

The Absurdity and Irrationality of War in the Everyday Life of the Hinterland

On István Örkény's Novella and Drama Tóték and Zoltán Fábri's Film Adaptation

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Abstract: The present study examines three versions of *Tóték* (commonly translated as *The Toth Family*; literally *The Tóts*), the first two by István Örkény, one of Hungary's leading twentieth-century writers: a highly successful drama from 1967, instrumental in reforming stage language in Hungary; and the 1966 novella of the same title. The third is their 1969 film adaptation, *Isten hozta, őrnagy úr!* (Welcome, Major), by Zoltán Fábri. The analysis of the drama and the novel focuses primarily on how a major arriving from the front during World War II brings the madness and irrationality of the war into the life of the Toth family when he stays with them for two weeks. The paper's second part examines the film adaption, asking in particular how the film represents madness and absurdity, given their key role in the original literary sources. The situation and the fate of the Toth family can be interpreted in all three works in more general terms as well, as a model for the working mechanisms and absurdity of dictatorships anywhere, hence, even if only indirectly, of 1960s Hungary. Sághy.Miklos@hung.u-szeged.hu

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István Örkény is a towering figure of twentieth-century Hungarian literature. His drama *Tóték* (The Toth Family; translated for English publication as *Welcoming the Major*), presented first in 1967, constitutes a fundamental and pioneering stage in the renewal of Hungarian theater after



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World War II.¹ It has been successfully staged in Hungary and abroad alike. The play was performed, among other places, in Paris, Washington D.C., Copenhagen, Moscow, Vienna, Berlin, Athens, Helsinki, Reykjavík, Prague, and Warsaw with the result of “putting Örkény’s name on the list of internationally renowned playwrights” (Lázár 1979: 268).² Interestingly, Örkény first drew up the story of the Toth family as a screenplay—initially titled *Pókék* (The Spiders), then later *Csönd legyen!* (Let There Be Silence!)—but then turned it into a novella, having had the piece turned down by the Hungarian Film Production Company (*Magyar Filmgyártó Vállalat*). The literary journal *Kortárs* published the novella in 1966. Only after this did Károly Kazimir, a director at the Thália Theater, commission Örkény to adapt his prose to drama, paving the way for a successful theatrical production. But, even at that point, the chain of adaptations had not yet finished. As Szirák notes in his analysis, “because of the impressive domestic and international success, the gates of the film studios too opened to this work by Örkény: [it] was filmed in 1969 under the title *Isten hozta, Őrnagy úr!* (Welcome, Major), directed by Zoltán Fábri” (Szirák 2009: 14). Thus, eventually, the story of the Toth family did end up on the silver screen as per Örkény’s original intentions. The present paper primarily studies the earlier, literary works from the perspective of the movie version with a focus on the process of film adaptation. The screenplay, though based on Örkény’s novella, was written by Fábri. For this reason, in examining the relationships of the novella’s adaptations, this paper will mainly, though not exclusively, concentrate on the novella and not the drama. Its final section will contextualize the conclusions of the analysis on the Eastern European cultural and political scene.

István Örkény: *The Toth Family* (Tóték)

The novella is set in an imaginary village in the mountains of northern Hungary, Mátraszentanna, where the scenery is enchanting, the air is pine scented, and the hustle and bustle of the city is a long way away. It is no wonder that the local residents make a considerable living by renting out their rooms to tourists looking for a breathtaking view and a place to relax. This picturesque,

¹ The literary works and adaptation have wildly different titles: the novella was first published in English in 1982, in Hungary, under the title *The Toth Family*. The original surname in the title, *Tót* (pronounce with a long *ó*, not as the English word “to”) is more run-of-the-mill and more ordinary in Hungarian compared to “Toth,” the one used in the translation. It is an extremely common name in Hungary, rendering the work even more universal. The title of the translation of the drama, *Welcoming the Major*, refers, in turn, to the title of the film adaptation, as the film’s Hungarian title is *Isten hozta, őrnagy úr!* (Welcome, Major). Even though the title of the film is translated in the subtitles as *Welcome Lord Major*; Péter Szirák in a study quoted later in this paper refers to the film with the title *Welcome, Major* (Szirák 2009: 14). In the present paper, the novella will be referred to as *The Toth Family*, the drama as *Welcoming the Major* (in accordance with the English translations); and finally, the film as *Welcome, Major*.

² Unless otherwise noted (i.e., indicated with references to published translations), all translations in this paper from Hungarian are by the author.

idyllic world has a counterpoint: it is the third year of World War II. For the time being, the war has influenced the village only indirectly such that "at least sixty percent of the population had relatives in the armed forces" (Örkény 2001: 93). The novel also mentions the anti-Jewish laws of Hungary at the time, which resulted in disenfranchisement and dispossession. We learn that the movie theater in Eger no longer belongs to Mr. Berger (who eats only kosher foods); the restaurant in Mátraszentanna is called as "volt Klein-féle vendéglő" (former Kleins' Restaurant).³; and finally, that it is only because of the dire needs of the wartime effort that half-Jews could participate in box-making, which was prohibited to "regular" Jews, who were no longer permitted to do anything like this by that time. There is no hint in the novel of anybody being bothered in the slightest by these measures, and the average workdays in the village seem to be unfazed by the distant war.

The life of the protagonists of the story, the Toths, also appears to be peaceful and unchanged for years. The well-respected fire chief, Mr. Lajos Toth, is at the helm of the family. As the narrator puts it:

[T]he Toth marriage had been exemplary: Mariska adored her husband, thought him superior to everyone, and obeyed blindly when he as much as blinked his eyes. Ági worshipped her father, as teenage girls often do. Everything beautiful in the world was epitomized by her Papa: the melting of chocolate in her mouth, the whirring of sparrows, the smell of a red rose, the thrill of being alive—all this and more (Örkény 2001: 151).

The peace reigning over the village and the family is disturbed by the arrival of Major Varró, the superior officer of their son, Gyula, who had advised the major to spend a couple of days in their quiet village to get over the atrocities of the Russian front. As a *quid pro quo* for the family's favor, Gyula hopes to receive favorable treatment on the front, of which he reminds his parents in a letter, so that his parents know well what to do: to humbly jump however high the major tells them to. However, at the beginning of the novel, we learn that Gyula had already died a heroic death on the front but, because the dimwit postman, Gyuri atyus⁴, had destroyed the telegram that would have broken the news to the family, the Toths do not learn of the tragic event. Their self-sacrificing willingness to serve the major thus no longer makes sense, and from the perspective of the reader, who knows more than they do, all their efforts could be called absurd if we accept Örkény's own definition for "absurd": "action is absurd when we act having lost all hope" (2009a: 1). The twist in the story is that from the point of view of the Toths, their sheepish assistance is *not* absurd. As Péter Szirák puts it, the family's lack of information and the recipient's extra knowledge creates tension that leads to the conclusion that "Örkény's work is

³ An adjective comparable to the original text's *volt* (literally "was" or "former") is missing from the novella's published English translation (Örkény 2001) even though it conveys essential information about the probably Jewish, now disenfranchised and dispossessed, Kleins.

⁴ "Uncle Gyuri" in the published translation, though "Daddy Gyuri" or "Pops Gyuri" would be more faithful to the original for this character, who is not a blood relative.

not absurd in its outcome but can rather be interpreted as the gradual unfolding of an *ironic-grotesque* effect originating in the double perspective and the exaggeration of certain plot episodes" (Szirák 2008: 196).

Major Varró is wearied and war-torn as he arrives from the front. With him, he brings the logic and mentality of war into the lives of the Toths, which they have to endure, for at least a while, in order to hopefully secure favor for their son., This is no mean feat: the major's fears, terrors, or even madness affect the whole family. As Tamás Tarján succinctly puts it:

The major is the messenger of war or the personification of the insanity of war ... Simply put, his personal traits and his paranoid delusion carry militant, antilife aggression. He and the war are the same. It is possible, nay, probable that the war made him who he is today highlighting and activating the negative elements of his personality. But, at the same time, war is the consequence and summary of the existence of personalities just like that. Wherever the major may go, a symbolic front will materialize around him (1998: 29).

One of his conspicuous eccentricities is that he loathes when someone looks behind his back. His mood swings and impulses are completely unpredictable. He is terribly annoyed, for example, when someone notices a butterfly flying about but seems totally at ease with it, if not showing sympathy for it, and when someone locks themselves in the outhouse and he, the major, learns that the person did not go to the outhouse to "use it" in the first place. He does not notice that the exhausted Toths escape the box-making workstation in pairs so as to take a quick nap in the cool air of the backyard but immediately spot Lajos Toth's wandering eye (which is just following the fluttering butterfly mentioned earlier). He routinely violates the norms of civilized human behavior: after dinner, he slowly and silently "circled his host twice" (Örkény 2001: 109) and then proceeds to question them about their evening as if he was a detective investigating suspects. An example of the major's twisted logic is when he sees Toth with bent knees, visibly "shrunk." He sizes him up, ponders, and finally declares the fire chief to be "a whole head taller somehow" (Örkény 2001: 160).

A result of the major's paranoia and impulsivity is that Mr. Toth has to wear his helmet down on his forehead in addition to holding a flashlight in his mouth so as to fight against drowsiness. The act of making boxes through the night is also a constraint thrust upon the Toths by the major. This activity completely throws off their daily routine and they all become seriously sleep-deprived. They become hypocrites and liars as their guest pressures them to act (and confirm repeatedly) that making boxes was not only fun for them but was their hearts' true desire—and not something the major had asked them to do. The major's power in having upset the Toth family's life does not actually involve blatant violence; even its very purpose can be questionable.⁵ The relationship between the Toths and the major, according to István Lázár, aptly

⁵ Cf. "[the devil the major] here is not a cold-minded evil spirit but a prisoner of his own situation. The killer is also a victim, as the victim is also the executioner a little bit" (Molnár Gál 1995: 138–139).

conceptualizes the relationship of tyrannical power—fascist power, in the play’s historical context—with that of the masses of everyday people, by highlighting “that quality of human nature by which we try to ‘defend’ our real and perceived values by adapting to evil even at the cost of extreme self-subordination, seeking a higher meaning for our abject humiliations, and only in the end, resorting to rebellion” (Lázár 1979: 259). Lajos Toth also waits until the end to rebel, but up until that point, and, for the sake of his son Gyula's benefit, he tolerates all the humiliations described above, and more, such as, for the sake of the major, jumping over the long shadow of a power generator as if it were a trench.

However, if we consider that the major forces Toth to do various humiliating if sometimes also comical, and not terribly serious things during his stay with the family—wearing his hat loose, making boxes, depriving him of sleep, having strange meal times imposed, and holding a flashlight in his mouth for two weeks—not by holding a gun to his head, the revenge exacted on the major, killing and dismembering him, seems disproportionate. Indeed, on listening to Lajos Toth’s complaints and learning that the fire chief didn’t even have to swallow the flashlight, Father Tomaji “flew into a rage”:

“Toth, this is impertinence!” he shouted. “Here we are, in the middle of a war, with people all around us trembling for their lives or weeping over their dead—and you, you have the gall to worry about such trifles, such petty piques, instead of being on your knees thanking God for guiding your son’s commander to your door! You should be ashamed of yourself! Now I’m sorry that I wasted all this time on you!” He stormed out of the room, slamming the door. (Örkény 2001: 148)

Presumably, the acts outlined above are not solely responsible for compelling Lajos Toth to carry out his tragic acts, as these are, rather, symptoms of an underlying problem: the fire chief is gradually losing his grip on his life, which he’d believed he was in control of.

The most conspicuous stages of the tragic and, at the same time, comical process in the novel are the fatal linguistic misunderstandings between the Toth family and the major. First, the major’s remark “I never would have thought your charming daughter was so grown-up” is heard by the family as “What I want to know is whose breath smells so foul” (Örkény 2001: 98). Later, instead of the word “major” the officer hears “schmajor”⁶; and, finally, the father tells the time but what the major hears is this: “Go screw your sweet old grandmother in the ears” (Örkény 2001: 136). (The play adds yet another misunderstanding to those in the novella: the major accuses the fire chief of having bitten his leg under the table, an accusation Lajos Toth denies.) Toth promises the Major, in vain, that he will never call him “schmajor” again; however, as their

⁶ In the Hungarian original the word *szórnagy* (fur-major) is used here, which, paired with the word *őrnagy* (major) constructs an untranslatable pun. In the English version this pun is not even imitated or substituted; the translator simply left it out (cf. Örkény 1981: 235).

perception of language and reality is so divergent, misunderstandings can happen again at any time, as we will see later.

It is noteworthy that not once does the external narrator take sides in terms of the mistakes and misunderstandings; readers, just like the characters in the story, cannot know for sure who was actually right. The situation even within the family deteriorates so much that Lajos Toth's family members gradually seem to side with the major. The fire chief's wife, Mariska, figures that "if the major felt insulted, he must have had his reasons" (Örkény 2001: 137). In one dispute, the ladies are so adamant about convincing themselves that Toth is wrong that Mariska recounts an old story that, she claims, proves that Toth has a bad memory. Eventually the two women verbally attack Toth. The major, in turn, tries to calm down the family: "Please stop all this senseless quarrelling!" he said with disarming indulgence. "What difference does it make whether we saw what we saw or Toth remembers what he remembers?" (Örkény 2001: 141).

The two women taking the major's side seem to be suffering from Stockholm syndrome; that is, they not only sympathize with the power that is disrupting their subjugated lives but actually offer their help.⁷ All the events that erode the fire chief's sense of reality (misunderstandings, accusations, humiliations, reverse logic explanations) lead him to cry out loudly in desperation: "Madness! Either you [Mariska] or I or both of us have dreamed up the whole thing" (Örkény 2009b: 24). The disintegration of Toth's identity in theatrical version is so severe that, by the end of the play, the fire chief not only calls shoes flutes but cannot even answer a simple question like whether he is a boy or a girl. Professor Cipriani, who asks him these questions, identifies the phenomena in his medical diagnosis as the hallmarks of that period in history. He thus diagnoses Toth as the victim of the age of war and, hinting at the reverse logic of the world, he observes:

"[I]n this day and age [...] if anyone ventures to call a shoe a shoe, I'll venture to say that he's sick. You're surprised? But every age has its characteristic feature, and ours is conceptual confusion" (Örkény 2009b: 35).

The cause for the Toth's disintegration is, therefore, that his dependable and invariable life turned completely uncertain and unreliable after the arrival of the major. Henceforth, anything can happen to him because he is subject to an irrational and capricious authority, just like their son Gyula on the front, or their Jewish compatriots in the hinterland. The war or, more generally speaking, the incomprehensibility and impossibility of the outside world, had arrived in the lives

⁷ Exaggerated and, therefore, ironic examples of Mariska's partiality for the major, are for example when she can foretell when he is going to be flatulent, so she discreetly leaves the room ("She even anticipated his farts and would unobtrusively leave the room"); or when the gray-bearded old Jewish man mysteriously warns her to run home and catch the falling umbrella before it hits the ground with a bang so it would not wake up the major (Örkény 2001: 152-153). According to Tamás Bécsy, "evidently, Örkény's dramas allude to the mechanisms, methods, and atmosphere of a personality cult. Manipulating inherently means creating a situation in which the people who are being manipulated are convinced that they are doing what the manipulator wants as if it were their own intention" (Bécsy 1984: 78-79).

of the Toth family in the figure of the major. They have to face the fact that instead of securing the life and safety of their son, they themselves fall victim to contingencies and insanities. Anna Földes observes that in

this reality, which defies logic, misconceptions automatically take hold and rationality loses its validity. Time becomes warped, and, in the topsy-turvy world where unlawfulness presides over law, it is twice as hard to tell lunacy from normalcy (Földes 1985: 103).

The absurd humiliations Toth has to endure are nothing more than symptoms of a chaotic world; a world that has lost its real outlines. As it is the major who represents this world in the microcosm of the family, he eventually becomes the target of Toth's murderous intent resulting from Toth's unbearable situation.

The novella's master manipulator is the major, but we also have to mention Gyuri atyus; the oafish postal worker who likewise contributes, though less noticeably, to the transformation of reality as perceived by the village and the Toth family. It is he who decides which piece of news can or cannot travel across the borders of Mátraszentanna. His decisions are based on personal preference and his predilection for symmetry. On a higher level of generalization, if we take the major to be the personification of the irrationality of the war, then Gyuri atyus represents the controller of the manipulative war propaganda who, among others, is the regulator and gatekeeper of news from the front. The "censorship" engaged in by the postman and the irrationality, tyranny, and unpredictability of power represented by the major, can be aligned not only with the militant Hungary of the early 1940s but also with the different periods of the nation's communist dictatorship. Both the Rákosi era (from 1949 to 1954) and the Kádár era (following the 1956 Revolution and into the 1960s and beyond), when both the novella and drama were published, were characterized by information and leadership politics based on silencing, dissemination of disinformation (in the manner of Gyuri), and disproportionate exaggerations and embellishments. If we interpret the novella and the drama as allegory, *The Toth Family* stages a world in which irrationality, subjugation, and fear are paramount; where authority is not transparent, and where its operation is not only incomprehensible but can, unfortunately, be correlated with several periods of Hungary's twentieth-century history.

The following section will explore the interpretative and cinematographic methods and preferences of Zoltán Fábri's film adaptation of Örkény's work based primarily on the characteristics of the literary works discussed so far.

Zoltán Fábri: *Isten hozta, őrnagy úr!* (Welcome, Major)

Released in 1969, the film *Isten hozta, őrnagy úr!* (Welcome, Major) starts off with a double narration: we can hear the narrator recount the story: "Somewhere in the north of Hungary, deep in pine forests, in the embrace of valleys, there is a little village," while at the same time we can see the events portrayed in images. The oral narration style used in the movie is similar to that of the novel—both relate the story of the Toth family by keeping an ironic distance, simultaneously

expressing minor and major exaggerations as well as disproportionate details. This intent is made obvious, for example, when the narrator compares the fire chief's giant clumsy hands to a crepe pan, or when describing the symmetry of Toth's body as follows:

"[I]f someone were to decide to cut Toth in half, he would only have to slice straight down from the part [in his hair] and Toth would fall divided into two identical halves—a rare occurrence even among eggs" (Örkény 2001: 96).

The information given by the narrator of the novella contains not only morbid and preposterous comparisons but is also ironically disproportionate. First, the narrator does not disclose much about the motivations, ideas or reasons for either the inadvertent or deliberate abuses committed by the major, the central figure of the plot. However, and secondly, the narrator presents minutiae galore about Lajos Toth: his slow wit while looking for a solution to his wandering mind during work is documented practically by the second with abundant detail. Similarly, the reader receives ample specifics about the size of the major's feet and the debate concerning the benefits and the disadvantages of emptying the outhouse. The novella's narrator is prone to reverse, mendacious logic. Completely aware as the narrator is of the exhaustion, humiliation, and sleep deprivation suffered by the Toths, it is impossible for the reader to take the narrator's words seriously:

"[T]hey were happy, smiling, full of enthusiasm. One could scarcely imagine a more idyllic picture" (Örkény 2001: 131).

The narrator of the movie, similarly, tries to lead us down the garden path when claiming that the last three days of the major's stay were spent in mutual love, cheer, and satisfaction. By this time, viewers are well aware of the fact that the price paid for this by the Toth family is absolute and humble service to the major's every whim. The novella contains disproportionate details only alluded to in the movie: the narrator explains the lore of making boxes and the exact nature of a paper trimmer while images of industrial-strength steel cutters used by photographers and bookbinders illustrate the narration; all the while, the major's motivations and the driving forces behind his actions remain hidden, just like in the novella. The ironic comparisons and the side commentaries of the novella's narrator are frequently cited word for word by the film's narrator while, at the same time, the film's narrator (actor Iván Darvas) adopts a jovial and genteel tone (complete with happy-go-lucky music), which provides counterpoints and frames the images by showing the abuses and vagaries of the authority as ironic.

Although as previously mentioned, it was Zoltán Fábri himself who wrote the screenplay, largely based on the novella, the film contains some motifs and scenes drawn from the play and not the novel. An interesting structural choice is that in the play and the film, viewers do not learn about the death of Gyula (the Toth family's soldier-son) in the beginning (as in the novella) but only halfway through. Another example is that only in the play and the movie, not in the novella, does the major open fire on a mannequin when he wakes up startled in the middle of the night. Overall, the film adaption follows the novella's order and structure, and the play is closely based

on the novella. However, the film cuts in its entirety the lengthy conversation with Professor Cipriani, one which comments on the state of the world and Toth. It also substantially shortens the dialogue between Father Tomaji and the desperate fire chief. Likewise, in the film version, the character of Mrs. Géza Gizi, the coquettish lady from the drama, is absent. I agree with Péter Szirák that the abandonment of these plot lines "serves predominantly the thickening of interpersonal drama and strengthens the discursive isolation of the world of the Toths" (Szirák 2008: 232). Compared to the novella, the film enhances the inner world, the motivations and self-manipulating interests of the Toth family, with new elements and motifs. In the film adaptation we learn that Toth's son, Gyula used to have a fiancée, whom he had to get engaged to because they "lay together" under the piano (an act still unfathomable for the mother), and that as the teacher at the local school, Gyula used to have a favorite student, a little boy with a limp. These additions make Gyula's background story more complete and add nuance to the character of Mariska, as it is through her internal monologue, as well as through photographs shown, that we learn about all this.

The fantasies and dreams of Mr. Toth's daughter, Ágika, in which she replaces her father with an idealized image of the major, likewise play an important role in the film, as they do in the novella. A novel element in the movie is a new scene in which Toth and Ágika search for scrap metal for a new paper trimmer at a landfill. Toth, completely exhausted, falls asleep in a giant iron pipe, while Ágika, after a small accident, faints and embraces a copper pipe while saying affectionately, "Oh, Major Varró! My dear Major Varró!" What is interesting is that at the close of the scene in the film, the cutaway shot that follows depicts a painting of the Virgin Mary holding the baby Jesus (see Images 1 and 2). This montage sequence, using the similarity of the two compositions and with a considerable amount of exaggeration, ironically sacralizes the devoted attraction Ágika feels for the major. When the family asks Toth to wear his helmet loosely and irregularly on his forehead (so his gaze would not horrify the major), the film depicts the hesitancy of the fire chief in two ways: in the audio track, the jolly narrator, quoting from the novella, chronicles his vacillation, whereas on screen, from Toth's subjective point of view, we can see his peers staring at him (see Image 3). These eyes will eventually become witnesses to his humiliation and loss of face. The scenes above, true to the novella's style, lay the foundations, even if often ironically, for the psychological probability and rational motivation for the actions of the Toth family. Nevertheless, the Fábri's film adaptation completely omits the linguistic misunderstandings (and the ones related to biting) even if, as explained above, these events depict important stages of the insanity that is unfolding. I am convinced that the role that such misunderstandings play in dismantling reality is taken over in the film by visual techniques that dismantle that adaptation's real, or coherent space and time unity.



Images 1 and 2. Heavenly love

Prominent in the film are accelerations that render the movement of the characters ridiculous, as if they were in a burlesque movie, and stop tricks, which make characters suddenly disappear and then instantaneously reappear. There are also jump cuts when minutes or seconds are missing from scenes so we can see, for example, the same shot of the major in one moment wearing only a shirt and then fully dressed in uniform in the next. So too, there are several still images of people stuck in certain positions. These can be likened to the black-and-white photographs shown elsewhere that portray Gyula and the events of his life. And, as we can never see the son in actual *moving* images, photographs depicting him represent his transition into recollections and memories. At the end of the story, we can see the photograph of the boy in uniform burning while the narrator reads the list of Gyula's personal possessions from his military death notice. According to Györgyi Vajdovich's interpretation, the film "illustrates with this visual metaphor that Gyula died for them [his family] at that moment (as they signed off on his death in the moment they killed the major without knowing that Gyula has already died)" (2008)



Image 3. Scrutinizing gaze

Other cinematic techniques are less prominent but worth mentioning; these create a link between scenes while, at the same time, dismantling the reality of the world depicted. One example comprising two scenes: Ágika exits the living room, leaving her parents (and the major) there, and opens the door to the garden; and after a cut comes another scene in which she takes the stairs down to the yard to find her parents (and the major) in the garden. The understanding of the two scenes as continuous, however, cannot comply with the appearance of the parents in the garden because according to the visually implied continuity of the events, they are supposed to be still in the living room. It also happens on several occasions in the adaptation that the film disrupts the harmony of sound and image in a way that while the dialogue (or the speech of a character) is uninterrupted, the setting, the time, and place changes on the visual plane. A prime example is when the major is explaining what a great time he is having at the Toth's place after having spent nine months in unbearable noise and stink on the front: during his monologue, we see him and the family members walking around in the yard (the latter can hardly keep up with the pace of the flustered major), then suddenly after a cut they all pop up by the table in the living room while there is no cut in the flow of the major's thoughts. The accelerations, the stills, the jumps, cuts, and the stop tricks, which make the characters appear and disappear together with the other effects that disrupt the coherent space and the audio-visual unity of the film—all this undermines the story's reality. These all symbolize how irreality takes over the life of the Toth family, creating the same effect as the bizarre misunderstandings and misinterpretations in the novella and the play. Even though I have mainly associated the source of the grotesque visual effects with the linguistic figures of the novella (and play) by Örkény, it should be noted that in the oeuvre of Fábri, this technique cannot be seen merely as an Örkény-like influence but, as Gábor Gelencsér persuasively suggests, "the grotesque stylization of *Utószezon* [Late Season] and *Isten hozta, őrnagy úr!* [Welcome, Major] indicates the director's predilection for the disruption of the realistic illusion of narration and film image and that this ambition is not missing from his movies made in the 1970s, and [...] the 1980s" (2015: 283).

Staging irrational logic and an irrational world can mostly be seen on the visual level of the adaptation, but the film conveys the major's unfolding lunacy (wreaking havoc in the peaceful

life of the Toths) is illustrated in another, different way in the film. A completely novel idea in the film adaptation, absent from both the novella and play, is that the major, so as to fight sleeplessness, decides to have the doors and walls of the Toth family residence painted. During box making, the guest forces the family to sing military marches, and when they start using the new paper cutter, he cheers them on to higher speed ("Come on! Forward, hey!"), as if he was in the middle of a battle. Overworking the Toths, insisting on their making boxes, is obviously the major's idea, just like in the play and the novel. But, on the one hand, the film inserts a scene in which the Toths throw the boxes into the river, and, on the other hand, cinematic adaptation emphasizes how the towers and piles of unnecessary boxes squeeze the Toth family out of their own home. (See Images 4 and 5.) Both cinematic solutions heighten the absurd and Sisyphean nature of making boxes. The major has the idea of internationalizing the box-making: in the novel, he explains and promotes the theory to Toth; in the play, to the family; and in the movie, to an ever-increasing crowd (with cuts between the ever-larger numbers) in the local pub. The scene of jumping over the trench, or rather over the shadow, also takes an interesting turn in the film adaptation. In the novel, the major mistakes the shadow of the generator for a trench on the road, so he jumps over it several times, back and forth. After some vacillation, Toth, in order not to embarrass him, imitates his guest. What makes the situation complicated is that the local mechanic catches up with them and he greets

Major Varro with great respect. His calculated, unctuous friendliness was motivated by several factors; he was thinking of his cousin serving at the front, his approaching retirement, and, last but not least, of an old charge against him: he'd allegedly committed subversion against the state. Bearing all these things in mind, he, too, jumped without a moment of hesitation (Örkény 2001: 134).

In the movie, as the major and the fire chief are walking home, they meet the mechanic again, but this time he is actually standing in a trench he has dug (where the shadow had been) to make the illusion of the major real (Image 6). In other words, he fans the flames of the major's insanity. He eventually receives his reward: the major promises him that his cousin will be safe and sound while serving on the front.



Image 4. The absurdity of box-making



Images 5. The absurdity of box-making

An essential part of the cinematographic creation is the acting. The major is played by Zoltán Latinovits, one of the best known and the most outstanding Hungarian actors of the 1960s and 1970s. His performance is characterized by impulsive, aggressive, and demanding authority, and, at the same time, ceremonious, humble politeness, bigotry, and cold calculation. And, as he shifts between extremes with complete unpredictability, the Toth family's "subjecting themselves to the character of the major can be interpreted as their acceptance of the absurdity of the world. Nevertheless, the absurdity of the whole situation stems also from the fact that because of the major's unpredictability, it is impossible to satisfy the major's whims" (Vajdovich 2008).



Image 6. Illusion has become reality

The less conspicuous manipulator, Gyuri atyus, is a determining force even from the background. The film stages his role in a condensed, symbolic composition. Consider the scene in which Toth asks the dimwit postman to stop teasing the dogs, as he always does, while the major is staying with them, because Gyula's life is at stake. Gyuri atyus responds, "What wouldn't I do for the Toth family?" And while we hear these words, we can see the reflection of the postman's face in the mirror, surrounded by photographs of Gyula. (Image 7). The central position of Gyuri atyus's smirking face suggests that he is the one strongly influencing and manipulating how Gyula is remembered and thought of—as is actually happening, unbeknownst to the Toths.



Image 7. Gyuri atyus in the middle



Image 8. The full front gazes of the Toths

At the end of the film, having dismembered the major, the members of the Toth family look into the camera, staged full front, without uttering a word. (Image 8) This is not the first instance in the adaptation when the actors look into the camera this way, because when the narrator refers to Gyula's pictures hung on the wall, the Toths turn toward the camera and tell the story of Gyula's life based on black and white photographs viewers also see. As the narrator also mentions, however, showing these pictures and recalling all the events related to them is a treat the Toths reserve for houseguests. Hence, the camera, and the viewers, have assumed the role of houseguests. By the end of the story, the camera position is not woven into the narrative so explicitly. So, the characters are not staring at a diegetic character (one internal to the story), but at the viewers, who can feel themselves "called" upon. The Toth family's collective gaze seems to be directing this unsettling question to the outside of the fictional space: did they make the right choice to end the power of the major over them as they did?

In 1969, when the film was released, Hungary was still ruled by a dictatorship (even if widely referred to by the 1960s as a "soft dictatorship"), so the film asking this question and the Toths desperately looking at the viewers to find answers, made the story timely despite its World War II setting. Also, the film highlighted the internationalization of box-making, which aligned with

the internationalist ideologies of the Left and not with the exclusionary ideologies of the extreme Right. Based on these, it seems that the Fábri adaptation, with its subdued and hidden allusions, managed to converge the parablelike nature of *The Toth Family* (and so its atemporality) to the contemporary viewers and world of Hungary in the 1960s. What is more, the basic conflict in both the literary work and the film adaptation—that is, the collision of the major's and the fire chief's worlds—made contemporary viewers and readers face a fundamental question: what compromises and collaborative deals were they willing to make with the communist power?

In comparison with the strict, oppressive Stalinist era Hungary of the 1950s, the 1960s allowed relatively more wiggle room for people within the bounds of a one-party communist dictatorship, with slight liberalization and independence of the economy and culture, as well as a more indirect, nuanced way in which power was exercised and social pressure applied. Within this softer framework, the individual's relationship with power became more complicated and harder to navigate. "Soft" oppression offered the illusion of being taken care of, but at the same time, undetectably spread a web over the everyday citizen, who was simply looking for safety, peace, and some financial security. The range of possible deals to be made with individuals and institutions in authority, and more generally with the state, thus widened considerably during this period.

The novella *The Toth Family*, the play *Welcoming the Major*, and Fábri's film adaptation therefore resonated with Hungarians in the 1960s, for the theme of making a tacit deal with authority was all too familiar. The major, after all, does not use force to coerce the Toths into doing his bidding. The members of the Toth family mostly comply with his caprices and aggressive requests that turn their lives upside-down, because they believe the major to be safeguarding the life of their son on the frontlines. It is well-known that the network of informants in Hungary during the Kádár era operated by blackmailing everyday citizens. The machinations of power in all three versions of the work seem to allude deliberately to the mechanisms of a soft dictatorship. That being said, the major's requests and indirect orders do not threaten the physical safety of the Toth family but are all relatively feasible challenges voluntarily undertaken for the sake of the son, Gyula. This, then, is one of the essential questions of the drama, novella, and film: how far can one go, or is one willing to go, when it comes to accepting compromises with power? The novella's epigraph—also quoted in the film—reads, in part, "[I]s there a power mighty enough to make a man devour his humanity to the last drop? Is there or is there not? It's quite a puzzle" (Örkény 2001: 89). Can the compromises inherent in accepting the hand extended by power destroy one's humanity? Not physiologically or biologically, but rather from a moral standpoint? Can it devour one's moral or ethical identity, which makes one a civilized human being? This is a major dilemma in all versions of *Tóték* and the periods of time in which these versions were born. The fire chief's answer to these questions is that he stomachs it for a while, then he rebels, and then, eventually, he kills the major.

In his foreword to the drama (titled "To the Audience"), István Örkény, writing as the play's narrator, concludes by explaining the processes of enduring and rebelling as follows:

If fate teaches a people to acquiesce, it is naturally hard to brand as a criminal [a person] who persist[s] to the end in acquiescing. It is harder still to condemn this firefighter, because the moment comes when he says, "Enough" [...] True, he has not picked the moment very well; his rebellion is by now futile, overdue, mindless. But why is he to blame for that? There are happy people; they are those that rebel when the time is right. We Hungarians are [a] breed that do[es] not rebel at the right time (Örkény 2009a: 1).

Note that in the above-quoted last sentence of the play's foreword, the narrator uses the pronoun *we*, as if speaking in the name of the wider community the fire chief and the narrator both belong to that of Hungarians generally. So, the events staged in *Welcoming the Major* expand into the history of Hungarians up to the present time of the foreword, the 1960s.

A comparative analysis of the novella and the film unearths the following similarities and differences: Ironic narration is present in both versions as the jovial storybook-like tone of the narration is not in keeping with the events depicted. The film's oral narration serves to emphasize the divergence of, nay, the grotesque disconnect between, the visual and the audio planes, in what amounts to double narration, and this is more conspicuous than in the novella. A good example of this is the jolly, comical music at the beginning of the film during the opening credits, which accompanies the visual cues foreshadowing the major's 'madness': the colorful doors and the ever-increasing heaps of boxes. The real or imagined nature of the novella's upsetting linguistic tools—that is, the misunderstandings—is not clarified in the story. Thus, the double "vision" of the characters (which nearly drives the fire chief crazy) remains unresolved. The film's focus of the film is narrower than the literary works, as the film primarily foregrounds the members of the Toth family, their guest, and the psychological processes occurring within and between them, ultimately abandoning the novella's secondary characters and plotlines. At the same time, the beautiful landscape and sunny hills of the movie's real location—the bucolic village of Szarvaskő, in northern Hungary—along with the cheerful soundtrack and the jovial narration, provide a counterpoint to the vicissitudes of the Toths and the horrors of war.

In a contemporary critique, László B. Nagy found fault with the exaggerated realism of the film, writing that its director:

must have thought that realism highlights Örkény's truth, which must also be his own truth. The artistic consequences have led to unimaginable distances from the original work, and have even deprived it of its meaning. The aim to achieve realism seriously endangers the credibility of and the possibility of being captivated by the film (B. Nagy 1969: 9).

According to Nagy, the film's enhanced realism—filmed in a real location, complete with realistic acting—decreases the allegorical meaning of the literary work, and, paradoxically, shrinks its credibility. Reality, however, is the departure point then deconstructed by cinematic tricks and processes so as to finally lead to unreality and to the frenzy of a dictator's caprices. Obviously, the novella's linguistic polysemies, which considerably determine the characters' worldviews, become externalized in the film in the form of fast motions and stop tricks, which are not part of the diegetic or a representative universe but of the processes of staging and

direction. Fábri’s adaptation creates a fertile tension between the reality of the location, the rational-psychological motivation of the characters, and the destructive cinematography outlined above. By foregrounding psychological process, the film, according to Péter Szirák, “validates itself as a social-ethical allegory of the mutual relationship of oppression and subjection of [the novel and the drama] *Tóték*. The latter, however, also suggests [i.e., through cinematic tricks] that the events in the progression of the story—in the course of the history—transcend particular considerations and individual will” (2008: 235–236). In other words, the Toths are exposed to a larger, external power, over which they have no influence whatsoever, as if they were mere puppets.

The cultural context of the adaptation

The grotesque allegory of both the novel *The Toth Family* and the film *Welcome, Major* is surely not unique in Eastern Europe. From the end of the 1950s, not unrelated to the death of Stalin and the political changes in the Soviet Union, a certain “thawing” unfolded in Eastern Bloc that manifested itself in less openly oppressive communist regimes. This went hand in hand with an intellectual renewal and liberation of cultural life, and widening publication possibilities across much of the region by the 1960s. One key outcome: the widespread publication of *grotesque* literary works, especially in Czechoslovakia and Poland. In those two countries, such authors of the 1960s harked back to a vibrant tradition of the 1920–30s. Czech authors Václav Havel, Milan Kundera, Ladislav Fuks, and Bohumil Hrabal could evoke such literary predecessors as Jaroslav Hašek, and Karel Čapek, while 1960s Polish writers Sławomir Mrożek and Tadeusz Różewicz revived the traditions of authors like Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz and Witold Gombrowicz.⁸ In contrast, in Hungary, we cannot speak of such continuity when it comes to grotesque representation. It is no coincidence that István Örkény mentioned in an interview that he felt quite alone as a writer in his own country:

“I am rather on my own [in Hungary] [...] [T]here have only been isolated experiments in this genre, independent of each other” (Örkény 1986: 207, 209).

As for contemporary writers abroad he related to, he highlighted Czech, Polish, and Romanian authors: “[T]he representatives of the Eastern European grotesque are the closest to me, such as Mrożek, Havel and Sorescu. My entire mindset is determined by the fact that I feel not only Hungarian but also Eastern European” (1986: 294). Örkény only mentions one Hungarian predecessor, Frigyes Karinthy, whose grotesque short prose did not manage to create the foundations for a whole literary trend in Hungary before the World War II (Örkény 1986: 415). Consequently, the plays and prose of Örkény published in the 1960s, especially celebrated

⁸ Péter Berkes explains this mechanism in more detail in *Senki sem fog nevetni... (Groteszk irányzat a hatvanas évek közép- és kelet-európai irodalmában)* (Nobody is going to Laugh: The Grotesque Trend in Central and Eastern European Literature in the Sixties), chapter II. (1990: 30–52).

collection of *One-minute Stories*, are pioneering attempts to renew Hungarian literary and theatrical language, on the one hand, and are organically connected to the Eastern European cultural trends on the other.

As for Zoltán Fábri’s oeuvre, it was about much more than the grotesque. Fábri’s directorial career started in the 1950s, and his first two films—*Vihar* (Storm) (1951) and *Életjel* (Fourteen lives) (1954)—followed the aesthetic principles of socialist realism. His film, *Körhinta* (Merry-go-round; 1956) brought him international acclaim and a watershed moment in his career. As Gábor Gelencsér puts it,

“after the ideological script-centricity of socialist realism, he brought back the *raison d’être* of directorial style and of a particular cinematography, or, as then called, ‘cinemalike-ness’ to the screen.”

In short, “he revels in the tradition of classic stylistic ideals in four of his movies released in the five-year period between 1955 and 1959” (Gelencsér 2017): *Körhinta* (1956), *Édes Anna* (Anna Édes) (1958), *Hannibál tanár úr* (Professor Hannibal) (1956), and *Dúvad* (The Brute) (1961). These works fit in nicely with the Hungarian cinematographic trends of the second half of the 1950s, and also surpass them with their innovative techniques and their more modern, more abstract, or, simply, more artistic solutions within a classic framework.

In the 1960s, however, another turn can be observed in Fábri’s oeuvre, as Fábri turned to contemporary films from both Western and Eastern Europe for inspiration. His use of nonlinear narrative in *Húsz óra* (Twenty Hours) (1965) and in *Nappali sötétség* (Daytime Darkness) (1963) can be clearly attributed to the influence of modernist films (especially those of Alain Resnais),⁹ while the ironic-grotesque tone of *Két félidő a pokolban* (Two Halftimes in Hell) (1961), *Utószezon* (Late Season) (1966) and *Welcome, Major* resonate of similar approaches by the Czech New Wave. The immediate precedent of *Welcome, Major*, in terms of cinematography in Fábri’s oeuvre, is *Utószezon* which stages the trauma of the Holocaust and the responsibility of Hungarian society in it in a grotesque, satirical way.¹⁰ All the techniques in *Utószezon* aimed at dismantling reality—like jump cuts, fast motions, and stop tricks—can be likened to the cinematographic solutions of *Welcome, Major*. It is noteworthy that in 1965 Fábri refutes the grotesque perspective of the screenplay of *Welcome, Major* (The Tots) stating in an interview (calling the work *Tóték*):

⁹ In his book on Fábri, József Marx mentions Alain Resnais’s *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959) which Fábri liked a lot, just he he did Agnès Varda’s *Le Bonheur* (1965), for example (2004: 130, 144).

¹⁰ The grotesque-ironic perspective can already be seen in Fábri’s *Két félidő a pokolban*, a film that, as with *Welcome, Major*, also sets out to grapple with the trauma of the World War II. This approach became dominant in Fábri’s films not only because the director was influenced by trends elsewhere in European cinema of the era, but also because Péter Bacsó became one of Fábri’s closest collaborators and screenwriters. Bacsó’s outstanding 1969 film, *A tanú* (The Witness), banned at the time for its critical take on communism, has achieved cultlike status within the Hungarian grotesque.

[W]e worked on the script for *Tóték* with István Örkény four years ago. [...] Then, simultaneously with *Tóték*, the script for my film *Húsz óra* was already being written. This latter was more mature, and our team at the Hungarian Film Production Company preferred it, as did I. I think the reason was that then the particularly bizarre and tragically grotesque tone of *Tóték* was unexpected and unusual." (Szalkai 1969: 9).

In a couple of years, Fábri had become more open to the grotesque, reflecting new trends in both Hungarian and European cinema, including the Czech New Wave. The Fábri oeuvre, as Balázs Varga writes, "follows more or less exactly the stylistic changes of Hungarian cinema in the fifties, sixties, and seventies" (Varga 2004); in the first period, as a trendsetter, and in the second, more as a trend follower. The adaptation of *Tóték*—primarily of the novella but also of the drama—therefore represents a compelling case of artistic collaboration. It sheds light on how predecessors of cinematographic and literary trends of grotesque representation were connected in 1960s Hungary and on what basis.

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