

'Mystic and a little utopistic'

The Mézga family as cynical utopia

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The Mézga Family is an animated television series that ran for three seasons in Hungary between 1970 and 1980 (produced between 1968 and 1978). In the first season, the twentieth-century Hungarian family establishes contact with their descendant from the thirtieth century who sends them futuristic gadgets whose use results in various adventures. In the second season, the family's youngest member goes out on missions to other planets in a spaceship built by himself. In the third season, the family goes on vacation during which several calamities befall them. The irony directed at facile utopian desires allowed the series to subtly express deeper-penetrating concerns but simultaneously remain light-hearted. This article introduces the term 'cynical utopia' to explain how the series generates multi-layered meanings and critical commentary. By using the conventions of utopia, sf and fairy tales, the series could discuss social and even political issues in a period when state control over media content was strict in Hungary and the production of a clearly dystopian work on national television would have been unimaginable.

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'Hello, this is Mézga Radio Station, Budapest!' – thus commence the adventures of Hungary's most famous animated group of characters, the Mézga family. This animated series, which ran for three seasons between 1970 and 1980, became massively popular and glued thousands to the screen each Sunday evening for its runtime of 22 to 25 minutes. In this essay, I argue that the series is a peculiar cultural artefact of the one-party socialist regime in Hungary and that the first season *Üzenet a jövőből – A Mézga család különös kalandjai* (*Message from the Future – The Strange Adventures of the Mézga Family*, Hungary 1970)¹ combines the widely disseminated government propaganda with utopian tropes to create a generic hybrid that facilitates the critique of a system which famously detested criticism. Then, I address the second and third seasons (*Mézga Aladár különös kalandjai* (*The Strange Adventures of Aladár Mézga*; Hungary 1973) and *Vakáció a Mézga család* (*The Mézga Family on*

1. To avoid confusion between the first season and the entire series, I refer to the first season as *Message from the Future* and to the series as *The Mézga Family*. All translations from the series (including titles) and translations from Hungarian scholarly works are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

Vacation; Hungary 1980)) to investigate the ways in which the discursive space opened up by the first season was gradually modified.

The article begins with an assessment of cultural policy in the Kádár era in Hungary (1956–88) and argues that the inherent contradictions and ambiguities of the institution of censorship were fertile breeding ground for idiosyncratic works like the first season. Then follows an analysis of the season itself from the perspective of the literary utopia, with an emphasis on its sociocultural embeddedness. I will introduce the term ‘cynical utopia’ to explain how the season generates meanings and critical commentary, while not forgetting that an interstitial work like *Message from the Future* might defy categorical boundaries. In the last two sections, I will briefly examine the second and third seasons and how they deviated towards less ambiguous genres.

Censorship in the Kádár era

A large chunk of Hungary’s tumultuous history in the twentieth century, the so-called Kádár era, may have seemed like a homogeneous and readily identifiable period from beyond the Iron Curtain. The leading party of the country (the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party) and its most important member, János Kádár, stayed in place for roughly 30 years, from 1956 to 1988,² during which period the country’s foreign policy and ideology did not change substantially. Even in 1988 in an interview with the BBC, days before his effective removal from office, Kádár declared that the ‘Party’s leading role in the country is unquestionable’ (‘Kádár’). Within the country, however, great changes were happening in all areas of life and cultural production was no exception. The two extreme positions that commentators generally take regarding censorship in the Kádár era paint a picture of a ‘dogmatic policy’ (Csordás 106) or ‘the merriest barrack’, implying that the censors were in cahoots with artists to criticise the system from within. As so often, the truth lies somewhere in the middle.

Before 1956, during the far stricter Rákosi era,³ censorship and ideological control permeated everyday life. Attila Dargay, an artist famous for his animated films such as *Vuk* (*The Little Fox*, Hungary 1981) and *Szaffi* (*The*

2. Kádár was effectively removed from leadership in 1988 and replaced by Károly Grósz but this did not stop the disintegration of the party and the oppressive regime. Just over a year later, the republic was announced on the thirty-second anniversary of the 1956 revolution.

3. Mátyás Rákosi was the leader of the Hungarian Communist Party and the Hungarian Workers’ Party before the 1956 revolution.

Treasure of Swamp Castle, Hungary 1985), recalls in an interview how far party members and undercover informers were willing to go in order to keep everyone in line. When Dargay and his peers smuggled in a short Walt Disney piece to their studio in order to study the movement of the animals in the cartoon, a colleague reported them to the police for ‘secretly watching American, imperialist films’ – and the person who obtained the film was fired within two days (Dizseri 18). During the Kádár era, people would not necessarily lose their jobs for watching a Disney film, but files were kept on every ‘dangerous’ individual or group, most prominently rock and pop musicians. The paradox is that the government officials’ attitude towards things like rock music might seem weak and paranoid but in some ways history did prove them right, as these cultural formations contributed greatly to the change of regime and the general atmosphere that brought it to life (Szőnyei 187).

Despite extensive surveillance and suspicion, censorship in the Kádár era was not a straightforwardly top-down process. In the 1960s, ideologues realised that integrating artists into the process was far more beneficial for them: a self-regulating, self-sustaining system could be put into place, in which there was no explicit hostility on either side (Varga 132–4). The so-called ‘3T-model’ of the Kádár era illustrates the fast and loose policy officials adopted to control cultural production; in Hungarian, those three T’s stood for ‘prohibited’ (‘tiltott’), ‘permitted’ (‘túrt’) and ‘promoted’ (‘támogatott’).⁴ Though more films and books were prohibited in the 1970s and 1980s because their critique became more explicit (Varga 134), the general rule of thumb did not change. There were three broadly conceived sensitive topics which were not to be discussed openly and critically: Soviet oppression; the supremacy of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party and its role in recent Hungarian history; and, last but not least, the fact that political power and Hungarian society are ‘socialist’ in Lenin’s sense of the word (Kende 197–9). If these topics were avoided (and sometimes other ‘advice’ adhered to, such as switching words or changing a film’s ending), artists were allowed to continue their work.

An interesting case that illustrates the ambiguity of censorship in the Kádár period is the fate of director Péter Bacsó’s film titled *A tanú* (*The Witness*, Hungary 1969). It is a satirical film that stayed ‘in the box’ (a common phrase in Hungarian for completed films that were not released) because of its outrageous attack on the Marxist–Leninist socialist regime – or so the popular story about

4. The witty translation (3 P’s instead of T’s) is by László Kontler (see Czigányik 226 n21). The present discussion of censorship concentrates on films and television but of course the literary scene was subject to regulation as well. For a concise English-language summary, see Czigányik.

merciless censorship goes. In reality, the film was rented out so frequently for private screenings at various Party events that several new copies had to be made (Varga 119; Gervai 243). When the film finally premiered ten years later in a small cinema with a small number of weekly screenings, publishing reviews about it was still prohibited (Gervai 104). The problem with the film, according to Bacsó, was not its critical perspective per se but its satirical tone. This case attests to the general pattern that the regime was more vigilant about satire than other genres. The reason for this, as Varga speculates, is that satire and the grotesque are ingrained into the fabric of a work of art and being so they are more difficult to eradicate as opposed to changing an ending or deleting a few sentences (118).

A brief and lucid explanation of how state-controlled censorship worked was provided by sociologist Péter Kende in an article he originally published in French: ‘the dictators of Hungarian culture’ were ‘only aiming for hegemony, not monopoly’ (196). Official Marxism tolerated other ideologies and even endured subtle and mild criticism, while explicitly arguing against Marxism was out of the question. Disputing the ‘socialist’ (i.e. Leninist) organisation of the Party and of Hungarian society, or revealing the dictatorial reality, were taboo. However, if the criticism occurred between the lines and some lip service was paid to ideology, even sociological studies could be conducted (Kende 197–9). Ideological leniency and the ambiguously successful co-opting of critical voices by the dominant political power resulted in the complex and often paradoxical matrix of control into which *The Mézga Family* arrived.

Popular culture policy and humour: the immediate cultural context

The Kádarian approach to popular culture and its management were no less ambiguous than censorship policy at the time. As Tordai explains, the Marxist interpretation of popular culture as a means of manipulation in capitalist systems created a paradoxical situation and difficulties in its understanding (144). Western theories of popular culture from that time were not unknown to Hungarian theorists – the problem they faced was that popular culture, which they framed as low-quality kitsch art catering to the cultural consumption of the petty bourgeoisie,⁵ simply refused to disappear in socialist Hungary (141–5).

5. More precisely for the consumption of the ‘kispolgár’, which literally means ‘small citizen’ in Hungarian. During the Rákosi and Kádár regimes, this term with negative connotations denoted the middle and lower-middle classes who did not fully adapt Soviet-style socialism into their mindset, usually portrayed as harmless reactionaries clinging to the interwar (that is, pre-socialist)

In other words, the conundrum was why popular culture, a staple of decadent capitalist Western society, still thrived in enlightened socialist Hungary. The ideal solution would have been to establish and advocate a ‘socialist popular culture’, which educated the minds of the masses to proper socialist behaviour – nothing like the (in the Marxist framework) definitionally apolitical cultural construct geared towards entertainment (148–51). The paradox was both theoretical and practical; the result was a convoluted discourse from the intelligentsia which condemned one kind of popular culture in favour of another (150–1). Unsurprisingly, ‘Kádarian cultural politics irrepressibly drifted towards liberalisation’ (151), and one beneficiary of that process was *Message from the Future*, which lies fortuitously at the intersection of four factors.

First, Hungarian hand-drawn animation was full of talented and enthusiastic people since the 1950s. The studio Pannónia Filmstúdió⁶ created high-quality work ordered by national and foreign companies as well as animated short films for film festivals (Dizseri 7–8) – one of their greatest accomplishments was Ferenc Rofusz’s *A légy* (*The Fly*, Hungary 1980), which won the Academy Award for Best Animated Short in 1981. Even before this crowning achievement, the studio’s efforts had been met with consistent success and the prospect of producing animated series for television promised to be profitable. Nevertheless, the studio was hard-pressed to find financial resources after the ‘New Economic Mechanism’ of 1968, which decentralised the economy and allowed a more liberal pricing policy for certain products but which also resulted in financial instability for companies who relied on funding from the government.⁷ The first four episodes of *Message from the Future* had already been created by writer-director József Nepp and animator Béla Ternovszky, who had been commissioned by the Hungarian Television; secondary writer József Romhányi was brought onto the project later to work on the dialogues (Kiricsi n.p.). The continuation of the series was uncertain because of financial issues but the project was eventually saved by French producer George de la Grandier who promised to distribute it in France and

economic and social system. The meaning of the term coincided roughly with the technical term ‘petty bourgeoisie’ from Marxist-Leninist theory – though the Hungarian expression was widely used in different senses before the official socialist discourse adopted it for its own purposes.

6. After its nationalisation, the small group led by animator Gyula Macskássy became part of the Magyar Híradó és Dokumentum Filmgyár (‘Hungarian News and Documentary Film Factory’) in 1948, then part of the Szinkron Filmgyártó Vállalat (‘Dubbing Film Factory’) in 1954; Szinkron Filmgyártó Vállalat became Pannónia Filmstúdió in 1957, their main profile being the creation of high-quality Hungarian dubbing and animated films (Dizseri 207).

7. For a good overview of the 1968 reform, see Hare; for consumerism in the Eastern Bloc, see Betts.

provided advance payment (Dizseri 47).⁸ The episodes were produced between 1968 and 1969 and aired for the first time between January and April 1970.

Second, the commission of *Message from the Future* coincided with the germination of a specialised Hungarian sf scene. It is beyond the scope of this essay to examine the publication history of Hungarian sf but it may be no accident that while *Message from the Future* was in the making, the *Kozmosz Fantasztikus Könyvek* ('Cosmos Fantastic Books') paperback series was also being established in 1969. The series, which bears an intentional pun in its name, was created to enable the publication of the best of sf literature, often including otherwise ideologically unacceptable material such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. Its editor-in-chief, Péter Kuczka, was a trusted Party associate (hence his relatively unobstructed activity) and also an enthusiast of sf. In 1972, simultaneously with the ongoing work on *The Strange Adventures of Aladár Mészga*, Kuczka also established *Galaktika*, the first specialised Hungarian sf anthology magazine. *Galaktika* was published between 1972 and 1995 and was later relaunched in 2004.⁹

The third event happened on television screens in 1968: the Hungarian Television broadcast *Raumpatrouille: Die phantastischen Abenteuer des Raumschiffes Orion* ('Space Patrol: The Fantastic Adventures of the Spaceship Orion'; West Germany 1966), a sf series comprised of seven one-hour episodes. The series had been produced two years earlier in Munich and premiered on West German channels. Practically unknown outside Germany and a few other European countries, *Space Patrol* became immensely popular in Hungary. The series follows the Orion on its adventures to other planets and shows considerable resemblance to *Star Trek* (US 1966–9) in its themes and tropes (for instance, a utopian unified world government). There was only one television channel in Hungary at that time and the *Kozmosz* book series was only launched a year later – so for many Hungarian people, *Space Patrol* became the definitive sf work across media. There are several parallels between *Message from the Future* and *Space Patrol*: both offer depictions of the thirtieth century and feature utopian social or economic systems and both are comprised of self-contained episodes with one basic plot structure. While determining the exact direction and measure of influences between newly proliferating sf works

8. Ternovszky recalls differently. According to him, de la Grandier commissioned the production of a French animation series at Pannónia and a portion of the profit from that deal was allocated to *Message from the Future* (Kiricsi n.p.).

9. For a longer overview of sf in Hungary, see Fekete. Fekete calls 'the post-war years, at least through the 1960s' a 'sterile period' and dates the strengthening of the Hungarian literary sf scene from the mid-70s (195).

and institutions and *Message from the Future* is an interesting endeavour on its own, it is sufficient for my purposes here to observe that audiences were primed to receive a series like *The Mészga Family* and were probably exposed to enough sf to appreciate its generic playfulness.

The fourth factor that explains how a television show like *Message from the Future* could be produced and distributed is the Kádarian approach to humour and comedy. Former film production chief manager István B. Szabó recalls that several television directors complained to him that censorship affected them more severely than those who worked in film, because the latter could enter prestigious film festivals and bring back awards (Gervai 248). On the contrary, animation film director István Orosz states that the animation studio was secondary to theatre, film or literature, and that control over them was therefore looser: ‘in the politician’s mind, there was probably an equation between fairy tales and animation art, so luckily it was politically indifferent’ (Dizseri 144). Similarly, József Nepp ruminates over the cultural role of animated films in Hungary as follows: ‘I think we were not taken seriously enough, thank God!’ (Dizseri 143). Rather than a fortuitous oversight, the Kádár regime’s relationship to humorous entertainment was the product of deliberate planning. Under Rákosi, there were attempts to create the ideologically motivated artificial genre called ‘socialist satire’ but writers had difficulties identifying with the serious, propagandistic and humourless mode that the government required (Reichert 139–48). In the 1950s, traditional interwar Budapest cabaret was deemed reactionary and bourgeois but the relatively permissive reforms of the Kádár regime meant the return of political cabaret in the capital in various media, chiefly radio, theatre and humour magazines (Takács 90–2). Behind the scenes, the party enjoyed, encouraged and supported mild political cabaret as a way to channel and defuse public dissatisfaction but officially political humour was only ‘permitted’, which made the party seem more tolerant than it actually was (Takács 96). As opposed to public ideological and political concerns, the spheres of private life (entertainment, family matters, everyday situations, etc.) also re-appeared as legitimate subject matter for humour in the decades after 1956 (Takács 100–5). *The Mészga Family*’s humorous jabs at human foibles were seemingly innocuous, devoid of any political content – contemporaneous audiences, however, readily ‘took the hint’. An illustrative description of how humour operated in this period is provided by István Sas, director of thousands of beloved Hungarian commercials during the Kádár regime: ‘Thus was the secret of Hungarian commercials: we pretended to be seriously advertising something. But since everyone was familiar with the background, with the context of these commercials, the way we praised the product while



The Mézga family. Left to right: Géza, Paula, Kriszta, Aladár, Blöki and Maffia. 'A táv szerviz', *Üzenet a jövőből – A Mézga család különös kalandjai 1*. Tower Video, 2001.



KMZ/X in front of his terminal. 'A táv szerviz', *Üzenet a jövőből – A Mézga család különös kalandjai 1*. Tower Video, 2001.

perfectly knowing that it was not very good, this gave a real “conspiratorial code” to the commercial’ (qtd Kováts). In sum, numerous interrelated factors contributed to *The Mézga Family*’s production and success, ranging from cultural policy to economic reasons, and its place in the cultural landscape of late-1960s to early-1980s Hungary was unique indeed.

Message from the Future – The Strange Adventures of the Mézga Family

The full title of the first season already indicates a sort of picaresque-sf generic hybridity. In the first episode, ‘A táv szerviz’ (‘Remote technical support’, 11 Jan 1970),¹⁰ viewers meet the Mézga (‘resin’ or ‘glue’) family from

10. Premiere broadcasting order was different from the subsequently established ‘official’ order of the episodes; I take premiere dates to be the decisive factor in numbering. Discrepancies exist with *Adventures of Aladár Mézga* too, where I follow the same practice.

Budapest: the henpecked husband Géza, the commanding Paula, the clever and impertinent Aladár, the whimsical quasi-hippie Kriszta and their two pets, Blöki ('Doggie') the dog and Maffia the cat. A recurring character in the season is their neighbour Dr Márís ('promptly'), a university teacher who is often involved in their adventures against his will. In 'A táv szervíz', Aladár accidentally establishes contact with their descendant MZ/X (nicknamed Öcsi, 'little brother') from thirtieth-century Hungary via an old radio (enhanced by his father's umbrella as antenna). All 13 episodes have the same plot structure without an overarching storyline: the family encounters a problem in the twentieth century and after their failed attempts at a solution, they call on MZ/X, who sends them various futuristic gadgets from the future via 'light post'. These devices always cause trouble for the family in then-contemporary Hungary – not because they malfunction but because the Mézgas are not prepared to use them responsibly. The episodes always end happily, however, with the characters unharmed and the next episode starting as if nothing had happened before.

In the season's theme song, Géza says that his relationship with Öcsi is 'mystic and a little utopistic' ('A táv szervíz'): the word 'utopistic' in Hungarian – as in English – is commonly used to describe a better but ultimately unattainable and implausible ideal, so the act of calling thirtieth-century high-tech Hungary a 'utopistic' place already signals doubt about the socialist project in the opening sequence. Öcsi's world is the communist ideal: everything is provided for the citizens (money does not exist), there does not seem to be a hierarchy or a government and all consumer goods and services (food, technical devices, medical services) are free and plentiful. The political system of thirtieth-century Hungary is not discussed explicitly in the show but given the aforementioned cultural and ideological hegemony of Marxism, MZ/X's environment *officially* cannot represent anything else than a communist Hungary because by Öcsi's time the efforts of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party will supposedly have blossomed. Strictly speaking, Öcsi's world is not a utopia but a echronia, a society located somewhere else in time, not somewhere else in space (see Vieira). The dislocation in time rather than space is ideologically motivated: after all, the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party is successfully building a better world. Only a few years before the episode aired, Kádár claims in an interview at a Labour Day parade that 'every May Day parade contributed to the cause of the proletariat' ('Interview'); the logic of continuous progress upholds and explains the technological marvels of thirtieth-century Hungary. The two utopias – the current utopia-under-construction in the 1970s and the echronia of the thirtieth century – are theoretically one and the same. On

the other hand, the high level of industrial and agricultural development of an apparently Hungarian (as opposed to American, West German, French, etc.) future was in itself a source of humour and irony to the contemporary audience: by the end of the 1960s, many Hungarians were well aware of the differences between their country and, for example, neighbouring Austria.

The multi-layered irony makes it difficult to interpret *Message from the Future* and to identify the ideological stance it eventually adopts. There is truth to what Zsolt K. Horváth observes about the family, namely that they represent the ‘consolidation and Kádarian societal compromise’ (74). They are an atypical family who are not self-sufficient in their own time, nor in their own country – Horváth concentrates on the third season, *The Mészga Family on Vacation*, and argues that it effectively dispels the widespread notion about a utopian West (75–8). Leaving the third season aside for a later section, the cultural and ideological codes of the first 13 episodes prove a bit more complicated to decipher. As Szilvássy notes, the season’s ironic tone and the ‘humorous portrayal of the latent split mind of then contemporary society’ (89) make it possible for two different readings: an unofficial one, sympathetic towards the ‘small citizens’ of the Mészga family, and an official one, condemning them for their un-socialist behaviour, like the propensity to amass wealth (94; see also note 12). Szilvássy is right in identifying the irony directed towards the socialist utopia in the sense that it is unfeasible and impractical (96) but – as mentioned in the previous section – the irony directed at certain aspects of ‘small citizen’ life has a long-standing tradition in Hungarian humour and is therefore not necessarily motivated by socialist ideology. I believe, however, that the mechanism of irony alone does not explain all cultural and ideological codes in *The Mészga Family* – rather, the first season uses the same ‘cynical reason’ that Alexei Yurchak identifies in relation to late socialism in the Soviet Union.

Yurchak argues that what he calls the ‘hegemony of representation’ (165) effectively meant that in late socialism, there was no alternative way to imagine the world than the official one (cf. Péter Kende’s similar argument from 1985); whether people believed in it was beside the point (162). This resulted in a ‘pretense misrecognition’ (171) driven by ‘cynical reason’ (174) – as Yurchak writes, ‘the only sensible behaviour in the public sphere was the pretense that one did not see the falsity of the official claims’ (171). This resulted in various social practices, the most relevant of which in this context is the telling of Soviet political jokes or ‘anekdoty’ (175). These jokes were directed at people’s own ‘inability to struggle against [their] own simulated support of this ideology’ (178) and ‘the discrepancy between their own understanding and their behaviour’ (178–9). Many of the episodes, besides the humorous references to everyday

problems in socialist Hungary (self-assured but incompetent servicemen, nosy police officers, self-important bureaucrats, Hungarian products that are inferior to Western ones, etc.) contain statements and presuppositions that are not supposed to be humorous in and of themselves but that are surely recognised as cynical statements about contemporary and future Hungary. I suggest that understanding MZ/X's Hungary as a cynical utopia illuminates why the genre of utopia is evoked in its theme song to uncover the full potential of its meanings.

Consider the following example. In the seventh episode 'Im-bolygó' ('Unstable planet', 22 Feb 1970), Dr Márís arrives at the beginning to ask for his French dictionary because he is travelling to Paris. After he leaves, Paula scolds Géza for not taking her abroad to travel, preferably to Italy – she says that 'an able person has at least one relative abroad' who can invite them. Géza contacts Öcsi, who lends them his 'interplanetary space-disk' with which they can travel in a bubble to a distant planet. No sooner do they arrive on the planet than aliens attack them – the family barely escapes and returns to Budapest only to find that 50 years have passed due to time dilation. The episode treats travelling abroad in 1970s Hungary as a given, though travelling either to France or Italy (both being 'Western countries') would have been impossible for most Hungarians at that time. Travelling also seems to be free in Öcsi's time, in the financial as well as the geographical sense. According to the 'official' interpretation, nothing is amiss in this episode, while the unofficial reading suggests that in the 1970s travelling to a different planet is easier than travelling to Italy. The cynical reading, however, sustains and subverts both readings: it recognises that the whole narrative is predicated upon a lie but the recognition of that lie interferes with the enjoyment of the exciting plot. The parallel readings of the episode might be represented like this: travel is not restricted in Hungary (which it is) and in the utopia that we are currently building (which we do not believe in), it will be so free that you might even travel to distant planets (which you will not). Adaptation rather than opposition to the system (cf. Yurchak 182) is necessary for the enjoyment of the episode, which is so charmingly humorous that one would be a fool not to sit back and enjoy it.¹¹

As Gregory Claeys argues, utopia is 'a mode of conceiving a realisable future' and 'plausibility ... is central to its definition' (30). Seen in this light, the critical power of *Message from the Future* comes from the tension between

11. This is the mindset that the season's theme song refers to: 'be a little crazy sometimes / the grey problems will fly away / the sky will clear'.

tangible and experienced implausibility, as opposed to the official version of utopian potentiality. In other words, it is not clear how the utopia-under-construction turns into the echronia and why it takes 1,000 years to happen. *Message from the Future* is therefore an officially utopian work whose function is anti-utopian or utopian depending on the reader's ideological position (as Szilvássy suggests) – it is too understated, however, to be called a 'satirical utopia'. After all, the family's safety is guaranteed at the end of every episode by socialist present-day Hungary, and their (mis)adventures might as well be credited to their 'backwardness' or inability to absorb socialist ideals.¹² Nor does it suffice to call *Message from the Future* a 'satirical anti-Utopia', which Antonis Balasopoulos defines as 'works which *attack* previous works or intellectual traditions by *exposing* them as impractically and unrealistically "Utopian", and which use this critique to *delegitimize* the authority of their prescriptions concerning the good life or the good society' ('Anti-Utopia' 61; emphasis added). Attacking, exposing and, most of all, delegitimising the official Leninist narrative was not possible because of censorship – the season has to content itself with portraying the socialist utopia with mild cynicism. Because of its special position culturally and politically, the season exhibits a generic hybridity that defies categories. I therefore propose to call it a 'cynical utopia' for the purposes of this analysis, while remaining conscious of the possibility that this categorical label (designed to fit this television programme) might prove too specific to be analytically useful for a wide variety of texts.¹³

Another important theoretical point to consider regarding *The Mézga Family* is the relationship between utopia and fairy tales. Besides its sf content, the series relies heavily on fairy tale elements well-known in traditional Hungarian folklore: the gadgets in *Message* resemble magical devices that help the protagonist, *Strange Adventures* uses the trope of the youngest son who goes on an adventure, and *Vacation* features a series of calamities, coincidences and impossible escapes. According to Ernst Bloch's theorisation of the affinity between fairy tales and utopia, the former is an 'older level' of the latter, full of 'social' and 'technological' utopia: fairy tales, just like utopias, portray better living conditions and technological marvels and express a

12. One of the strongest markers of this is Géza and Paula's attempts to make money: of the 13 episodes, at least seven contain explicit contemplations on how to profit financially from Öcsi's gadgets. This was in stark contrast with official Marxist-Leninist ideology; in one of his speeches at the end of the 1960s, Kádár expressed his dislike for people who 'collect like hamsters' (qtd Valuch 382).

13. For a different but also specifically situated take on the relationship between cynicism and utopia, see Balasopoulos 'Utopian and Single Elements' 327–58.

hopeful ‘longing’ for the better ‘that is the pervading and above all only honest quality of all human beings’ (‘Missing’ 5). In other words, fairy tales depict universal ‘wish-fulfilment’ (‘The Fairy Tale’ 163) – similarly to utopias, they contain ‘a critique of what is present’ (‘Missing’ 12). As Blochian scholar Jack Zipes explains, the connection between fairy tales and utopias is more than an affinity of content, as it is also instrumental: fairy tales reveal ‘the dissatisfactions of average people’ and thus awaken ‘a utopian consciousness that may have been repressed’ (127). Despite the appeal of this theory, Zipes notes that Bloch’s understanding of fairy tales tends to be universalising and reductive (123–6); in the case of *Message*, however, some of Bloch’s observations are especially pertinent in understanding how it cynically subverts not only utopias but fairy tales as well.

For Bloch, utopian fairy tales are about giving voice and power to ‘the people, the little fellows’ (Zipes 126) and the Mézgas seem to be the perfect candidates for this. Dissatisfied with life and armed with the technological marvels of the thirtieth century, they could have a real impact on their environment – but alas, they pursue their individual materialistic goals and fail even at that. They prove unable use their magical tools successfully, which echoes the officially sanctioned political humour of the time, namely the self-adopted ‘credo’ of Hungarian humourists (and journalists) that ‘the party’s politics are correct, and errors occur during application’ (Takács 97). The other, cynical reason for the Mézgas’s disappointments is that according to Bloch, utopian change – even in fairy tales – is predicated not only upon individual achievements but on ‘social and political change’ as well (Zipes 114). However, such change was unimaginable at the time. Moreover, if ‘discontent’ is truly a prerequisite of utopia (Zipes 110), then the double irony of *Message* is that ridiculing utopia in general implies that there is no need for it in Hungary because there is no discontent, which most Hungarians knew was not true. Rather than questioning the validity of utopian fairy tales, *Message* suggested to the contemporary audience – besides the satire directed at the ‘small citizen’ – that the promises of socialist technological progress read like a fairy tale gone astray.

The term ‘cynical utopia’ captures this ambiguity at the heart of *Message from the Future*, in the sense of an imaginary alternative place which is presented as feasible while known to be the opposite and thus making its critique multidirectional and foreclosing the question of plausibility. The cynical utopia makes it impossible to assume an ideologically neutral position while at the same time containing refutations to all possible reactions, prompting its diverse audience to constantly shift attitudes and leaving them to find themselves the target of critique. *The Mézga Family* employs a great amount of verbal humour and

situational comedy to soften the edge of critique and channel it into laughter, which makes it impossible to say when artificial cheerfulness blends into the real thing. Focusing solely on these theoretical questions might give the impression that *Message* is weighty political satire. Embedded in the traditions of social and political satire in the Kádár period, *Message* primarily functioned as entertainment and was perfectly enjoyable without paying attention to its cynical undertones. The visual humour of the series is indeed formidable, but where *Message* truly shines is in its use of language; Romhányi's brilliant use of Hungarian follows in the footsteps of Frigyes Karinthy, one of the finest twentieth-century writers of Hungarian literary comedy.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the contradictions and incongruities inside the episodes cannot be disregarded since they serve to subvert the dialogical aspect of utopia: ever since Thomas More's foundational work, dialogue has been central to the idea of utopia, either in the literal sense of a philosophical conversation or as a multidirectional discourse with multiple participants. All three 'faces' of utopianism (outlined by Lyman Tower Sargent in his foundational essay) require or imply some sort of concrete or abstract dialogue: the literary tradition between author and audience or between characters within the text, intentional communities among the participants, and social theory between the theory and social reality (cf. Claeys's criterion of plausibility).

The problem, however, is that neither the cynical attitude nor Hungary's Leninist political structure was conducive to dialogue: as Kende writes, it allowed some comments from within that were formed in accordance with the rules, but it was absolutely unimaginable that a discourse outside the small circle of political power players would accomplish anything (207). Compare Tom Moylan's characterisation of the textual strategies of 1970s critical utopias: '[the] narrative tendency for a utopian trajectory to lapse into the stasis of a blueprint, plan, or party line was challenged by textual tactics that broke open the utopia form so that the utopian imagination remained responsive to further critique and change' (88) – the opposite of what was possible on primetime television in 1970s Hungary. *Message from the Future* focuses not

14. It is impossible to fully convey *Message*'s verbal humour in English because rhymes, puns and double meanings abound in every line spoken by the characters. The epitome of this is the 'neo-Hungarian' language used in the thirtieth century, which relies on word truncation, clipping and blending, which is mainly created by shortening Hungarian words, and provides fertile ground for various misunderstandings. Let an example speak for itself: in 'Góliát-fólia' ('Goliath-film', 8 Mar 1970), Géza explains to Öcsi that he has 'worms in his garden' ('féreg a kertemben'). Öcsi misunderstands this, because the old-Hungarian phrase 'féreg a kertemben' translates to 'félek reggel a kerületi temetőben' ('I feel scared at the municipal graveyard in the morning') in neo-Hungarian.

on the falsity of socialist claims and promises but on its whole underlying rhetoric and argument structure. MZ/X's world is a blueprint for utopia gone awry, built without dialogue between its constructors and its inhabitants – or between the inhabitants themselves. The communist utopia therefore seems to lack community: Öcsi lives a lonely life in his private residence in a 'tower city'. *Message from the Future* observes its cultural context with the characteristic distance of the cynic and extrapolates to what kind of utopia results from pretence misrecognition, identifying the phenomenon more than a decade before the period of late socialism.¹⁵

A good example of the difficulties of dialogue between Öcsi and his ancestors is the neo-Hungarian language spoken in the thirtieth century (cf. note 14). Aladár somehow understands MZ/X and so does Paula to an extent – but Géza is completely lost without translation. Moreover, the primary source of their adventures is that the Mézgas do not understand how Öcsi's technology works. This trope is present in many time-travel narratives and the dangers are conveniently averted by a willing companion figure, but both Géza and Öcsi are reluctant to ask for clarification or offer advice. To give a few examples, this results in a dangerous flying television set (a normal television spliced with a fly in episode 1), a hurricane they cause with a weather-controlling device (episode 11) and a super-strong amplifier destroying their whole apartment building (episode 4). The most vivid example is perhaps the episode 'Góliát-fólia' ('Goliath-film'), which discusses the unrealistic requirements and claims of Soviet-style agriculture. In this episode, Öcsi gives the family a device that has only four buttons and can help them achieve a wonderful yield with the Goliath-film – a huge bubble that uses radiation to stimulate growth. Foreshadowing the events that transpire, he warns Géza about the importance of pesticides but Géza shrugs off his warnings. After the Mézgas apply the bubble, it turns out that growth stimulation also affected the pests in their garden and they have to fight the monstrous worms and locusts that grew alongside the plants.

15. Although Yurchak locates in time the practice of 'telling anecdote' and 'pretense misrecognition' to the mid-1980s in the Soviet Union, one could argue that life in Kádár's Hungary was considerably unconstrained as compared to other Eastern Bloc countries (Valuch 365–6). The standard of living rose steadily and Western products like Coca Cola or Marlboro cigarettes could be obtained (384). As Richard Stites writes, in Stalinist Russia '[m]aps of communist heaven ... were even more repugnant [than capitalist hells], since the fictional heavens ... were as distant from Soviet reality in the 1930s as the Earth was from Mars' (236). The gap between reality and fiction did exist in 1970s Hungary too but to a markedly lesser extent. I assume that the mindset described by Yurchak could easily have developed earlier in Hungary due to less repression and invasion of privacy, as also evidenced by the massive popularity of a television programme that builds on this mode of experience.

A longer conversation about pesticides or a user's manual could have saved a lot of trouble for Géza and his family. The Goliath-film, along with the cleaning robot (a mechanical servant that goes berserk in episode 3 because it does not understand old-Hungarian) and many of Öcsi's other gadgets are examples of inventions that sound good on paper but fail spectacularly when put into use. It is easy to see parallels not only with the claims of Soviet-style economic planning but also with the claims of Hungarian state officials and then-contemporary Hungarian propaganda in general.

The Strange Adventures of Aladár Mézga

The second season was produced in 1972 and aired between January and April 1973, three years after the sweeping success of the first. Its protagonist is Aladár, the youngest member of the family, together with his dog, who can now speak. Aladár builds an inflatable rubber spaceship called Gulliverkli 5, a wordplay referring to Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver* and the fact that the spaceship can fit into a violin case ('verkli' meaning 'barrel organ' in Hungarian). Like the first, the second season is also an anthology: in every episode, there is some kind of conflict between Aladár and his parents or his environment, so he travels to a distant planet and returns after his adventures. Even though the humour and linguistic inventiveness of the series is unchanged, the planets Aladár visits are clearly different from MZ/X's world. As the ship's name suggests, the season resembles the plot structure of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, as well as the satirical tone of the eighteenth-century novel.¹⁶ The planets are utopian satires, which, to use Sargent's definition, 'the author [intends] a contemporaneous reader to view as a criticism of that contemporary society' (9). The second season leaves behind the subtlety of the first season and its contextual specificity – contemporary Hungary barely even appears. Most episodes are sf adventures that comment satirically on human errors and societal issues: 'Óskorban' ('In the Prehistoric Age', 11 Feb 1973) has Aladár travelling back in time and teaching politeness to prehistoric men; 'Luxuria' (25 Feb 1973) features a luxury automated planet that the lazy Aladár first enjoys but then grows tired of; 'Mesebolygó' ('Fairy tale planet', 14 Jan 1973) features a planet full of characters from fairy tales and Aladár – the ignorant student – endangering his dog

16. The relationship between the 'gulliveriad' (a technical term in Hungarian scholarship that denotes members of a genre derivative of Swift's novel) and the eponymous tie-in novelisation based on the television series (written by Romhányi) is explored in Gombos 304–18.

and himself by overlooking intertextual references, and so on. Even in more politically pointed episodes, the criticism is too broad to identify its target: for example, 'Dilibolygó' ('Goofy planet', also a wordplay on Hungarian slang 'dilibogyó', 'medication for mental illness'; 4 Feb 1973) has a super-sensitive intelligence agency that suspects everyone and during the Cold War this was easily applicable to both superpowers.

A striking feature of the planets (also noted by Gombos) is that, out of 13 episodes, six are controlled by dictators and at least one more is clearly authoritarian. While there is no explicit condemnation of authoritarian regimes, Aladár intervenes in six cases to better the lives of the planets' inhabitants. This pattern could have made the whole season suspect for cultural policymakers, but the setting is distant enough compared to the first season and the thematic elements are more cartoonish: *Strange Adventures* feels more like an animated series directed at children than *Message from the Future*, despite the critical subtext. One episode, however, was not distant enough for East German authorities: 'Superbellum' (18 Feb 1973) features two old generals on a planet who fight each other with advanced heavy weaponry, even though neither of them remembers the cause of the fighting and all other inhabitants have been killed as a result of their never-ending war. Aladár realises that he cannot reason with them and leaves just as one of them destroys the entire planet with a nuclear weapon. 'Superbellum' was not broadcast in East Germany but this conspicuously themed episode is the exception – the television company had no problem showing 'Musicanta' (25 Mar 1973) that features oppressed musicians staging a rebellion against noise-obsessed maniacs or 'Varia' (18 Mar 1973), about a planet in constant flux to the impulses of its 'fashion dictator' who once mis-designed the weather and killed all his subjects.

Thus, as the series transforms from a cynical echronia to a satirical utopia, so it becomes a YA sf adventure cartoon instead of a culturally embedded animated series. This shift causes the show to seem more innocuous, so it paradoxically enables more explicit critique to be voiced and the element of dialogue to be introduced. Aladár and his dog discuss all the planets they visit and involve themselves in the affairs of the natives in order to free them from oppression and bring permanent change to their lives, as opposed to Öcsi and the whole family who are separated by a thousand years and thus quite unable to have a lasting effect on each other. With the introduction of dialogue, the cynical distant tone lessens and the often ambiguous value system of the series becomes more straightforward. In *Strange Adventures*, it is always clear who the villains are and what the message of the story is, at some points even slipping into didacticism.

The Mézga Family on Vacation

The third season was produced in 1978 and aired between June and September 1980. Instead of being anthological, the season tells an overarching story of a promising vacation gone wrong for the family. Pisti Hufnágel (Paula's beau from her youth) sends them a plane ticket to Australia, where he claims to live luxuriously. The Mézgas sell their belongings to collect enough money for the trip and take along the neighbour as a translator/companion. In Australia, it turns out that Pisti is a fraud and the family must find their way back to Hungary without money. Their trip takes them all around the world into various countries (many of which are Western countries, as seen from the Eastern Bloc), all featuring stereotypical and humorous events without any of the critical commentary of the first two seasons.

Zsolt K. Horváth rightly points out, however, that the season does have an ideological layer. During their adventures, the Mézgas realise that their 'conception of the West as automatically wealthy and high-standard is an illusion' and the season 'discredits the utopia that posits the West as an ideal place' (78), criticising those Hungarians who adore the Western countries unreflectively. Every dissident Hungarian the family meets is of dubious moral character and Horváth argues that the season almost suggests that 'crossing [Hungary's] borders simultaneously means crossing moral boundaries' (78). The season's narrative structure supports this argument: an extended version of any episode from *Message from the Future*, the season has the family going on adventures, experiencing several turns of fortune and then returning to Hungary in an episode entitled 'Végre otthon!' ('Finally home!', 7 Sep 1980).

The season can certainly be read as a satirical anti-utopia in Balasopoulos's framework, since there is an identifiable target of critique (namely the myth surrounding the 'Western utopia') and an underlying ideological message (Hungary is still a safer and overall better place to live). The neatness of this analysis is only upset by the subversive last episode, the return itself. Instead of joy and liberation, the Mézgas encounter trouble from the suspicious authorities at the airport – it seems that their experience rubbed off on them and pushed them into a liminal position between East and West. When they arrive at their apartment, they find out that Pisti Hufnágel had been hiding there from authorities and has robbed them of their remaining money and furniture (as well as having broken into the neighbour's flat). The much-anticipated homecoming disappoints and emptiness awaits them instead of comfort and happiness. Pisti Hufnágel, who left the country illegally, is demonstrated to be a dangerous person as dictated by the official position, but the state apparatus is

not especially helpful either. The family is now in limbo, having been exposed to the reality of the West and returning to find their world not much better. *Vacation* can therefore be considered an anti-utopia that does not have much to offer in place of the target of its critique. Even though there are scarcely ten years left until the regime change of 1989 (and even fewer until the clear signs of crisis within the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party appear), it was still difficult to imagine in 1980 that Kádár's regime would ever be supplanted. Thus, to posit that the otherwise conservative season reacted to anything palpable in official or unofficial discourse would be difficult to maintain indeed, though the vacuity that ends the season is symptomatic of the mindset that years of cynicism produce.

Conclusion

The Mézga Family is a uniquely situated animated series in many ways. The three seasons span the tumultuous decade that brought relative affluence and comfort to most Hungarians and that saw ideological loosening in terms of less invasion of privacy and oppressive violence, though of course officially nothing was amiss and radical change in the system remained unimaginable. They were produced in a country that was located behind the Iron Curtain, but not by much – a country that, for example, did also provide a meeting space for separated German families. The series also tapped into several cultural processes at once: the promotion of the prestigious Hungarian animation scene, the paradoxical efforts to create a socialist popular culture and the complex web of different perspectives responsible for censorship. As a foundation for all this complexity, the period was underpinned by an official dogma of utopianism and a parallel unofficial experience of not achieving it. The first season was born in this cultural-political matrix and in its generic hybridity bears all the contradictions, pretences, ambiguities and above all, defiant cheerfulness of its age.

The second and third seasons diverge in all aspects but their sense of humour. While *Strange Adventures* moves away from cultural specificity in exchange for more explicit societal critique, *Vacation* illustrates a backlash regarding ideological content and subversive potential. Even so, the second and third seasons cannot be dismissed as faded remnants of the first's energies, most importantly because they capture two different reactions to cynical utopianism: a turn towards satire and a critique of contemporary social reality versus a seemingly conservative counter-attack that belies its conceptual

strength at the end to expose ideological vacuity. The cynical utopianism of the first season reaches its logical conclusion in ‘Mag-lak’ (‘Core-house’, 5 April 1970), when the Mézgas accidentally detonate the house that Öcsi built for them, which acts as a nuclear device. Months of pretence and interaction without dialogue take the Mézgas to the top of a tree to watch an ominous mushroom cloud rise above the country. Cynical utopias, the season seems to suggest, end in catastrophe; but the interventionism of the second season offers a solution. The way out from a cynical utopia to a real one is paved by dialogue and critical thinking – hardly an irrelevant message in the present day.

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