

## Pre-Workshop comment

JUDIT FRIEDRICH

### **Cultural memory: where it is now and where it is going; how LCS works in this field**

My take on cultural memory is one that aims at understanding, and helping others to understand, the changes in attitudes and priorities in Hungarian culture during the last 20 years. From this perspective, earlier features of culture in Hungary, such as the popularity of postmodernist fiction writer Péter Esterházy, seem to take on a different meaning. Analyses of certain literary and cultural phenomena, such as Esterházy's autobiographical/fictional treatment of the character of his father, an aristocrat turned informer under the communist regime, or Tibor Fischer's comic novel on the 1956 revolution of Hungary, seem to offer chances for renewed discussion, and a new understanding of, historical events and current situations, and the concepts of fictionality and historicity.

Ultimately, this work of analysis, processing, presentation and discussion, exploiting the concept of rhetoricity, should lead to a form of acceptance and healing, releasing energies to concentrate on current issues. The significance of large-scale social discussion directed toward cultural healing is not widely understood in Hungary where political upheavals and immediate economic pressures have not encouraged focusing on the more unexpected consequences of the drastic changes that have occurred.

My take is based on the concept of textuality: a double cultural perspective of studying Hungarian and English literature and culture as text, against a background of postcolonial and feminist critical theory. I find that studying a foreign culture offers an amount of objectivity that is painfully lacking when dealing with one's own cultural practices. I also find that once the skills are honed on neutral, that is, foreign, cultural areas, they transfer to home areas, at least to some extent. The concept of cultural memory offers a new perspective of the past and new ways of dealing with pressing current political and cultural issues.

## Position paper

My points of reference include Hungarian and English literature; the special cultural memory position of Hungarian immigrants who left after 1956, as represented in Tibor Fischer's *Under the Frog* (1992, Hungarian translation); the post-1989 restructuring of cultural memory in Hungary: scapegoats, political polarisation, lack of public reconciliation. Why are we (Hungarians) trying to create scapegoats rather than address our problems?

The case of individuals who acted as informers under the Communist regime.

- feeling of helplessness, frustration, anger – hope of release: blaming, rather than processing
- wary of the possibility of accepting some amount of responsibility
- historically too dangerous: fear of another change of regime
- processing of trauma still undone, issues not addressed seriously, as shown in Péter Esterházy, *Harmonia Caelestis* (2000) and *Javított kiadás [Revised Edition]* (2002), especially the lack of public response to this offer of examining the position of previous informers in our current social setup and a nuanced acceptance of various shades of responsibility and emotions towards those informers.

Some progress: alternative narratives, personal narratives, not only oral but also published. For 1956, Tibor Fischer provided one such alternative: anecdotal, oral based, comic.

How can we promote such processing – when the overwhelming evidence shows no public interest?

- publishing, courses, conferences, media
- the media are sensitive and they do not promote issues if they feel resistance towards them (unless it is in their interests to do so)
- politicians do not seem to feel a need to promote healing – they live off strife:
- fear-based rhetoric, demonizing the opposition,
- educational institutions are already over-politicised, often extremist:
- the need to be right, to possess the winning argument, as opposed to opening up debate, allow space for discussion

Cultural memory roots: traditionally, grass roots movements, social debate are not how Hungarian culture operated:

post-Communist (also post-Habsburg empire, post-Ottoman empire) fears of a new empire taking over: American commercialism, EU bureaucracy, Russian mafia.

Alternative venues in Budapest: *Trafó*: performance venue, previously used as electrical transformer, hence the name, and small community cultural centre *Nyitott Műhely* [Open Workshop], literally the workshop of an artist working with leather, who opened up the space for cultural events.

General attitudes of helplessness and negativity: example of Hungarian born, American educated, world travelled expert Jutka Dévényi in *Trafó* introducing the idea of experimental urban theatre as political tool and finding antagonistic response and little in the way of positive attitudes shown on location, yet some more in follow up web based discussion.

This process needs time to tease out development, a process that can only be encouraged, not forced. Like in the tale of the sun, the wind and the vagabond, there is a need for the continued presence of friendly spaces – as an open invitation for such processing in order to help generate an intellectual and cultural climate that allows remembering, processing, and healing.