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Identity politics, authenticity and romantic love:

American telecinematic discourses on homosexuality and the Hungarian "gay boom" of the 2000s

THE AIM OF this article is twofold: first, to provide an overview of what I identify as a local "gay boom," a relative proliferation and diversification of homosexuality-related representations on the postcommunist Hungarian television and cinema screen of the 2000s; second, to focus on one of its significant trends, the pro-gay coming out storyline, and explore its LGBT politics in relation to that of the American "gay boom" in the 1990s.

Queer in the Hungarian media context
Besides one curious exception in 1971,[1] it was only the 1980s and 1990s that saw a sporadic emergence of films containing explicitly queer[2] storylines.[3] This emergence concurred with broader socio-cultural and political transformations in Hungary related to changing international relations. The thaw of the 1980s brought about the relative liberalization of the public sphere, including lifting the taboo on homosexuality in the media and popular literature, and

the registration of Homérosz, the first anti-homophobic organization (Eszenyi 2006). Queer visibility in popular culture grew in the 1990s due to multiplication of commercial, liberal, and tabloid media, including the widespread exposure to Anglo-American pop-cultural products, franchise media, and the Internet. Even *Neighbours* ([Szomszédok], 1987-1999), the most popular Hungarian TV-series of the 1990s, broadcasted by the national public service television, featured a queer character between 1990 and 1993. As for legal reforms: unregistered cohabitation has been recognized by the law since 1996; discrimination based on sexual orientation was explicitly prohibited in 2003; the age of consent was equalized in 2002; registered partnership for same-sex couple has been available since 2009 (Farkas 2000; Reuters 2007; Takács 2007). However, the Hungarian Foundational Law enacted in 2012 by the rightist Orbán government forecloses the possibility of same-sex marriage, and provides no guarantee against discrimination based on sexual orientation (Pinknews 2012).

The 2000s was a much more stirring decade than previous ones in terms of visibility in public discourses, including cinema: at least ten feature films premiered that engage with homosexuality in a dramaturgically significant way.[4] Furthermore, it has become routine to include marginal motives of homosexuality/homoeroticism, especially in comedies,[5] though not exclusively.[6] One of the most popular programs on Hungarian television with top ratings, the daily primetime soap *Between friends* ([Barátok közt], 1998–present) has included four storylines with denotative gay, lesbian and transgender characters. Talk-shows, reality shows, and make-over shows with forerunners like American *Queer eye for the straight guy* featured non-straight-identified persons. In 2000 the Budapest Lesbian Film Committee [Budapesti Leszbikus Filmbizottság], founded

by members of LABRISZ Lesbian Association [LABRISZ Lesz-
bikus Egyesület], made its debut film, and has been active ever
since, producing short films and documentaries (Imre 2008) aimed
at "strengthen[ing] the identity and the world of lesbians living in
Hungary" (LABRISZ 2007-2012). Before exploring the represen-
tational tendencies of this local "gay boom" with a limited focus on
live-action feature films and fiction television, I would like to dis-
cuss the main patterns and sexual politics of homosexuality-related
pop-cultural representations of 1990s' US and their relevance in the
Hungarian context.

The "gay Nineties"[7] in the US and "global queering"

Post-Stonewall American gay and lesbian identities, imagery, and
activism have gained a quasi-global hegemony (Altman 1996) – a
phenomenon highlighted by Kevin Moss in relation to Central
and Eastern European countries. Moss calls attention to the over-
whelming dominance of US media images, and to what he sees as
its dangers: the eclipse of local LGBT models and identities, their
Americanization, and, consequently, that they will become easy tar-
gets for nationalist and homophobic criticism (2007, 264–5). Moss's
argumentation seems to rely on what Mark J. McLelland identifies
as a kind of "unique local essentialism" opposed to "global homo-
genization," which tends to promote a critical engagement with lo-
cal specificities on the grounds of their alleged authentic (McLel-
land 2006, 1), or in Moss's words "less colonized," status (2007, 265).
Though I agree with Moss on Americanization as a salient tendency
in Hungarian queer culture and politics, I do not see it as necessar-
ily "dangerous." I would rather emphasise the need for confronting
nationalist discourses (homophobic or otherwise) instead of trying
to by-pass their critique. Furthermore, I would not dismiss Ameri-

canization because its supposedly reductive effects on diversity and local specificity. First, not all forms of diversity are necessarily good. Second, I would promote a "hybridization model" (McLelland 2006, 2) that tries to move beyond the binary of an authentic and backward local versus a colonising and modernising global/Western.

In any case, the striking growth of homosexuality-related images in the 1990s' American popular culture, and specifically, in television and on the movie screen (e.g. Walters 2001; Benshoff and Griffin 2006;) must have, to a significant extent, affected the popular media of many countries all over the world because of the globalization of US television programming, and the specific symbolic status and hegemonic market position of Hollywood cinema (Miller 2005). This American "gay boom" is attributable, according to Ron Becker (2006), to an atmosphere of multiculturalism and neoliberal discourses on free market and personal responsibility, in which a supposedly economically affluent lesbian and gay minority functions as a model minority. Relevant telecinematic representations have been criticised from anti-homophobic perspectives (Walters 2001; Becker 2006; Moss 2007; Davis and Needham 2009; Joyrich 2009), highlighting the following undesirable patterns: the episodic appearances of non-straight characters and the narrative marginalization of recurring ones, sometimes using them only as dramaturgical tools or even as butts of jokes; the focus on the reactions of the straight world in a coming-out storyline, often creating the illusion of a post-closet era where homophobia occurs only sporadically; the desexualisation of non-straight characters whose sexual and intimate lives are hardly ever represented, especially visually; the lack of representing a queer community, and portraying LGBT characters mainly as the friends of straight characters; the avoidance of engaging with explicitly political issues but presenting gay

identity first and foremost in consumerist terms; the overrepresentation of white, urban, upscale (and male) professionals; the scarcity of bisexual characters and the reinforcement of a binary sexual and gender paradigm with naturalized, stable identities. In general, the 1990s produced images that were not threatening to an audience presumed to be straight, potentially reassuring them both in their open-mindedness and their heterosexuality.[8] This gay mainstreaming deploys an implicitly classist, racist, and gender-normative "positive image" strategy, demonstrating political correctness and valuing inclusion without questioning the terms of that inclusion and normality as a point of reference, refraining from a radical critique of heteronormativity. At the same time, the systematically limited and relatively straight-friendly imagery of the "gay boom" still mirrored and induced America's "straight panic" that occurred as a result of the compromised moral superiority of heterosexuality as homosexuality became less stigmatised (Becker 2006, 13-36).

The mainstream gay visibility in the 1990s' US is compatible with the dominant agenda of the anti-homophobic movements of the same period (Benshoff and Griffin 2006): identity politics aimed at inclusion and equal rights, positing gay or lesbian identity as a quasi-ethnic one, with an underlying idea about homosexuality as the fixed, natural essence of a minority of people (Gamson 1995). Identity politics relies on the principle of authenticity as it assumes that a lack of recognition or the misrecognition of an essential attribute is a source of oppression imposing "a false, distorted, reduced mode of being," preventing the project of being true to one's own unique self – a rarely questioned Western ideal of selfhood in Western modernity (Taylor 1994, 25). Identity politics is keen on articulating identity-distorting trauma and pain, and building a community and politics around it (Brown 1995; Berlant 1999). It has

been criticised – notably by queer activism and theory aimed at the deconstruction of heteronormative binary categories of sex, gender, and sexuality since the late 1980s, early 1990s – for being hierarchical and exclusionary because of its insistence on the stability and differentiability of sexual identities; the reductionist equation between sexual identity, lifestyle, and politics; and, as mentioned above in relation to popular culture, for uncritical heteronormative aspirations and acceptance of straight majority norms (Weeks 1985; Fuss 1989; Berlant and Freeman 1993; Seidman 1993; Warner 1993; Bell and Binnie 2000; Richardson 2004). Consistent with identity politics, the "coming-out" narrative – globalizing since the end of the 1960s – formulates same-sex desire as a matter of identity development from "phoniness to authenticity," typically involving a growing awareness, a crisis, and an ultimate (subjective and public) avowal of one's "real self" (Robinson 1999, 393). Significantly, the marginal inclusion of such coming-out storylines and token gay characters is a frequent characteristic of American television and films of the 1990s (e.g. *Ally McBeal*; *Beverley Hills, 90210*; *Clueless*).

Homosexuality-related telecinematic representations of the Hungarian "gay boom" in the 2000s show great affinity with, but also significant discrepancies from American pop-cultural trends and their underlying identity politics.

The Hungarian gay boom's branches

The inclusion of denotative and connotative gay jokes revolving around male homoeroticism or homosexual identity has, by the 2000s, become a routine practice deployed by comedies. As opposed to these motifs that are almost always verbal rather than visual, and intended to be funny, the accidental images of female homoeroticism/homosexuality are usually visually explicit (e.g. women kissing

and touching each other), and are represented as attractive to the male characters that witness or fantasize about relevant scenes. I would like to focus here, however, on representations with central queer-related motifs, and call attention to the three salient characteristics of the decade that I have identified. The first among these characteristics is the persistent predominance of the (melo)dramatic mode, which continues the exclusively melodramatic and tragic "tradition" of pre-2000s' Hungarian queer-related films. Indeed, one of the important differences between the American and Hungarian "gay boom" is that while the former has, to a great extent, included light-hearted television and film comedies with non-straight protagonists (such as *Birdcage*; *Ellen*; *In & out*), there is only one Hungarian film (*Panic*) that elaborates the issue of homosexuality in a comedy and not in a (usually dark-toned) (melo)drama. This peculiar tendency cannot be explained simply by the relatively small number of homosexuality-related films in the small Hungarian market, as comedy has been traditionally the most prolific genre of Hungarian popular cinema (Hirsch 2004). In contrast to the proliferation of gay jokes and brief exploitative motifs of female-to-female sexuality in comedies, the uneasy conjunction of a queer-related focus and comedy is, I argue, due to a cautious strategy on part of anti-homophobic filmmakers, or their producers and sponsors; they might not want to alienate potential audiences (in a small domestic market) and might think that drawing on melodrama when promoting an anti-homophobic perspective could be the most efficient in the Hungarian context where a gay-friendly focus still needs strong legitimisation in public discourses in order not to be dismissed as exhibitionism, or even heterophobia. Homophobia-related pain and suffering framed in (melo)dramatic terms can obviously serve this legitimation better than presenting more or less happy queers living

their normal(ised) lives. The second salient phenomenon of the decade is the emergence of complex and visually explicit images of male same-sex relations unprecedented in Hungarian television and film (*Men in the nude; This I wish and nothing more*). The third phenomenon is the emergence of the explicitly anti-homophobic coming-out storyline (in *Between friends, Panic*, *Paper planes*, and *The innermost room*). I shall focus on this latter phenomenon, as I am predominantly interested here in how anti-homophobia as a political stance unfolds in Hungarian live-action feature films and fiction television, and relates to identity politics with which the mainstream representational tendencies of the American "gay boom" are consistent.

Anti-homophobic representations: The strategy of normalisation

Arguably anti-homophobic representations seem to rely on a normalising agenda accentuating the ultimate sameness of gay and straight people apart from their sexual orientation, and aiming at a multi-layered reconciliation of homosexuality with "authenticity" – two concepts that have been constructed as severely at odds with each other, as homosexuality has long been considered as the inauthentic counterpart of a naturalised heterosexuality, and associated with various psychopathologies (like narcissism and the inability of object love) (Foucault 1978; Lewes 1988; Butler 1990). Moreover, the homosexual closet, as the essential trope of coming-out narratives and structuring element of modern homosexual identity, is a metaphor of a sexuality which is (tried to be) kept as a secret from public knowledge, or is latent and hidden from the person's own awareness. That is, homosexuality and the closet necessarily entail issues of sincerity and authenticity as moral ideals.

Hungarian anti-homophobic representations share the following

patterns: endowing the (gender-typical!) non-straight characters with "normality" and conventionally positive characteristics, and, in contrast, associating homophobia with conventionally negative personality traits; accentuating the queer characters' desire for, and capability of, romantic love and intimate relationships, while down-playing the sexual as such; constructing the homosexual closet as harmful and immoral in contrast to conscious and open identifica-tion, which latter is the main structuring motive in the (coming-out) narrative. These patterns, as I pointed out earlier, show great similarities to the American "gay boom," the limits of which are best exemplified by *Between friends'* coming-out storylines.

Coming out: The story of normality

Between friends has contained four storylines with denotatively non-straight characters throughout the decade: two "gay," one "lesbian," and one transgender storyline with a male-to-female postoperative transsexual. Within the limit of this paper, I will focus on the most elaborated storyline featuring a gay-identified character called Misi (2000–2002), as it is more complex and intriguing both cinemati-cally and narratively, thus analytically more productive than the others.[9] Misi is a young, formerly straight-identified man who re-alizes that he feels attracted to an openly gay man. Except for his father, all of his family and friends prompt him to accept himself as homosexual. In fact, it is the father and Misi's own internal-ized homophobia that are the major obstacles to Misi's happiness. With the firm intention to find, and prove, his straightness again, he starts to date and has sex with a young woman, but his attempt to go straight fails. In contrast, he falls in love with a guy and this love is indexed on screen by their sharing a kiss in a 2001 episode – a unique moment in Hungarian fiction TV ever since. Eventually,

Misi comes to terms with his sexuality and love for the guy. They get together and move to another city – and are consequently out of the narrative as well.

Above all, this is a schematic coming-out story with the closet transforming into self-acceptance, avowal and "out" engagement in same-sex relations. Homophobia is condemned, the straight characters are shown as overwhelmingly supportive – creating the illusion of a post-coming out world with only a very few homophobic persons. Furthermore, in so far as Misi is only attracted to other self-identified gay men (one of them even tells him "[w]e recognised each other at the first sight"),[10] the show strengthens the idea of a stable and safe straight-homosexual binary, thereby mitigating the viewer's potential homosexual paranoia. Misi's sincere, but ultimately inauthentic and unsuccessful, effort to go straight suggests the essential, unchangeable quality of homosexual orientation. That is, the *Between friends'* narrative is apologetic in the sense that it implicitly reinforces the heterosexist idea that homosexuality is something that is in need of justification. Simultaneously, except for that single, curious same-sex kiss, it offers straight-friendly images only. Compared to the representations of straight sexuality and intimacy, the show is cautious about directly representing same-sex eroticism. Moreover, the character is deprived of a post-coming-out storyline and is written out of the show once the issues of identity formation and public avowal and acceptance is resolved.

The Misi-storyline leaves (hetero)normativity unquestioned in the sense that it presents gender-typical non-straight characters only. Moreover, homoerotic attractions occur only between men roughly of the same age, and the gay characters are represented as having a strong romantic attraction and desire for and/or capability of an enduring monogamous relationship. This signifies, in my reading,

a reliance on romantic love and intimacy instead of, for instance, highlighting the significance of sexual desire, or that of individual, free choice regarding sexual identity. Accordingly, Misi's on-screen gay kiss was a peculiarly queer moment in Hungarian television yet the show did not transgress television's heteronormativity in a "radical" way. Its three other (transgender, lesbian, and gay) storylines in 2002, 2004, and 2008, respectively, follow the same patterns as the Misi-storyline, only in much shorter narratives (constituted by several episodes), with more marginal characters, and basically without any representations of homoeroticism. That is, while the show univocally condemns homophobia and characterises it negatively (by associating it with impulsive violence, backwardness, etc.), it has remained overwhelmingly heteronormative, comfortable and re-assuring for an assumed-to-be-straight audience, as its salient strategies for emancipating homosexuality has included the emphasis on the essentiality of homosexuality in a minority of persons clearly distinguishable from a straight majority, on the debilitating effects of inauthenticity and secrecy, and on the normality and normatively positive attributes of denotatively non-straight characters (e.g. their gender-typicality, warmth, intimate aspirations).

Consistent with the strategies deployed by *Between friends*, the "lesbian" storyline in Simon Szabó's film *Paper planes* visualises homophobia in a negative father figure who abuses, both emotionally and physically, his daughter Titi, who tries anxiously to remain in the closet. In contrast, her girlfriend Detti is happy about finally coming out to her mother, who turns out to be absolutely supportive. When Detti's mother, in good faith, outs the girls to Titi's father, Detti panics and desperately tries to warn Titi. The next time Detti meets Titi, the latter suddenly tells her to "get away and leave behind this shit."[11] They run off hand in hand from the shop where Titi

works as a cashier, into the night streets of Budapest.

The film presents a committed lesbian relationship that proves to be strong enough to overcome the obstacles of love – that is, *Paper planes* draws on the traditional tropes of an idealized romantic love, including the freedom, found by the lovers in their affectionate feelings, in contrast to social and economic constraints (Shumway 2007). In the following sections, I shall focus on the significance of the trope of romantic love as a key motif in all of the arguably anti-homophobic coming-out stories in the 2000s.

The authentication of homosexuality by romantic love

As Edgar Landgraf argues (2006), the modern concept of romantic love has involved the ideal of genuine communication and the mutual validation of the lovers' "true selves" with "the full and authentic freedom of a real person" as its main goal (de Rougemont 1983, 7). Thus, the ideal of romantic love (also imagined as the basis for long-term, committed relationships; Shumway 2003) signifies the authenticity of the participants. Moreover, heteronormative sexual ethics is bound to the idea of romantic love, as according to its still dominant model of relational/companionate sexuality, "ethical" or truly "authentic" sex occurs in intimate love relationships, and relational sex is on the top of a normative hierarchy as opposed to commercial, recreational or anonymous sex, for instance (Rubin 1993; Bernstein 2007).

Jody W. Pennington calls attention to the tendency of American pro-gay cinema to tie character motivation to love, "which in turn is tied to sex and its importance for identity and contentment" (2007, 144). The tendency to emphasise love instead of sex is consistent with mainstream identity politics, that can be criticised for its desexualisation of LGBT identity in its attempt to challenge the

stigma attached to it, while simultaneously "reinforcing the shame of sex" (Warner 2000, 31). Indeed, there seems to be two conflicting aims here: to attack what is identified as a gay stereotype, i.e. that homosexuals are only interested in sex, while trying to avoid the symbolic (homophobic and sexphobic) erasure of homosexual sex from visibility. Unfortunately, all the Hungarian anti-homophobic coming-out storylines – just like mainstream American pro-gay tel-ecinema of the 1990s does – reiterate this erasure. It should be add-ed, however, that certain forms of female homoeroticism are much easier for the straight-minded majority to tolerate than male ho-moeroticism. The former are, in fact, often banalised and appropri-ated for a straight male gaze (Russo 1987, 280; Benshoff and Griffin 2006, 129–51; Driver 2007, 242). Hence, it is not so "shocking" that the lesbian coming-out storyline in *Paper planes* contains a same-sex kiss. However, the film could not be critiqued for voyeurism: it fo-cuses on the loyalty and emotional intimacy between the two young women instead.

I assume that both *Between friends* and *Paper planes* would be praised for their same-sex kiss by Stephen Tropiano, who dismisses the first sensationalist same-sex kisses on US television in the be-ginning of the 1990s (e.g. the very first female-to-female kiss shared in *L.A. Law* in 1991) in favour of kisses between "real-lovers," as "[p]rogress in terms of more honest representation of our lives can only happen when such a moment [a same-sex kiss] is an integral part of a storyline (as to being positioned as the 'big moment') and, more importantly, we begin to see more stories with gay and lesbian characters that are truly in love" (Tropiano, 2003, 7). In his read-ing, same-sex kisses are ultimately authenticated by the characters being in love, and, vice versa, a kiss signifies the romantic love of non-heterosexual characters, love clearly being more valuable than,

for instance, sexual desire or experimentation.

Premiered and awarded as the best debut film at the 2009 Hungarian Film Week, acclaimed by critics and audiences alike, *Paper planes* has multiple and disconnected storylines. The documentaristic visual style, amateur cast, and intended-to-be realistic dialogues bear witness to a sociological aspiration. The implication is that the spectator will see the everyday lives and conflicts of young people living in Budapest. Significantly, part of that contemporary reality is the life of a lesbian couple, struggling for the viability of their love. *Paper planes*' documentaristic style and sociological aspiration show great affinity with the so-called Budapest school's fictional documentary: a hybrid film form, mixing the attributes of fiction and documentary, aimed at revealing and commenting on social reality from a critical new-leftist perspective, salient in the mid-1970s (Gelencser 2001). In that sense, *Paper planes*, and even more so, *The innermost room* appropriates an explicitly (new-leftist) political and sociological Hungarian fictional documentaristic film tradition for the LGBT cause. The title of Csaba Szekeres' TV movie is itself a metaphor for the subject's internal space, for intimate, secret privacy – quintessentially the homosexual closet. It has parallel, but connected storylines – signifying, in my view, the ultimate connectedness (thus community) of people that usually remains unnoticed by them – involving the (here, disconnected) issues of physical disability, Roma ethnicity, and gay sexual identity, all of them represented as minority identities, sharing social oppression. The film contrasts ignorant stereotypes with unusual, individualistic representations of the private lives and selves of stigmatised persons, offering an emancipating insight of what they are "really" like. The gay storyline traces Gabor and Viktor's relationship, whose pain and unhappiness is constructed as a matter of closetedness as opposed to a potential

happiness associated with supposedly authentic homosexual identi-
fications and openness about same-sex relationships – another sali-
ent pattern in anti-homophobic representations.

Out of the inauthentic closet

Gabor is a young judge, whose professional success is juxtaposed
with his private relations: since his gay coming-out, he and his par-
ents do not talk to each other anymore. His only support is his sister,
who confronts him about Viktor, Gabor's closeted lover who always
lets him down. Viktor is a selfish medical doctor, reluctant to leave
his wife but neglecting her emotionally and sexually. Concerned
about his career and being pressured both by his desperate wife and
his lover, Viktor decides to break up with Gabor in a dismissive way.
Gabor then commits suicide. His sister sends his ashes to Viktor.
Viktor goes to a motel room, in order to start over again with his
wife through role-playing. However, he is unable to have sex with
her. When the ashes are accidentally found in his handbag, he ad-
mits to his shocked wife that he had a four-year relationship with
a man.

Curiously, except for one brief moment, the viewer never actually
sees the two lovers together. I argue that this absence is an effective
metaphorisation of the homosexual closet. Furthermore, this closet
stands for the insincerity and inauthenticity that is shown as the
necessary consequences of denying sexual identity and love. When
denied the possibility of the mutual recognition of each other's "real"
selves, inevitably leads to the tragedy of symbolic or actual self-
annihilation.

Gabor and Viktor's relationship is represented only in indirect
ways. First, there is a scene featuring a phone call, in which the
viewer only hears and sees Gabor – instead of cutting back and forth

between the two men, or at least hearing the voice of the other on the phone as is the case in another phone call between Viktor and a different character. Second, the relationship is the subject matter of the conversation between Gabor and his sister who tries to persuade Gabor that he should not torture himself and continue his closeted relationship. This conversation specifically starts because Viktor did not show up at their dinner together – another motive that signifies the closeted relationship as lack. Third, there is a scene in which Viktor is lying on a bed, smoking (which is a typical cinematic scene signifying a preceding sexual intercourse that was not shown visually). A shot is framed in a way that the viewer catches a glimpse of the feet of someone lying next to him, probably sleeping; but in other shots, the other side of the bed is off-screen, with Viktor's gaze suggesting the presence of another person next to him. Then there is a cut to Viktor sneaking out of the room alone, closing the door, and putting his wedding ring back. A fourth sequence shows Gabor waiting alone, then going into the motel room, where he performs a monologue as preparation for how he would give Viktor an ultimatum: if Viktor is not willing to have an out relationship, Gabor will break up with him. Gabor also recalls his own painful coming-out to his disappointed and hostile parents. Significantly, the confessional monologue takes place in front of a big mirror, the room lit dimly so the viewer sees Gabor's blurry double image (the silhouette and the mirror reflection) while he is walking up and down. In contrast, in the last shot of the sequence, when he is rehearsing the final ultimatum in an assertive way, his image is shown sharp, not fading into its dim context anymore, signifying him firmly making up his mind and assertive standing up for himself; in short, his dignified self-identity. In the next scene, the motel room's door opens, and Gabor says hello to Viktor (shown from behind) who goes inside.

However, the camera stays behind, showing only the closed door with Viktor and Gabor's dialogue audible. The viewer can hear but not see how Viktor briefly and mercilessly breaks up with Gabor. The door opens up again, and in the next cut, the viewer sees Viktor from behind again, walking away. The next shot is a super close-up of Gabor's face. The next scene features Gabor's sister being notified on the phone about Gabor's death – an ultimate signification of the closet's silent, but lethal tragedy.

I assume that the dramaturgical separation of Gabor and Viktor all the way to their harsh breakup accentuates their lack of "true" connection, the symbolic invisibility of their relationship literalised. The immorality of the homosexual closet is further emphasised by presenting not only Gabor's suffering, but the pain of others involved, like Viktor's wife or Gabor's sister. At the same time, coming-out is not banalised as a simple solution depending only on the sincerity and authenticity of the homosexual person: homophobia is also emphatically represented in the form of parental rejection and as a source of blackmailability in Viktor's case. However, by stressing the severely isolating and paralysing state of closetedness, starting the coming-out process is shown as indispensable for happiness, or even for psychic (and potentially, literal) survival. The visualization of the closet, that includes the lack of direct representation of any same-sex physical intimacy makes the film quite straight-friendly by focusing on the emotional and relational aspects of homosexuality; and, potentially, reifies the homophobic reluctance to visualise a sexual and intimate male-to-male relationship.

Interestingly, while lacking any explicit sexual representations, Attila Till's *Panic* still manages to visualise the most intimate gay couple so far on the Hungarian screen. While clearly drawing on the typical anti-homophobic representational strategies consistent

with identity politics, *Panic* refines and offers some satirical comments on the discourses of coming out and the closet. Moreover, it frames these discourses as matters of americanization.

To Americanize, or not to Americanize?

In contrast to the "sociologising" tendencies in *Paper planes* and *The innermost room*, *Panic* positions itself in popular fiction entertainment regarding its visual style and narrative structure. The films of Woody Allen and Quentin Tarantino and the western genre have been mentioned repeatedly as inspirations for the movie (e.g. Jászay 2008). The multiple storylines revolve around the neuroses of different people who might be regarded as individualised embodiments of certain modern, social stereotypes (like the successful career-woman having relationship issues, or the affluent middle-aged woman addicted to shopping). I read Till's film as exposing some psychological issues of the (seemingly) normal majority, discussing the insecurities and ambiguities of "normality" as such. Thus, it is highly relevant that one of the parallel stories features two elite SWAT-policemen[12] who are a closeted gay couple. Dino and Dick embody two types of homosexuals of different generations. Dick is 37, keen on demonstrating his traditionally masculine identity, full of internalized homophobia and terrified by the idea of coming out in fear of losing his job. Dino is twenty-something, comfortable with his gay identity. He tells Dick that he wants to come out to their boss because he is fed up with lying and wants "to live [his] own life."[13] Significantly, Dick and Dino's different attitudes and identity formations are framed as mirroring the influence of dominant Western popular discourses on the younger generation who have grown up as teenagers after the system change of 1989 (Eszenyi 2006; Kis 2007). Concretely, when Dino announces to Dick that he would

like to come out to the captain, he offers the following legitimising explanation: "It happens in the States all the time. Why can't it be the same here?"[14] They start to fight, with Dick declaring that he is "not gonna be the token fag,"[15] rejecting the very sexual politics of the US Dino appeals to as a positive model.

Their dramatic fights almost end in break-up (and in them literally killing each other), but in the end, their love not only overcomes their serious conflict, but also refines the often moralising discourse of coming-out: while Dino heavily and unequivocally draws on the discourse of authenticity and the unquestioned importance of "being oneself," he postpones his coming-out because of his tolerance for Dick's closetedness. Thus, coming out is represented as a matter of negotiation between one's need for an authentic sense of identity, and his/her authentic love for someone. The ultimate importance of love is not only represented in the dialogues, but also in a scene where Dino is about to come out to their boss: a parallel montage cuts back and forth between shots of Dino sitting in the captain's office, just about to announce his gayness, and of Dick waiting in the corridor, smoking a cigarette, then shooting himself. As it turns out, the "shot" is only Dino's fantasy, he then asks for a raise instead of confessing his gayness. Then he joins Dick who tries to scrape off an inscription on the wall of the men's room that suggests his homosexuality.

While helping Dick, Dino claims that they will continue their discussion on coming-out after the SWAT competition in Orlando, US, which is represented as a great honour rewarding their professional eminence. Here, the US, or rather "America," signifies a far-away world of opportunity and status. On the one hand, *Panic* explicitly cites and comments in its dialogues on the idealizing discourses on "America" as a geopolitical space of global power, abun-

dance, and the land of (LGBT) freedom and gay visibility. While "America" as a clearly positive reference point is appropriated by Dino, Dick indirectly produces a critique on the potential hypocrisy of personal and institutional politics associated with the US (he does not want to be a "token fag," and he accuses Dino of merely seeking attention by exposing himself as gay). Also, he points to the difference of the Hungarian context that makes an uncritical embrace of American practices naïve and inauthentic (he mocks Dino about playing the role of "the ultra-modern faggot,"[16] and calls attention to what he sees as the real potential consequences of coming-out). While Dick's criticism is not totally discredited, he is still depicted as somewhat backward and neurotic, and ridiculed as such, at least compared to an indeed "gay" Dino. Thus, though there is a critical hint of the idealization of "America," the main agenda and LGBT politics associated with it is ultimately affirmed.

On the other hand, *Panic* embodies the ambivalence towards "America" and US pop-culture by its subversive re-appropriation of archetypically American genre conventions: while it apparently finds inspiration in and pays reverence to American cinema (and high-status directors like Tarantino), *Panic* tends to provide a more distanced perspective on it as well, through its queer subversion. When Dino leaves the police captain's office, the latter mumbles to himself, making it clear that Dino and Dick's homosexual relationship is an open secret: "Two stupid, greedy fags!" Through this motive, *Panic*, even if unintentionally, functions in a way that reveals the silent homophobia that tolerates homosexuality as long as it is excluded from public visibility, and that structures the heterosexist status quo that seems to be a persistent element of masculinist state institutions like the police, or generally, of society. Indeed, by making the gay characters elite SWAT-policemen – i.e. embodiments of an idealized

traditional masculinity, uniting physical and intellectual masteries in the service of "justice," participating in a quasi-male-only institution – the movie seems to renegotiate the relation between homosexuality and hegemonic masculinity (Carrigan, Connell, and Lee 1985; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). The queering of idealized masculinity is accomplished through a subversive re-appropriation of prototypically American genres like the western, the action film, and the buddy (cop) movie that tend to fetishize a heroic straight masculinity (Fuchs 1993; Tasker 1993; Jeffords 1994; Wood 2003; Kolker 2011). Namely, Dick and Dino quarrel throughout the whole film in sequences evoking the prototypical set and scenes of the genres named above: duel and car-chasing scenes, and sequences featuring them while working. In an ironic contrast to the *mise-en-scène* raising associations with super-hegemonic masculinity, the two characters keep on engaging in dramatic gay lovers' fight. A telling example is the scene where they participate in a simulation of a counter-terrorist operation. In the midst of battle commands and machine gun noise, they are discussing their different attitudes towards coming-out. While Dino regretfully tells Dick that he was "the only gay man who never told his Mum,"[17] Dick accuses him of ignorance and lack of professional commitment. During their emotionally charged conversation, they are carrying out their assignment. Besides discussing gayness and emotions prototypically coded as feminine, the homoerotic undercurrent of their super-masculine commando operation is also highlighted (Dick facing Dino's crotch while helping him to get into the right position to shoot), thus, super-masculinity is marked as queer. Furthermore, relevant scenes are abound with phallic imagery, mostly huge guns[18] – for example, a framed picture of technical drawings of rifles hanging on the wall of Dick and Dino's living room, juxtaposed with stereotypically gay iconic imagery like Madonna-

posters. In an optimistic reading, *Panic's* exaggeration of masculinist (cinematic) symbolism and its homoerotisation suggest a subversive move aimed at the exposure of inherently instable heterosexist ideals. In a less optimistic reading, it is an attempt to reconcile gayness with masculinity, re-establishing its gender-normativity. All in all, while *Panic's* is congruent with the straight-friendliness and overall heteronormativity of the Hungarian "gay boom," its cheerful satirical tone opens up new possibilities for dealing with homosexuality onscreen in a favourable and non-reductionist way. At the same time, while an anti-homophobic pioneer on Hungarian telecinema conquering comedy for queerness, it is still preoccupied with the issue of sexual identity formation and coming out.

The Hungarian gay boom and how far it reaches

While Hungarian telecinema is still overwhelmingly heteronormative, explicitly anti-homophobic representations tend to perform a straight-friendly normalisation of homosexuality, through granting authenticity to it, and associating it with normative lifestyles and relational forms, leaving the dominant, fundamentally heteronormative gender and sexual system basically intact – in consistence with identity politics, similarly to the American "gay boom" of the 1990s. In contrast to the US, however, pro-gayness in Hungary has not really made its way into the most popular and "light" genres and narrative modes like (romantic) comedy; and the only exception, *Panic* still focuses on sexual identity as the main issue with which its non-straight characters are busy. The Hungarian "gay boom" remains, to a great extent, restricted to the realm of (melo)drama, which signifies the still substantial need for legitimising the "exhibition," the direct and sympathetic representations of same-sex sexuality and non-straight identities in Hungary.

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NOTES

1. *Ant hill* ([Hangyaboly], dir.: Zoltán Fábri).
2. Throughout the article, I use the term "queer" in an inclusive sense, i.e. referring to those motifs and characters that are marked in the texts as nonnormative in terms of sexuality and/or gender, as in being related to homosexuality, homoeroticism, transgenderism, or a salient gender-atypicality. I do so because I do not want to foreclose the potential meanings of the relevant texts (even if I might assume a dominant reading later), and because I find it problematic to trivialise the terms "gay" or "lesbian" as necessarily essentialist, heteronormative and politically regressive as opposed to "queer."
3. *Another way* ([Egymásra nézve], 1982, dir.: Károly Makk), *Colonel Redl* (1985, dir.: István Szabó), *Before the bat's flight is done* ([Mielőtt befejezi röptét a de-

nevér], 1989, dir.: Péter Tímár), *Sweet Emma, dear Bobe* ([Édes Emma, drága Böbe], 1992, dir.: István Szabó), *Kisses and scratches* ([Csókkal es körömmel], 1994, dir.: György Szomjas), *School of senses* ([Érzékek iskolája], 1996, dir.: András Sólyom).

4. *The innermost room* ([A legbelső szoba], 2006, dir.: Csaba Szekeres), *Men in the nude* ([Férfiakt], 2006, dir.: Károly Esztergályos), *This I wish and nothing more* ([Nincsen nekem vágyam semmi], 2000, dir.: Kornél Mundruczó), *Paper planes* ([Papírrepülők], 2009, dir.: Simon Szabó), *Nibelung residential park* ([A Nibelung-lakópark], 2009, dir.: Kornél Mundruczó), *Dolina* (2006, dir.: Zoltán Kamondi), *Chameleon* ([Kaméleon], 2008, dir.: Goda Krisztina), *Questions in details* ([Köntörfalak], 2009, dir.: Zsombor Dyga), *Sticky business* ([Macerás ügyek], 2000, dir.: Szabolcs Hajdu), *Panic* ([Pánik], 2008, dir.: Attila Till).

5. For instance *9 and a half dates* ([9 es fél randi], 2008, dir.: Tamás Sas), *A kind of America 1-2* ([Valami Amerika], 2001, 2008, dir.: Gábor Herendi), *Bro* ([Tesó], 2003, dir.: Zsombor Dyga), *Circus* ([Kész cirkusz], 2005, dir.: Zsombor Dyga), *Glass tiger 1-3* ([Üvegtigris], 2001, dir.: Péter Rudolf and Iván Kapitány; 2006, 2010, dir.: Péter Rudolf), *Night of the singles* ([Szinglik éjszakája], 2009, dir.: Tamás Sas), *Papírkutyák* (2008, dir.: Bence Gyöngyössy), *Throbbing stones* ([Dobogó kövek], 2010, dir.: Csaba Martin).

6. *Bibliothéque Pascal* (2010, dir.: Szabolcs Hajdu), *Forest* ([Rengeteg], 2003, dir.: Benedek Fliegauf), *Intimate headshot* ([Intim fejlövés], 2008, dir.: Péter Szajki), *I am not your friend* ([Nem vagyok a barátod], 2009, dir.: György Pálfi), *Pleasant days* ([Szép napok], 2002, dir.: Kornél Mundruczó).

7. Terms like "gay Nineties" and "gay boom" are popular references to the queer-related media phenomena of the 1990s' America (Benshoff and Griffin 2006; Walters 2001).

8. Such criticisms continue to be relevant for representations of the 2000s (Sender 2006; Avila-Saavedra 2009), but the limits have been pushed further by series like *Queer as folk* (2000-2005), *Six feet under* (2001-2005), *The L-word* (2004-2009), and films like *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), and *I love you Phillip*

Morris (2009) in terms of narrative centrality, or explicitness of homoeroticism onscreen.

9. The predominance of gay male representations (not only in Hungarian telecinema) over lesbian and transgender ones should be noted. I assume that homosexuality tends to be treated as a separate, self-contained (minority) identity (supposedly clearly distinguishable from race, ethnicity, disabilities etc.), which is then usually "paired off," in telecinematic representations, with unmarked identity features implicitly posited as universal: male, white, able-bodied, for instance. For feminist arguments on how social hierarchies do intersect, see Yuval-Davis, 2006.

10. "Első pillantásra megismertük [felismertük] egymást [mint meleg férfit]."

11. "Tűnjünk innen, hagyjuk itt ezt a szart!"

12. A SWAT (*Special Weapons and Tactics*) team is "a group of elite police marksmen who specialize in high-risk tasks such as hostage rescue" (Oxford Dictionaries, "SWAT team").

13. "Szeretném a saját életemet élni!" All the English translations throughout the article are identical with the English subtitles provided on the film's 2011 DVD release.

14. "Amerikában van ilyen, olvastam a neten, akkor itt is lehet, nem?"

15. "Én nem leszek díszbuzi a csapatban!"

16. "[Játszod a nagymenőt,] a korszerű buzit!"

17. "Te vagy az egyetlen meleg a világon, aki nem mondta el az anyjának."

18. Firearms and side arms are often used to symbolize the male genitals, reinforcing the patriarchal fantasy of the phallic penis (Dyer 1993, 113).

ABSTRACT

The aim of my article is twofold: first, I would like to provide an overview of what I identify as the Hungarian "gay boom" in the 2000s, i.e. a relative proliferation and diversification of homosexuality-related telecinematic representations. Second, I would like to focus on the emergence of the pro-gay coming-out storyline, as one of the significant new trends of this "gay boom," to explore how anti-homophobia as a political stance unfolds in Hungarian live-action feature films and fiction television. In doing so, I will examine how the characteristics of this Hungarian "gay boom" relate to the 1990s' American "gay boom" and the identity politics in which it is embedded. I will analyse the coming-out film and television narratives in *Paper planes* (2009, dir. Simon Szabó), *The innermost room* (2006, dir. Csaba Szekeres), *Panic* (2008, dir. Attila Till), and the popular TV-show *Between friends* (1998-present), pointing out the narrative, cinematic, and intertextual means by which they visualise a normalised, open homosexuality as a minority identity. I then show the means by which this identity is authenticated through its inclusion into the normative ideal of romantic love and coupledom, while also constructing the closet as an ultimately uninhabitable and immoral place. Specifically, I draw attention to the ways in which *Panic* simultaneously refines, and offers satirical comments on, the normalising discourses of coming out and masculinity, framing the issue of gay identity in contemporary Hungary explicitly as a matter of Americanisation.

SAMMANFATTNING

Min artikel har två syften. För det första vill jag ge en översikt över, vad jag menar vara, en ungersk "gayboom" under 2000-talet, d.v.s. en relativt stor ökning av och breddning på homosexualitetsrelaterade framställningar på film och television. För det andra granskar jag framväxten av homovänliga komma-ut-historier som en av de viktigaste nya trenderna i denna "gayboom", samt under-

söker hur anti-homofobi som politiskt ställningstagande utvecklats i ungerska *live-action* filmer och fiktionstelevision. Då television och film från USA har haft ett avgörande inflytande på ungersk populärkultur, undersöker jag hur den ungerska "gayboomen" förhåller sig till den amerikanska "gayboomen" och den identitetspolitik denna är nära förbunden med.

Ett av utmärkande drag hos den ungerska "gayboomen" är det (melo)dramatiska stämningslägets dominans inom film- och televisionsproduktion, en fortsättning på den uteslutande (melo)dramatiska och tragiska "traditionen" i ungerska filmer från före 2000-talet om samkönad kärlek och erotism – en viktig skillnad mellan den ungerska och den långt ifrån uteslutande (melo)dramatiska amerikanska "gayboomen". En annan tydlig trend i det ungerska 2000-talet är komplexa och visuellt explicita framställningar av samkönade relationer mellan män. Det tredje karaktäristiska fenomenet är uppkomsten av de anti-homofoba komma-ut-historier som utgör artikelns primära analysobjekt. Jag belyser de narrativa, filmatiska och intertextuella sätt som framställningarna i fråga visualiserar hur en normaliserad, öppen homosexualitet bildar grunden för en minoritetsidentitet. Jag visar sedan hur denna identitet ges autenticitet genom att införlivas i det normativa idealet romantisk kärlek och parförhållanden, samtidigt som garderoben också konstrueras som en i slutändan obeboelig och omoralisk plats. Jag behandlar delhandlingen om Misi (2000–2002) i den populära TV-serien *Between friends* (1998 till nu), som exempel på en prototypisk komma-ut-historia som upphöjer homosexualitet till status av normalitet, samtidigt som den dämpar heterosexuell oro, i synnerhet när det gäller kyssen i rutan mellan två män i en episod från 2001. På liknade sätt granskar jag den kyss mellan två kvinnor som visades i *Paper planes* (2009, regi Simon Szabó), och hur den trotsar den exploaterande heterosexuella manliga blicken genom att överföra romantiska kulturella troper på de två kvinnornas relation istället. Jag undersöker särskilt romantisk kärlek som en normativ diskurs alla de aktuella handlingarna utnyttjar för att ge homosexualiteten autenticitet, d.v.s. göra den förenlig med autenticitet och ärlighet som icke-ifrågasatta moderna,

västerländska moralisk ideal. I linje med detta projekt betonar anti-homofoba handlingar hur skadlig, och ytterst sett omöjlig, den homosexuella garderoben är – en position som drivs till sin spets i *The innermost room* (2006, regi Csaba Szekeres), som återger den tragiska homosexuella berättelsen med hjälp av ett omfattande filmatiskt metaforiserande av (det dödsbringande i) garderoben i sig själv. Även *Panic* (2008, regi Attila Till), den enda film som behandlar komma-ut-temat i komediform, framställer detta att vara i garderoben som en form av destruktiv inautenticitet. Den lyckas emellertid förfina den hegemoniska diskursen genom att synliggöra de (mellanmänskliga) förhandlingarna kring garderoben. Betecknade nog undersöker Tills film konflikterna förenade med den homosexuella garderoben i förhållande till maskulin identitet. Den senare blir både fetischerad och satiriserad som ett disciplinerande ideal, konstruerat av amerikanska, populärkulturella filmatiska diskurser.

Sammanfattningsvis vill jag visa att fast heteronormativiteten i de ungerska komma-ut-handlingarna under 2000-talet uppvisar stora likheter med identitetspolitiken och den förhärskande framställningspraxisen i det föregående decenniets amerikanska "gayboom", förekommer även självmedvetna och potentiellt sett subversiva reflektioner kring de amerikaniserade/amerikaniserande diskurserna runt homosexuell identitet.

Essä