern Europe during the decades of Communism. After delineating the concept, the essay continues with interpretations of Hungarian animated films produced by the famous Pannonia Film Studio as examples of the Aesopic language. The paper distinguishes between a less and a more direct variant of creating ambiguity, depending on whether the animated films lack or contain explicit references to the Communist system. The group of the less direct variant includes *Rondino*, *Changing Times* and *The Fly*; among the examples of the more direct variant we can find *Story about N*, *Our Holidays* and *Mind the Steps!*.

**Keywords:** Hungarian animated film, Central and Eastern European cinema, ambiguity, symbolism, censorship.

Once upon a time, there was a studio in Central Europe making animated films, and it became world famous for a few decades. This studio was situated in Hungary, and it was called Pannonia Film Studio (Pannónia Filmstúdió). As film historian Zsolt Pápai points out, “some of the most glorious chapters of the

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Hungarian film history were written by animated film directors. The animated film had been one of the country's most important cultural exports since the 1960s; due to the feature-length animated film production, which started in 1973, Hungary became a world power, and for a while, Pannonia was listed among the five most important film studios producing animated films in the world" (Pápai 2007, 43).

Several short films were highly acclaimed; including Gyula Macskássy's *Duel* (*Párbaj*, 1960) – it won the Jury Prize in Cannes –, Marcell Jankovics's *Sisyphus* (1974) and *Fight* (*Küzdők*, 1977) – the former one was an Academy Award nominee, the latter won Palme d'Or in Cannes –, Ferenc Rofusz's *The Fly* (*A légy*, 1980), which won Hungary's first Academy Award, while Béla Vajda's *Moto perpetuo* (1980) was honoured with Palme d'Or. Some of the animated series had impressive success as well; the comedy series *Gustavus* (*Gusztáv*, several directors, 1964–68, 1975–77) was sold to over 70 countries, the folkloristic *Hungarian Folk Tales* (*Magyar népmesék*, several directors, 1977–2011) were bought by more than 40 countries. Among the feature-length animated films, we can find some of the most successful Hungarian films ever: Attila Dargay's tales such as *Mattie the Gooseboy* (*Lúdas Matyi*, 1976) and *Vuk* (1981) were both seen by more than two million viewers only in Hungary.<sup>2</sup> Jankovics's extraordinary *The Son of the White Mare* (*Fehérlófia*, 1981) was voted one of the 50 best animated films of all time in the Los Angeles Animation Olympiad in 1984 (it is worth mentioning that beside *The Son of the White Mare* only five feature-length animated films can be found on the list).<sup>3</sup>

Although this series of success stopped after the end of Communism and especially after the end of the state-supported animated film industry,<sup>4</sup> and contemporary Hungarian animation has to face serious difficulties and challenges (both financially and artistically), the golden years of this kind of film making is still and will be considered as a highly important segment of Hungarian film history in general. However, despite its great achievements, Hungarian animated film has not been discovered in depth by film studies yet. There are only a few texts available that deal with Hungarian animation, including Mari Kuttna's short introduction to the profile of Pannonia Film Studio (Kuttna ca. 1970) and the chapters focusing on Hungary in Giannalberto Bendazzi's book (Bendazzi 1994,

2 Regarding the fact that Hungary's population is estimated to be around 10 million, these numbers of viewers definitely indicate exceptional success.

3 The list can be found here: [http://www.awn.com/mag/issue1.4/articles/deneroffini\\_1.4.html](http://www.awn.com/mag/issue1.4/articles/deneroffini_1.4.html). Last accessed 23. 02. 2015.

4 During the decades of Communism, film industry – including animated film making – was financially supported by the state.

175, 347–352), and in *Animation Art* edited by Jerry Beck (Beck 2004, 50–51, 230–231, 288–289). More detailed inquiries are yet to come; however, we can surely distinguish some basic tendencies of Hungarian animation without those as well.

First of all, one of the most specific attribute of Hungarian animation is an exceptional diversity of films. Those who know Hungarian animation tend to agree (cf. Dizseri 1999, 67) that we cannot speak about a so-called Hungarian school of animation or a distinctive national style of our animated films. Instead of that, Hungarian animation is a very viable mixture of myriads of themes, approaches and animated forms; it ranges from Ferenc Varsányi's slapstick-like pixilations (e.g. *Schooltime Blues* [*Suli-buli*, 1982]) through Ottó Foky's mildly surrealistic object animations (e.g. *Scenes with Beans* [*Babfilm*, 1975]) to the grotesque cartoons of József Nepp (e.g. *The Corrupt Cats* [*Megalkuvó macskák*, 1979]), and so on. Despite this undeniable diversity, some basic tendencies can be discovered as well. The characteristics of these tendencies appear in every basic production type of the animation, i.e. in individual short films, series and feature-length films. I distinguish four basic tendencies of Hungarian animation: (1) tales (from Gyula Macskássy's groundbreaking *The Little Rooster and His Diamond Halfpenny* [*A kiskakas gyémánt félkrajcárja*, 1951] to *Berry and Dolly* [*Bogyó és Babóca*, M. Tóth Géza, 2010], a contemporary animation made for small children); (2) satirical comedies (from József Nepp's *Passion* [*Szenvedély*, 1961] to Béla Ternovszky's cultic *Cat City* [*Macskafogó*, 1986]); (3) animated films based on different aspects of Hungary's past, such as folklore, literature and history (from Zsolt Richly's folklore-inspired shorts [including *Molnár Anna*, 1972] to Marcell Jankovics's monumental adaptation of Imre Madách's *The Tragedy of Man* [*Az ember tragédiája*, 1988–2011]); (4) animated films with sociographical interests and documentarist ambitions (from György Kovásznai's shorts including *Vernation No. 3369* [*Rügyfakadás No. 3369*, 1971] and *The Boulevard by Night* [*Körúti esték*, 1972] to a contemporary success, Áron Gauder's *District* [*Nyócker!*, 2004]).

In the following essay I am about to delineate another tendency in Hungarian animation. This tendency does not rely on basic sources, thematic elements or generic conventions; it can be considered rather as *a manner of constructing meaning*. My aim is to demonstrate the characteristics of a so-called Aesopic language of Hungarian animated film. First, I am going to describe what I call Aesopic language, and I propose two approaches to explain it. Then I will discuss its characteristics by analysing a few Hungarian animated films obviously connected to the Aesopic language.

## Explaining the Concept of Aesopic Language

Before delineating the concept, it is worth recalling an anecdote which definitely helps to highlight what the Aesopic language is supposed to mean. In 2005, a Hungarian CGI animated film directed by Géza M. Tóth, entitled *Maestro*, had a world-wide success; it was even an Academy Award nominee. The film depicts how a bird, that the viewer thinks is an opera singer, rehearses before his performance. When the time comes to appear on stage, the mechanical arm, which until then helped him, grabs the bird and pushes him out of the supposed dressing room, and the bird starts repeating “cuckoo.” In the end, it can be realized that the whole plot takes place inside a cuckoo clock. The director mentioned (Zalán 2010, 32) how the film was commented by an American professor who knew Eastern European film art very well. It was said that if *Maestro* had been presented in the 1980s, it would have been interpreted as a quite brave metaphor of an attempt to escape from darkness and imprisonment.

As the anecdote suggests, the topic of Aesopic language is connected to the meaning(s) of works of art, especially those interpretations that are centred on possible hidden meanings. The term I borrowed from Marek Hendrykowski (Hendrykowski 1996, 633) unquestionably reveals these concerns and even proves that this topic can be traced back to antiquity (or even much further in the past). Aesop’s fables should be seen as the pattern of duplication (or multiplication) of possible meanings and interpretations: the text leads to different readings on different levels; the interpretation based on the so-called surface can be modified from another point of view. This phenomenon inevitably raises too many unresolved questions. At this point, my argument could be continued with summarizing countless proposals written about topics such as how texts (including audiovisual constructions, e.g. animated films) produce meanings; what the valid interpretations of a single text are, and what are not; what the role of the author’s intentions is; how we can handle the limitedness, or on the contrary, the supposed unlimitedness of possible interpretations; and so on. Different approaches, such as post-structuralist, deconstructivist and hermeneutical, to name but a few, emphasize many different aspects and elements of these questions, but it is not my aim to explore their labyrinth.

Now, I will rely on a perhaps simplifying delineation of the phenomenon: I will try to capture it as an achievement of specific conditions. We can regard the Aesopic language as a kind of strategy to construct ambiguity that permits two or more alternative interpretations of the same text. However, it is useful to see

the Aesopic language not as the case of any kind of ambiguity, but as a way of interpretation that is against existing, operating and mainly oppressive political systems. This is a key element of the Aesopic language in Hungarian animated film as well. Regarding these characteristics, I will explain the development of Aesopic language based on two factors: (1) the “nature” of the animated film in general; and (2) the historical context of the examined films.

## Animation and *Double Sense*

Animated film has always been considered as a unique field of moving-image culture. Although there are debates about what the definition of animated film could be (cf. Dobson 2010, xlii–xliv), basically, we can approach the animation following Charles Solomon’s suggestions, who “discusses a variety of techniques that he says can be called ‘animation’. He finds that ‘two factors link these diverse media and their variations, and serve as the basis for a workable definition of animation: (1) the imagery is recorded frame-by-frame and (2) the illusion of motion is created rather than recorded’” (Furniss 1998, 5). Simplifying this proposal, we can also say that “most people think of animation in a more general way, by identifying a variety of techniques such as cel animation, clay animation, puppets and so forth” (Furniss 1998, 5).

The specific animated imageries and the constructed movements both develop a more or less significant distance from the photographic imagery of live-action film.<sup>5</sup> That is why it is reasonable to assume that animated film has some inherent characteristics which can be found in all types of animation. As I argued earlier (Varga 2011), these characteristics are *creationism* and *artificiality*; the former refers to the fact that the artist may have a maximal control over the *mise-en-scene*, while the latter means that the animated images have a very strong tendency to emphasize their own artificial constructedness instead of hiding them. Due to these characteristics, those animated films which are the least influenced by narrative, stylistic and generic conventions established by the mainstream live-action cinema have elaborated a specific vocabulary of their own way of expression. Even if it is debatable whether “animation as a film language and film art is a more sophisticated and flexible medium than live-action film” (cf. Wells 1998, 6), it is

5 The distance depends on the animated forms and is manipulated by several factors (above all, by stylistic devices). Some of the animated forms are relatively close to live-action cinematography, especially the forms of stop motion animation, such as puppet and clay animation. On the other hand, those animated films that consist of drawn or painted pictures usually have much more significant distances from live-action imagery.

undeniable that the most authentic animated films<sup>6</sup> show a remarkable tendency of using devices which are *very close to the language of poetry*.

This kind of “language” partly comes from the phenomenon described by María Lorenzo Hernández as “the *double sense* of animated images” (Hernández 2007), which can be regarded as an aspect of the aforementioned artificiality. As Hernández remarks: “The double sense of animated images is a conceptual movement that calls attention to the surface of representation, instead of its actual contents. From the earliest age of cartoons, their high degree of self-reflexivity has reinforced the status of animation as an invented environment, building what has been labelled as the *language* of animation” (Hernández 2007, 36). In this sense, animated film has a *visual ambiguity* which meets – or continues in – a way of expression created by certain methods that produce ambiguity. These animated films tend to rely on symbolic or metaphorical images or events, and especially narrative constructions which offer more than one possible interpretation (due to lacking conventional causal motivations, clear time and space relations, stable character identities, and so forth). This strong attachment to ambiguity is the basis of the Aesopic language.

However, it is important to note that not every ambiguous animated film should be considered automatically as an example of the Aesopic language only because it has the potential of a certain political interpretation as well. Obviously, not every ambiguous animated film has this potentiality. If we consider Ottó Foky’s *A School for Clowns* (*Bohóciskola*, 1965), for instance, the difference is quite clear. In Foky’s puppet animation, the main character, a little rascal called Holzinger is daydreaming about himself being a clown; but when he has the opportunity to join a circus, he experiences that even clowns have to learn a lot. The fantasy sequence of Holzinger’s daydreaming shows him in an almost abstract space, where he is floating, moreover, even a rocket ship appears – and these clues assure us viewers that it is not real what we see in the diegesis, but imagination. However, the scenes taking place in the circus are more ambiguous. The lessons for clown students contain definitely irrational elements – e.g. when Holzinger plays the violin, the notes literally appear as they fall onto the ground –, and these elements are contrasted with a relatively realistic and coherent *mise-en-scene*. The result is a paradoxical situation, and we cannot be sure of what is real and what is imaginary. Thus, it is appropriate to regard *A School for Clowns* as an

6 When I say the “most authentic animated films,” I mean those animations which deliberately do not follow the patterns crystallized by mainstream live-action cinema. Thus, these animations are mainly short films.

example of ambiguity. However, this ambiguity does not relate to political issues. If the Aesopic language can be referred to as ambiguity which specifically focuses on political questions, the emergence of animations related to it can be explained from another point of view, apart from the aesthetical one.

## **“Censorship Is the Mother of Metaphor”<sup>7</sup>**

As it is well-known, during the decades of Communism (from the late 1940s to the end of the 1980s), in Central and Eastern Europe, any kind of artistic activity was strictly controlled by the party state. The artists in the “satellite countries” of the USSR were not allowed to express their thoughts and feelings in a free way; in particular, topics related to criticizing the dictatorship were strongly restricted. Basically, the Communist regime expected the artists to show the system in a positive way, forcing the doctrine of the so-called “Socialist Realism.”

However, the artists, including film directors, did not give up their ambitions to speak and think about their world, especially about the shadows and contradictions of the Communist regime. “Political circumstances, and film-makers’ responses to them, led East Central European cinemas in the post-war period to adopt a number of strategies,” as Marek Hendrykowski wrote (Hendrykowski 1996, 632), which he calls “elusive strategies.” These “elusive strategies” – besides historicism and literary affinities, for instance – contain the “Aesopic language,” which “stems from the harsh rigours of censorship imposed on art and cinematography in the eastern bloc countries. For several decades a subtle use of metaphors, symbols, allusions, subtexts, and understatements effectively enabled film-makers to communicate with their public above the head of the censor [...]. Faced with the impossibility of depicting anything directly, film-makers perfected this method of communication, resorting in the process to a rich variety of semantic tropes and stylistic devices whenever they needed to circumvent the censor’s taboos” (Hendrykowski 1996, 633).

Although the films based on the Aesopic language mentioned by Hendrykowski are live-action films (including Andrzej Wajda’s and Miklós Jancsó’s works), it has to be emphasized that animated film is no exception either because this too elaborated its own Aesopic language. Definitely, the most obvious proof is Jiří Trnka’s puppet animation masterpiece *The Hand* (*Ruka*, 1965) made in Czechoslovakia, which is widely known as a protestation against every form

7 The words of Jorge Luis Borges are quoted by Paul Wells introducing a passage in which he discusses Jiří Trnka’s *The Hand* (Wells 1998, 84).



of dictatorship in general, and Stalinism in particular, “through the conceptual allegory of a giant (live-action) Hand that tries to force a puppet potter to make only images of Hands instead of flower pots” (Moritz 1998, 552). Similar ambiguous animations can be found in Hungarian film as well.

In Hungary, the cultural politics established by the Soviets and centred on supporting and banning was strongly intertwined with one certain politician. György Aczél was the chief figure of Communist censorship, or more precisely, the Communist cultural politics, which relied on the system of the so-called “TTT.”<sup>8</sup> Basically, this system was a method of classification for the products of literature, fine arts, film art and so on; the works could be supported, tolerated, or banned.

In this system, the animated film played an intriguing role. As Sándor Reisenbüchler, director of the highly acclaimed *The Kidnapping of the Sun and the Moon* (*A Nap és a Hold elrablása*, 1968) remembered: “One of the paradoxes of the Communist regime was that meanwhile it generously supported the culture financially on the one hand, its bureaucracy harassed the artists on the other hand. For its money, the regime wanted films praising the system, and it did not tolerate criticism easily, especially not in the beginning. This changed later during the soft dictatorship. With a clever twist, Aczél used criticism as a form of praising the system, thus the West could see that the Communists permit the critical voices as well” (Dizseri 1999, 142). This controversial situation was one of the key factors why the Aesopic language could be so prevalent in the animated film.

However, this did not mean that directors could do everything they planned; on the contrary, they still had to be very careful regarding the contents of their films, and they had their conflicts with the censors. Despite the fact that until the end of Communism only one film made in Pannonia was banned,<sup>9</sup> several problems were found in certain films. For instance, Péter Szoboszlay mentioned (Lőcsei 2010) that a member of the bureaucracy did not approve number 56<sup>10</sup> to appear on a streetcar in György Csonka’s *Lullaby* (*Altató*, 1974); when Ottó Foky was working on *Scenes with Beans*, questions were raised about the colours of some beans (Lendvai, 2007); and similarly, Ferenc Rofusz was not allowed to make *Gravity* (*Gravitáció*, 1984) unless he was willing to change the naturally red

8 The abbreviation consists of the initials of the Hungarian words for “supporting,” “tolerating” and “banning.”

9 This film was *Young Man Playing the Guitar at the Old Master’s Gallery* (*Gitáros fiú a régi képtárban*, György Kovásznai, 1964). The reason of its banning is unclear (cf. Iványi-Bitter 2010, 75–76).

10 Number 56 inevitably recalls the year (1956) of the Hungarian Revolution against Soviet oppression.



colours of the apples to something else – in the final version, the apples are blue (Mészáros 2014, 14).

As we can see now, the emergence of the Aesopic language in Hungarian animated film is the result of the delineated set of aesthetic characteristics and historical circumstances, or, to be more precise, the temporary overlapping of these, as they mutually enhanced the use of the Aesopic language.

In the next chapters, I will discuss a few animated films as examples of this tendency. Regarding the manners of depicting the dictatorship, it could be useful to distinguish between different variants: *a less direct* and *a more direct approach* of the Aesopic language. In the case of the *less direct approach*, films do not contain elements referring to the Communist system in an explicit manner; however, these films undeniably offer the possibility of a coherent secondary interpretation, which can be connected to the questions of the dictatorship. Meanwhile, the case of the *more direct approach* does not mean that films directly criticize the Communist dictatorship, but certain of their elements are clearly connected to the Communist system, and these are easily recognizable. These elements may refer to historical events, persons, institutions, symbols and ideological issues. First, I will discuss the films that belong to the less direct approach, and then I will continue with the group of the more direct approach.

## Variations on Execution

Comparing Csaba Szórády's *Rondino* and István Kovács's *Changing Times* (both made in 1977), we can discover a very sharp contrast, although they both deal with scenarios of executions. *Rondino* contains such extreme violence that would easily be unbearable to see in a live-action film (indeed it is very similar to the disturbing cruelties depicted in *Saw* [James Wan, 2004] and mainly in its sequels). Regarding the plot and the characters, *Rondino* is about some kind of an inquisition; however, the situation rather builds on the aftermath of an interrogation, as in this two-minute-long voiceless film we see the process of how inquisitors destroy their victim. The range of cruelties is surprisingly wide, including tearing apart and even cannibalism(!). As the inquisitors are built up of spots, while the victim is formed only by lines, we eventually see in a self-reflexive way, relying heavily on the double sense of the animated image, how lines are erased by spots, and this is the explanation of how this cartoon can be bearable at all [Fig. 1]. However, *Rondino* is not just a self-reflexive cartoon. Due to the lack of any accurate historical context – and even the lack of any trace of

coherent space constructions –, the viewer (especially the Hungarian viewer) is allowed to see *Rondino* as a shocking, visceral depiction of the horrors, tortures, cruelties and humiliations committed by the most notorious organization of the Communist regime, called State Security,<sup>11</sup> in the late 1940s and during the 1950s.

In *Changing Times*, the situation is entirely different. The execution taking place on a plain cannot be finished because a car appears repeatedly and the driver delivers to the commander continuously changing orders about what to do with the convict and what the commander or the soldiers have to do. Seven letters are delivered in this three-minute-long cartoon; every order not only reconfigures the characters, but in a certain way also restarts the whole situation, which results in a mixture of linearity and circulation, and it ends in a cliffhanger (we do not know what the last letter contains). The constant changing of roles and the instability of the hierarchy of the characters make the events satirical, on the one hand. On the other hand, the plot also offers more intriguing interpretations. The use of open space, the music playing march, and the choreography of the figures resemble the artistic devices associated with the live-action films of Miklós Jancsó (e.g. *The Red and the White* [Csillagosok, katonák, 1967], *Agnus Dei* [Égi bárány, 1971], or *Red Psalm* [Még kér a nép, 1972]), and even the deeper concerns are similar: just like Jancsó's films, *Changing Times* also examines the unbalanced and uncontrollable mechanisms of power. Furthermore, Kovács's cartoon permits a more specific historical interpretation; it might remind the Hungarian viewer of the internal struggles in the leadership of the Communists during the 1950s, strongly related to the decisions made by the leaders in Moscow.

In entirely different ways, the topic of execution also appears in Ferenc Rofusz's two black-and-white drawn animated films. *The Fly* apparently follows the fatal journey of an ordinary fly through the title character's point-of-view. After the fly leaves the forest and enters into a house, it becomes trapped, and finally ends up in a collection of insects made by the owner of the house [Fig. 2]. While on a superficial level *The Fly* is a painfully accurate chronicle of the last minutes of an insect (emphasized by the *real time* of the plot), according to the logic of the Aesopic language the film also establishes a stark contrast between freedom and oppression, and the theme of persecution gets a central role. In this sense, *The Fly* explores the trauma of losing freedom, and the anxiety of being threatened by lethal and unseen forces, regarding the fact that the human who chases the fly is never shown. Thus, in the broadest sense, *The Fly* expresses in a metaphorical way what the Hungarian nation and other nations had to suffer

11 In Hungarian: Államvédelmi Hatóság (ÁVH).

and endure because of the Soviet expansion. As far as executions are concerned, Rofusz's next film is a logical step from *The Fly*, and it can be connected closely to *Rondino* and *Changing Times* as well. The extremely bleak *Deadlock* (Holtpont, 1982) puts the viewer in the position of a convict waiting for his own execution. At this time, the point-of-view photography is linked to a human character and his last minutes can be seen in real time. Maybe *Deadlock* is less ambiguous and less complex than *The Fly*, but it deals, in a rather disturbing way, with the delicate issue of the executions committed by the party state.

## Look Behind the Pictures

If we consider those films that use the more direct approach of the Aesopic language, one of the most daring pieces would be Péter Szoboszlay's *Story about N* (*Történet N-ről*, 1978). Some of Péter Szoboszlay's earlier films can be interpreted as the examples of the less direct approach of the Aesopic language. His other works, including *Salt Soup* (*Sós lötty*, 1968), *Order in the House* (*Rend a házban*, 1970), *Dance School* (*Össztánc*, 1972) and *Hey You!* (*Hé, Te!*, 1976) deal with the characteristics of dictatorship through depicting evil and obsessive authoritarian figures in everyday life, who tend to harm the lives of everyone else (cf. Varga 2008).

*Story about N* reflects the main events of Hungarian history during the 20<sup>th</sup> century in an easily recognizable way. We see the events approximately from the 1930s to the 1970s; this seven-minute-long cartoon summarizes the historical issues through emblematic and symbolic images. *Story about N* elaborates a double vision: firstly, it is about the life of an anonymous Hungarian person, followed from his childhood to his manhood; secondly, the film is an exploration of how the historical turning points, events and traumas affect the life of the main character. It becomes clear that the identity (both personal and national identity) of the main character is continuously formed by and interfered with symbols and representations related to authorities, so the private sphere of the main character is sieged not only by historical events, but the representations of the authorities as well.

If we consider the events after the end of the 1940s depicted in *Story about N*, the film strongly emphasizes how Communist ideology offended not only individual integrity, but national identity as well when it forced Stakhanovism and the personality cult of Mátyás Rákosi, leader of the Communists [Fig. 3]. To depict the years of Stalinism in the 1950s in such a recognizable way was a rarity (for two decades, this period was a taboo), or to be more precise, it had just begun in live-

action films in the late 1970s (e.g. András Kovács's *The Stud Farm* [*A ménészgazda*, 1978], Pál Gábor's *Angi Vera* [1979]). *Story about N* shows Mátyás Rákosi, also known as "the most excellent pupil of Stalin in Hungary," and Stakhanovists in a slightly satirical way, instead of providing a heroic representation of them.

In the last unit of the plot, the film even dares to depict the process of how Communism made the country "the happiest barrack in the socialist camp," as it was known in the era of János Kádár, during the decades of the so-called "soft dictatorship," from the 1960s to the 1980s. During this period, people were relatively freer than in previous years and compared to the people in other countries occupied by the Soviets, but the system was a dictatorship, undoubtedly. The last unit of *Story about N* is significantly different from the previous ones regarding its visual style: it shows every event from a fixed point-of-view, while until this point the film used plenty of movements, including imitations of camera movements. This change in the style eventually expresses the new nature of the dictatorship [Fig. 4]. As Gábor Csaba Dávid emphasizes, this film has a groundbreaking role in Hungarian animated film because it was the first one that dared show how the historical events in the 20<sup>th</sup> century affected individual integrity (Dávid 1984, 205).

A very different question is at the core of another important animation, Kati Macskássy's *Our Holidays* (*Ünnepeink*, 1982). Kati Macskássy's animated films elaborated a special stylistic device: the director used original drawings made by children, and the soundtrack of her films contained children's speeches. *Our Holidays* is built up by the same characteristics; at this time, the topic related to the Communist regime is a very delicate issue, particularly in terms of self-representation, symbols and ideology. It is about the concept of holidays: the children's drawings show images of them, while their speeches try to explain what the holidays mean to them.

Apparently, *Our Holidays* is a quite funny account of misunderstandings about what the different holidays are supposed to mean. The speeches are full of errors, especially of historical ones: the children constantly mix up who did what, where and when, and what the consequences were. However, according to the interpretation based on the Aesopic language, this coin has another side as well, regarding the fact that one of the most important and outrageous offence against the national identity committed by the Communist regime was the reshaping of the holidays: renaming some of them, restricting their national content and above all, eliminating the religious content. The Communists not only reshaped holidays, but they also added Communist holidays, including the celebration of the Socialist

Revolution. In this regard, what we experience in Kati Macskássy's film can be interpreted as a "distorting mirror" reflecting the confusion related to the possible meanings of the holidays. The meanings can be altered and mixed by authorities and children as well, however, the motivations and the results are extremely different in the two cases. It is not surprising that *Our Holidays* was banned for a short time and then the director had to cut out certain parts (M Tóth 2004, 80).

Maybe, the Aesopic language found its most adequate way of expression in the style of István Orosz's *Mind the Steps!* (*Vigyázat, lépcső!*, 1989). As István Orosz is originally a graphic artist, his animated works have a very strong connection to graphical arts. Orosz is highly interested in visual paradoxes and illusionism, thus he frequently uses images similar to the pictures made by M. C. Escher, and one of the trademarks of his style is black-and-white photography. *Mind the Steps!* is not an exception; moreover, this film can be considered as the greatest achievement in the use of the Aesopic language because the hidden meanings meet the Escher-like visual paradoxes, or, more accurately, visual ambiguities. As Orosz noticed, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, certain phrases were very popular, such as "Read between the lines," and "Look behind the pictures" (M Tóth 2004, 71). It is not a coincidence that these phrases basically summarize the essence of the Aesopic language.

*Mind the Steps!* depicts a very usual milieu in a very unusual way. Furthermore, the setting is not only usual, but also very typical of, even emblematic for the Communist era, for the Central European scenery: the images take place in a shabby stairway [Fig. 5]. The film has no plot in the usual sense; it features a set of typical characters, and events reappear during the film, for example a boy is playing with a ball, and two men are carrying a wardrobe. However, the most important elements are not the human characters. It can be said that "the main characters" in *Mind the Steps!* are the *spatial directions*, which are continuously mixing and changing, the ups and downs are "embracing" each other. All these happen in a rather disorientating way, confusing the space constructions established in the film [Fig. 6].

The film is known as a summary of the decades of Communism, partly due to the appearance of very recognizable motifs and images. For instance, we can see the symbol of the red pentangle on the wall – however, the star is more like a shadow than the actual symbol of the Communist regime –; a notice on the wall saying "long live Socialism" – this is a highly ironic gesture regarding the fact that the late '80s was the period of the dusk of Communism –; the doorbell, which is metonymically related to the State Security: it reminds of the so-called

“fright of doorbell” – this was a well-known phrase during those decades and it referred to the fear of the appearance of the members of State Security, especially in the middle of the night.

The presence of a tank is highly important because it is shown in several ambiguous ways. Once it appears as the private part of a perverted man, while in another scene it keeps going around as if it was a ticking clock [Fig. 7]. Thus, the tank can be interpreted in different ways: mainly it is the symbol of violence against the country and the metonymy of the Soviet army, which still had groups in Hungary during the very early 1990s. As far as the Soviet military is concerned, it is worth emphasizing that not much after the release of *Mind the Steps!*, a contract about the withdrawal of the Soviet troops from Hungary was signed. From this point of view, *Mind the Steps!* includes not only a Kafkaesque, labyrinth-like vision of everyday life during the Communist dictatorship, but it is related to current political turning points as well.

In addition to the political interpretation of *Mind the Steps!*, it has to be mentioned that István Orosz also made a famous poster – with the wording “Tovariscsi, konyec!” (Comrades: The End!) on it –, which is directly related to the end of Communism in Hungary, and it became the visual emblem of the event. His poster was known by more people than his film, but the two works match perfectly.

While the animated film relies on the Aesopic language, the poster signs a new period where the double or hidden meanings can be replaced by more direct meanings and interpretations. This new period inevitably changed the animated film in Hungary – but its exploration would be the aim of another paper.

## Conclusion

As I noted earlier, the questions of meaning, ambiguity and interpretation – not necessarily just regarding works of arts, but especially concerning them – can be approached from many theoretical perspectives, even from the most different ones; their methods, suppositions and statements show a variety of proposals. In my paper, I was interested in delineating the concept of a specific case of ambiguity related to works of art, to be more precise, in showing how Hungarian animated film – not unlike the animations of other Eastern European countries – elaborated a certain way of expression. Thus, I focused on a specific kind of ambiguity which I called Aesopic language and I considered it as a way of constructing meaning, or more precisely, meanings which are deliberately against

oppressive political regimes. I argued that a set of circumstances tended to create this so-called Aesopic language.

I centred on two main factors. In the case of animated film the *double sense* of its imagery is one of the main factors. This aspect indicates a wider perspective regarding the question of the roots of ambiguity or multiple meanings: it shows that the explanation of these is partly related to how the works of art are built up (i.e. their elements, structures, stylistic devices and other characteristics tend to permit different readings, interpretations). However, the second factor proves that alternative meanings can depend on the historical, political and sociocultural contexts of the works of art. From this point of view, it was emphasized that oppressive political systems (in this case the Communist regime) and the censorship inevitably force artists to find a way of creating hidden meanings. The first factor can be considered as an internal factor, while the other one as external, while the result of these two is the rise of the Aesopic language.

I also emphasized that the usage of the Aesopic language does not lead to a homogeneous way of expression, therefore I distinguished between different variants of it. The *less direct approach* of the Aesopic language lacks the recognizable motifs of the criticized system, while its *more direct approach* dares use elements which are connected to the oppressive system in a recognizable way. Both tend to say what is not permitted to say, try to show what is forbidden to show, and depict more authentic visions of reality than the ones preferred by authorities. These tendencies provide very strong connections between a set of Hungarian animated short films made during the Communist decades (*Rondino*, *Changing Times*, *The Fly*, *Deadlock*, *Story about N*, *Our Holidays*, *Mind the Steps!*). Their exploration led to intriguing questions about artistic devices and personal resistance, and especially about the way these were connected – which can be considered as the core of the Aesopic language.

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## List of Figures

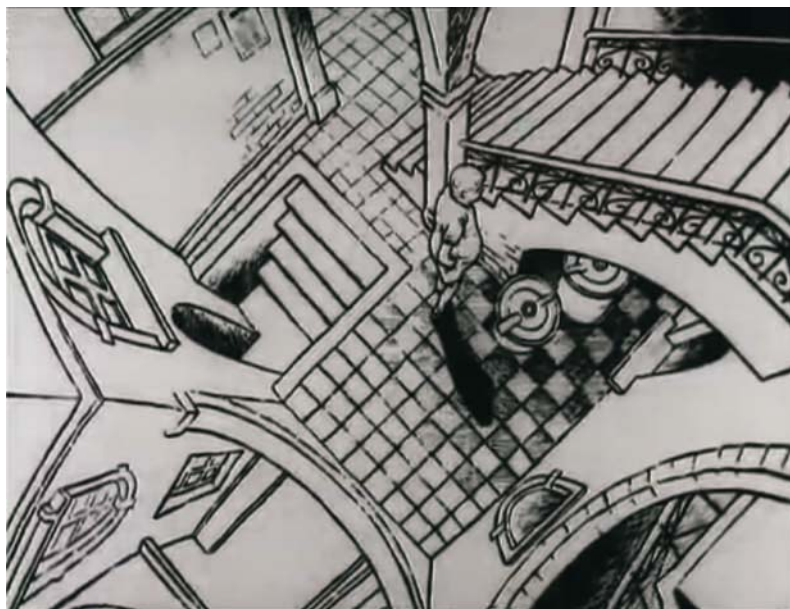
**Figure 1.** *Rondino*: “spot characters” torture a “line character.” **Figure 2.** *The Fly*: the title character ends up in a collection of insects.



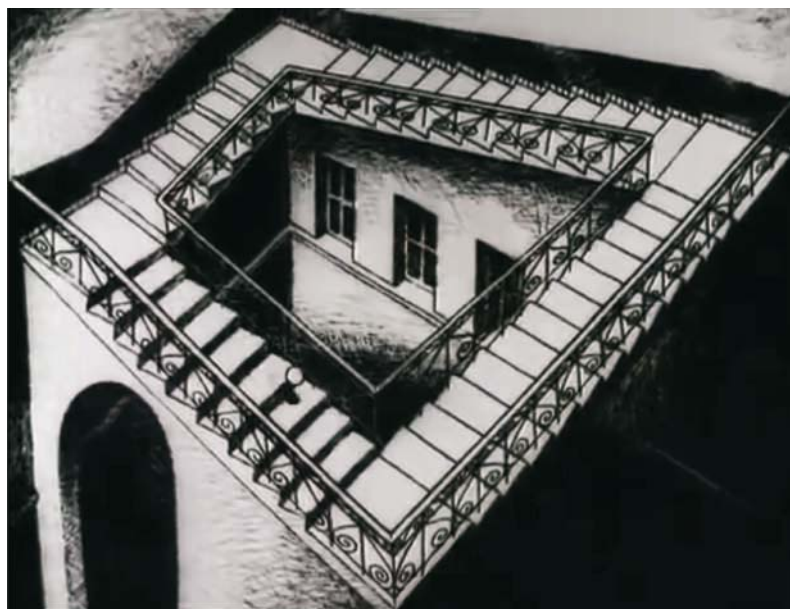
**Figure 3.** *Story about N*: the illusions of Stakhanovism. **Figure 4.** *Story about N*: the last shot as depiction of the “soft dictatorship.”



**Figure 5.** *Mind the Steps!:* a usual setting depicted in an unusual way.



**Figure 6.** *Mind the Steps!:* disorientation of spatial directions.



**Figure 7.** *Mind the Steps!:* the tank as a ticking clock.

