Fanni FELDMANN

“We are not like you”*

Imaginations of the Rural-Urban Dichotomy in Eastern European Queer-themed Cinema

Abstract. This paper explores the dichotomy between rural and urban spaces as represented in Eastern European queer-themed cinema. The analysed films (*Land of Storms*, *Beyond the Hills*, *In the Name of*, *The Country Teacher*, *Go West*) imagine and construct the countryside as a conservative, patriarchal and heteronormative space, while the city is depicted as enlightened, liberal and tolerant, which dichotomy is parallel to the film’s imagination of the West-East opposition. Furthermore, the films attach a value hierarchy to the binary opposition they create, in which the liberal Western thought is positioned as superior, and is adopted by the films themselves. I argue that the complex and multiple nature of the rural-urban dichotomy points to multilayered marginalising and self-colonising strategies present in Eastern Europe, in which sexual and spatial marginalisation is intertwined. By ignoring the stratified nature of urban and especially rural complexities, the films and their queer characters construct the latter as the other of the city and along with that, the other of Western liberalism as well. Furthermore, when the artificially separated layers of space inevitably collide, this crash usually and repeatedly leads to tragedies ranging from repression of sexuality to violent deaths. I point out in the last part of the text how these clashes of value hierarchies also refer to crises of certain values which are represented by dysfunctional father figures and families.

Keywords: Eastern European cinema, sexual otherness, spatial dichotomies, value hierarchies.

Introduction

The quotation I chose as the title of this article comes from Ádám Császai’s 2014 *Land of Storms*. In this seemingly simple sentence we can find several layers of the film’s spatial, sexual and identity politics. The mother of one of the protagonists warns the main character, Szabolcs, to leave her son, Áron, alone, since Szabolcs’s homosexuality is an alien element in the rural community with frightening consequences. Instead of re-evaluating

Fanni FELDMANN

University of Debrecen

Email: fannifeldmann@gmail.com

Ekphrasis, 2/2017

TRANSNATIONAL CINEMA DIALOGUES
pp. 62-77

DOI:10.24193/ekphrasis.18.5
Published First Online: 2017/12/30

her son's sexual identity, and considering the possibility of having a homosexual son, the mother draws a sharp distinction between the rural community and queerness, and accuses the gay character of corruption and seduction. Although her words reflect interpersonal tension, instead of the first person singular to express her fears, she uses the pronoun "we," the plural pronoun to extend the attitudes of refusal onto the whole rural community, of which she becomes an embodiment and spokesperson.

The separation of the countryside from queerness does not only represent a commitment to heteronormativity. In this particular film, Szabolcs, although having countryside origins, returns after living in Germany as an aspiring footballer. Therefore, his homosexuality is interpreted as to the result of the permissive liberalism of the West and big cities. In other words, the rural community does not only differentiate itself from queerness as such, but also from the space and identity politics of its emergence: the separation of rurality from queerness turns into a distinction, or rather, dichotomy between rural and urban space.

This dichotomy of rural-urban space is a recurring motif in several Eastern European queer-themed films, such as the Polish *In the Name of* (2013), the already mentioned Hungarian *Land of Storms* (2014), the Romanian *Beyond the Hills* (2012), the Czech *The Country Teacher* (2008) and the Bosnian *Go West!* (2005). In this article I analyse how these films approach the spatial dichotomy of the rural and the urban, and how they even unconsciously reinforce normative strategies and attitudes of the public discourse of rural space. Although the films were made in various Eastern European countries, they approach questions of hegemonic sexual politics, heteronormativity, and patriarchy through spatial dichotomies, more precisely by contrasting urban and rural spaces and social dynamics. The city is usually imagined as the enlightened, peaceful and tolerant space of Western liberalism, whereas the representation of the countryside as patriarchal, aggressive and intolerant towards otherness, a space stuck in the past, even though some characters approach as an idyllic shelter. These two approaches to space inevitably collide and lead to tragedy as a result of their irreconcilability. I argue that the complex and multiple nature of the rural-urban dichotomy points to multilayered marginalising strategies present in Eastern Europe. The city embodies the desired and envied Western advancement, which, since Eastern Europe is aware of its own subordinate position in relation to the West, leads to the creation of a double otherness symbolized by the rupture that makes not only Europe but the Hungary of Europe seem unreachable. As such the image of the underdeveloped and even demonised countryside is a symptom of this double rupture, created as a compensational other to pass down the country's own experienced otherness in relation to the West. Similarly, I argue that the homophobia of the rural spaces is a compensatory strategy resulting from the countryside's othered and marginalised position within Hungary. In order to handle their own marginalisation, the countryside creates its own other as embodied by the queer charac-

ters or communities, since – to paraphrase Éva Kovács – Eastern Europe is being colonised, but on a smaller scale it is the coloniser itself (15).¹

Spatial dichotomies

With the exception of *In the Name of* the corpus of films I chose for analysis define their relation and connectedness to space already in their titles. They either refer to the location of their setting or the desired goal of their protagonists. The previous attitude is characteristic of *Land of Storms* which refers to a geographical location in Hungary, while *Beyond the Hills* and *The Country Teacher* outline their space more vaguely, only evoking the countryside, rural space in general terms, without specifying a geographical area. As opposed to them, *Go West* defines a desired direction of movement towards Western Europe, the space of values which may only be found (or imagined to be found) in the cities of Eastern Europe. Yet, without exception the five films take place in the countryside, and the city with the values attached to it appears – just like in the public consciousness – as the counterpart, the opposite of the countryside. It is important to notice that the films themselves create a dichotomy between urban and rural spaces, in which dichotomy the city is on the positive end of the inherent hierarchy. The image of and value systems attached to the countryside are urban imaginations, and the films – implicitly – look at urban spaces through the lenses – and let me add, sense of superiority – of the supposedly liberal, tolerant and enlightened city..

As opposed to the countryside, the city is conceived of as the space of enlightenment, liberalism, peace and tolerance. The most striking visual difference between the city and the countryside occurs in *Land of Storms*, where Szabolcs, the protagonist, returns to rural Hungary “from the buzzing multicultural atmosphere of a German metropolis and the orderly, functionalist and sterile spaces of his football club” (Feldmann 199). Similar contrasting techniques can be found in *Go West!*, where both portrayed cities – Sarajevo before the outbreak of the civil war and the undefined Western city where Kenan arrives as a refugee – accommodate tolerance for queer lifestyles, art, an a general sense of openness. In *Beyond the Hills*, although there is no such sharp visual difference between rural and urban spaces, the city appears as the space of logic, rationality and even humanity in contrast with the religious extremism of the secluded monastery.

As sociologist Bernadett Csurgó asserts, the countryside is often depicted as the antithesis of the city, and rurality is “filled with negative connotations” (Csurgó 44). Such portrayal of rural space is not exclusive to queer-themed films, as Miklós Sággy contends in an analysis of Hungarian cinematic representations of the countryside, “protagonists are often on the borders of several worlds: they are at the same time civilised and uncivilised, human and inhuman, spiritual and instinctual. In short: they incorporate all that carries the binary of familiarity (being civilised) and threatening alienness (wildness) for a Western subject.” (Sággy 15) I argue that in these queer-

themed films, the countryside is beyond those borders, what is more, it is depicted as inferior to the city. The countryside and its rural, rudimentary environment not only designate geographical distance from the mainstream and the centre, but also expresses a cultural and social marginality. As Rob Shields emphasises in his fundamental monograph on rural space, "[i]n all cases the type of geographic marginality discussed below is a mark of being a social periphery. That is, marginal places that are of interest are not necessarily on geographical peripheries but, first and foremost, they have been placed on the periphery of cultural systems of space in which places are ranked relative to each other." (Shields 3) Rural spaces are depicted as marked not only by their geographical distance and difference, but also cultural and social underdevelopment: defined by values which occupy inferior positions in the normative value hierarchy performed by the films.

Barren, dusty landscapes and futureless, earthbound individuals perform rural space, where outsiders are perceived as oddities, even threatening aliens. In *Land of Storms*, the country house, Szabolcs's heritage, is a ruined, isolated, dirty and abject space, which he intends to refurbish without success. The roof provides no protection from the rain, doors and windows are missing, the only chance to bathe is provided by the well outside the house, and the only "blanket" he gets is the cuddling of a shepherd dog. Furthermore, the Great Plain of Hungary does not symbolise endless freedom and possibilities – as in Hungarian literary evocations of the region –, instead, it turns into an endless prison and a wasteland of hopelessness. As György Kalmár points it out in connection with similar representations of the region: "the plain becomes a prison as well: its infinity, similar to that of the desert, holds no promise of liberation" (12). As Szabolcs describes his surroundings after his disappointment in the remote and hidden place: "I am in a house in the middle of nowhere. Completely alone. There is nothing here. It's dark and silent." (Császi 51:07)

Similarly, *In the Name of* represents an isolated charity institution at the margins of an otherwise peripheral village, where refurbishing seems to be a never-ending process and the only opportunity for entertainment is buying beer from the local grocery. Although the surrounding fields and forest might be perceived as beautiful, at one point of the film the two protagonists start communicating in the forest and in the middle of corn fields using animal-like sounds, which has a transforming effect on the natural scenery and emphasizes features of being animalistic, out of civilisation and normality. Inhabited space itself is so outdated and represented as stuck in the past with its dimmed colours that the presence of modern technology, like a shining laptop screen astonishes the viewer as an unexpected, dislocating experience. It appears as out of time, out of place – anachronistic – in the dull, faint environment. *Beyond the Hills* goes even further and represents the secluded monastery as a residue from medieval times without a single comfort of modernity. The small community lives without heating, plumbing or electricity.

Such a lack of modernity implicates a difference, or rather abyss, in terms of time and cultural development between the city and village. Rural space is home to more traditional cultural and gender politics, founded on heteronormativity and patriarchy. As Csurgó puts it, “traditional gender roles are attached to the traditional views on rural space” (70-71), where women are perceived as the bedrock of private, homely spaces, whereas men gain their masculinity via strength, fitness and aptitude (Little 368-70). The films depict this idea of patriarchy, gender roles and masculinity through the recurrent motifs of football and religion. The opening sequence of *The Country Teacher* summarises the essential presence of these two institutions in rural life, since the first image of the new teacher having just arrived to the village, is framed by the church and the football gate. The new teacher’s queer masculinity is in sharp contrast with the “sweaty tracksuit masculinity” embodied by the headmaster of the village school. Football has a significant role in *In the Name of* as well; the fair refereeing of the newcomer priest makes new friendships. A memorable scene from the film depicts how he switches places in the game with an introverted, outsider, bullied boy, mocked by the name “Humpty,” which – due to a beautiful score – results in the boy’s admission into the community. Football plays an important role in the conflicts of *Land of Storms* as well: at the beginning, Szabolcs’s professional footballer skills makes him a popular player in the friendly football games, however, as his homosexuality becomes clearer, and as the period of Lent progresses, the earlier friendly games turn violent and aggressive. Symbolically, Szabolcs is physically abused for the first time at the end of one of these matches.

Although the pronounced presence of football and its masculine qualities release tangible tension, religion saturates the image with darker and bleaker shades. It indicates a more heteronormative and archaic masculinity than the homosocial bondings of sport, and reflects on the unquestionable and implacable conservatism of patriarchy, which reaches its peak in *Beyond the Hills*. The small community of the monastery lives in medieval circumstances, not only in terms of (the lack of) comfort, but gender relations and family structure are also highly traditional and archaic: “they live in a modest way like a rural family... a larger table is enough for them to sit down, everyone does their duty, the Pater works in the church, grants absolution, and issues orders, the Mater organises, plans and mediates, and the daughters work with certitude” (Margitházi 47). In this world the patriarch’s word is as sacred and unquestionable as the word of God, creating unlimited authority within the walls of the monastery. Instead of the official – and already ambiguous – “father” they call him “Papa,” which is closer in meaning to the English word “daddy” and is certainly more informal, more familial than the official title, which emphasises the Patriarch’s position as the father figure, the head of the family. What is more, the nuns totally internalise his voice: Voichita, the protagonist, for instance repeats the patriarch’s words about love, faith and forgiveness almost without any change, which signifies how her own, earlier identity vanishes under the inscriptions of the new Voichita, as constructed by the

patriarch. This radical change in her personality is emphasised by Alina, her previous (girl)friend, who – filled with frustration and fear – demands the "old" Vocihita.

The powerful priest figure is central to the intertwining of space, identity and culture in *Go West* exemplifies the recurring motif in the film of the priest being lifted up in his wheelchair to perform sermon to the top of the hill. Although his body is paralysed, which refers to a certain crisis of religious ideologies and politics, he has not lost the symbolic power of language. He incarnates the voice of the people not by expressing their opinion, but the other way around: he proclaims and prescribes what positions, worldviews, belief systems, and social structures people should stick to. His discourse is highly normative, xenophobic and violent. He excludes (or rather excommunicates) anyone who dares to differ from the norm. Although he represents a religious institution, which advocates turning inward, to God and the holy scripture, most of his religious speeches are filled with an aggressive nationalistic jingoism propaganda, violence, destruction and war. In his character (sexual) normativity, religion and nationalism are intertwined, he represents the "religio-sexual nationalisms [which] are organized around erotic discourse, heteronormativity, patriarchal (often militarized) masculinity, heterosexual hegemony and the gendered order of society" (Vravník and Sremac 73). His is the only voice in the rural community, further emphasised by the constant, unbroken silence of his permanent helper, a nun. It is impossible either to disagree with him or silence him; to the only way to evade his hate-ridden preaching is to leave the church or close one's ears. For instance, the protagonist's father, Ljubo, leaves the church when he cannot cope anymore with the aggressive nationalism of the priest, and when his son is killed in the Yugoslav Wars – itself partly a result of jingoism and nationalist propaganda he forbids the priest to perform the burial ceremony. It is impossible to escape from the priest's fanaticism as his voice, his presence is echoed by religious music, church bells ringing in the background of scenes, or only possible through violence as in the scene when he tries to comfort Ljubo after his son's death with the familiar propagandistic discourse and Ljubo lifts him out of his wheelchair and throws him on the ground.

In *Go West* the city is markedly and visibly the opposite of rural space. As Sarajevo turns more chaotic, news and images of the civil war are interrupted by a concert of classical music, where Kenan, one of the protagonists, plays the cello: a symbolic instrument in the film. As Vravník and Sremac point out, "[c]lassical music became a symbol of cultural resistance in Sarajevo during the siege" (76). This cultural resistance acquires a double meaning in *Go West*. In the city, the sounds of classical music try to silence guns, tanks, and nationalistic slogans, whereas in the country these are not only complemented but propagated by religion and sexuality forming the religio-sexual nationalism that Vravník and Sremac talk about. In the rural space the sound of the cello becomes not the sound of anti-war sentiments, but also the sound associated with queer love and acceptance, which is markedly different from the other musical sounds of the village: "[t]here is a difference between the music in the

Serbian village from what Kenan is playing. In the village we hear not only trumpets in the traditional folk music at the wedding and the Serbian folk music instrument, on which a local priest plays nationalists songs, but also obscene sounds of chain saws accompanied by two village idiots singing." (Vravník and Sremac 76) Significantly and, also, symbolically, in her revenge for Kenan's rejection of her aggressive heterosexual advancements, the village "witch" destroys Kenan's instrument while he is playing it at the grave of his lost love. However, in the closing scene of the film – set in an undefined Western city – we hear and see Kenan playing on an imaginary cello. He imitates the movements and through the employment of extradiegetic music audiences hear the tune he played in the graveyard-scene. In other words, the liberal Western city makes real the counter-discourse represented by the cello (Vravník and Sremac 73) and it also makes fantasies, brutally rejected by the countryside, a reality. This gesture also uncovers the film applying its own value hierarchy, in which it approaches its topic as a spokesperson of liberal thought.

Queering rurality?

At this point several questions may arise about the examined films, namely: "How can homosexuality exist in these places at all? Why do not queer characters flee from the countryside to the city? What is more, why do they go to these rural spaces?" It might seem paradoxical that each of the five films present queer characters moving from the city to the countryside, a movement associated with retreat. In light of the above detailed rural homophobia, also highlighted in sociological research (Takács, Szalma 63-64), retreat indeed seems paradoxical. However, I feel obliged to emphasise that perceiving of rurality as the space of bleakness, futurelessness and as a reminiscent of the past – as applied by the films themselves – is the exclusive attitude and the dominant public perception, since the countryside is a discursive construct made up of different perceptions. "One of them views the countryside as the remnant of the past. According to the other, the countryside is a haven of peace and safety as opposed to the uncertainties of urban spaces." (Csurgó 51)

The visual styles of the films and images of rural spaces in these films certainly employ the first attitude. However, the queer characters' approach towards rural spaces is closer to the second one, which looks at the countryside from a more idealising and romanticising perspective. Mostly, these characters regard rural spaces as a blank canvas, ready for the dreamlike pictures, as Shields contends, space-myths. In *Land of Storms*, Szabolcs attempts to use the secluded region of the Hungarian countryside as a space for cleansing and developing a more authentic identity. He believes that his native village (or rather its outskirts) can provide a safe and harmonious environment for such development. He approaches the wild rurality in a different way than the film does and he believes it to be the land of endless possibilities and a natural state of existence.² The film signals this in its visual style. Usually, the images are darkened by grey and pale brown shades, and a dull and bleak immobility signifies

the film's approach to rural space. However, when we see Szabolcs around his bees – he starts keeping bees and hopes to make a living as a bee farmer – the images are dominated by sunshine, green leaves and the vitality of buzzing bees. Similarly, in *The Country Teacher* the protagonist retreats to the village after a break-up, in order to get over his emotional and mental turmoil. In other words, he, as a gay man, attempts to use the village space for recovery, regardless of the norms and practices of the village. Like Szabolcs in *Land of Storms*, he also falls for a village boy, however, his seductive attempts are met with refusal.

Even when the movement towards rural spaces is not entirely voluntary, protagonists show a great degree of ignorance towards the complexities of rural spatio-cultural politics. In the case of *Go West*, for instance, the motivation, or rather, force, that drive Kenan and Milan to the latter's native village is the chaos and menace of the civil war. Yet, the two gay men truly believe that the village will be a safe hiding place before they proceed to the desired West. Although they are aware of the strong heteronormativity of the village – Kenan is dressed as a woman and is introduced as Milan's fiancé – they fail to recognise another characteristic of rural life: the strong sense of belonging to a community, where it is impossible to keep secrets. For a short time, their plan seems to succeed, however, Kenan's camouflage is inevitably recognised.

The central character of *In the Name of* does not move to the village as a result of his free will either: as a priest, he follows the orders of his superiors, what is more, it is implied in the film that his transfer to this marginalised rural space is an attempt of the Church to hide him and his previous exposures as a gay man. As opposed to the film's approach to rural space as a futureless and hopeless void, the priest makes an effort to make the most of it: on the one hand, he becomes a caring father figure who attends to the needs of the boy in the institution. On the other hand, he also uses the space for penitence. His struggle with his homosexuality is pronounced throughout the film, and he – unlike Szabolcs, who hope to liberate himself from past constraints – chooses to repress his sexuality not only as a duty of celibacy, but as a part of his main identity strategy.³ As a recurring motif, he jogs in the in the forest nearby the village, which is filled with complex meanings. It is clearly an act of penitence, and evokes medieval monks' self-inflicted tortures, such as metal cilices or flogging, for the extreme punishment of the body. However, especially because of the enhanced corporeal experience, it also becomes an attempt of reconnecting with the body, which is in sharp contrast with attempts to completely repress sexuality. Furthermore, it is in the very same forest that he and his love interest, Humpty, first connect intimately: he teaches the boy to swim in the lake.⁴ Paradoxically, the rural space – both the village and the forest becomes a space of facing his sexual otherness.

Both the negative and more idealising attitudes towards rurality are present in *Beyond the Hills*. Alina, the emigrant girl returning back from Germany, views the peripheral monastery a remnant of the past, while Voichita, the inhabitant of this space

approaches it as a shelter. It must be emphasised that her staying there is not an act of free will: although she decides to become a nun of the strict institution, her circumstances never really offered another choice. Lacking a family (both girls are previous residents of an orphanage), financial stability and a supporting community, Voichita chooses the monastery as her only resort, and her perceptions of the place as being safe and providing a substitute family are shaped by her being grateful for having a place to live. By contrast, Alina, who comes back to “rescue” her (girl)friend from this place, cannot pretend not to see the unbearable aspects of the monastery, its bareness reminiscent of a medieval religious prison, where inhabitants – especially the Father – attempts to hide Voichita away from her. Even though she comes from the same background as Voichita, she sees the establishment as an involuntary shelter for women without other choice.⁵

As a result of their failure to recognize the complexities of rural space, most characters more or less consciously attempt to queer the rural space, in other words, use it in a markedly different way, disregarding or ignoring the “reality” of the countryside, which “reality” I interpret as multiple and very often irreconcilably opposing layers of discourses and practices inscribed upon each other. As they dream about temporal or permanent happiness in queer relationships, their struggle to transform the space, their direct revolt against or resistance to patriarchy and heteronormativity, and their disregarding the layered, stratified nature of space usually ends in tragedy. They forget that “[t]he space in which we live in ... is also, in itself, a heterogeneous space. In other words, we do not live in a kind of void, ... we live inside a set of relations.” (Foucault 23) Both the films – by representing negative aspects of rural space – and the queer characters who approach this space as a blank canvas with their dreams, repressions, frustrations and cultural-sexual politics painted on it forget that the “reality” of the countryside is not equal to the sum of urban discourses about it. They leave aside how urban discourses about the countryside, the awareness present in rural space about these discourses, and rurality’s own discursive practices create a space with its own dynamics, mechanisms and frustrations. Instead of approaching this complexity as a “heterogeneous space” the films and their characters pick specific layers and remove them from the stratified context of rural space, therefore treat it as two-dimensional embodiment of either ruthless patriarchy or an idealised familial community which the sexual others attempt to reformulate, or restructure on a social and spatio-cultural level.

The films depict different instances of this restructuring, which usually end in tragedies, and even in “milder” cases in the repression or rejection of homosexuality as a result of their ignorance of certain elements of rural complexity. In *Beyond the Hills*, as I have already mentioned, Alina cannot and does not want to comprehend the forces that drove the inhabitants of the monastery to the decision of living as nuns, furthermore, she deliberately refuses any kind of cooperation with the abbot or the nuns, she neglects their religious beliefs and considers her own behaviour as

a war for the liberation of the trapped Voichita. As a result, Alina (and sexual otherness) is experienced and interpreted by the religious community as the temptation of the devil. Furthermore, she develops symptoms of schizophrenia, which is interpreted by the religious community as she is possessed by the devil himself. Therefore, she is subjected to exorcism. As she is trying to protect herself, her legs and hands are chained to boards, which – unnoticed by the inhabitants of the monastery – create a cross. After three days of starvation, thirst and torture, Alina dies on this cross, on the threshold of the religious and the secular worlds. Religion and religious symbolism are also central to Szabolcs's death in *Land of Storms*, where he is stabbed with a splinter of glass by his lover, Áron on his side, just like the crucified Jesus by the soldier, who wanted to make sure that he was dead. However, here it is not only religion that plays a part in his tragedy: he rather becomes an expiatory offering for the insulted heteronormativity. Áron does not kill Szabolcs as a result of his religious beliefs, the rural community put him under immense pressure, and it is them that he is compelled to conciliate. Yet, "Agnus Dei," the Christian ritualistic music of sacrificial offering, audible during the scene of Szabolcs's death, transforms him into the sacrificial lamb killed to propitiate heteronormativity.

In *Go West* religion is only one factor in play in ensuing tragedy, and the complex stratified nature of rural space becomes visible. The civil war broke out as a result of ethnic and religious tensions, however, even if Milan dies in the war, there is a complex web of forces in action. First of all, the film depicts how Ranka, the "village witch" performs pagan-like rituals to curse him to death, which is in sharp contrast with institutionalised religion be that Christianity or Islam.⁶ The visuality of these rituals is also radically different from the religious sermons carried out by the village priest. The church and occasionally the cemetery are depicted as well-constructed, public spaces with a recognisable authority figure. As opposed to that, Ranka's ceremony is represented as being performed at night, in an unrecognisable space. The whole sequence is like a nightmare from a horror film, the source of light in the background is unidentifiable, which gives an unearthly atmosphere to the images. Apart from that, everything is dark, forms and figures only appear as shades. Kenan's tragedy is also caused by Ranka, who, after learning that the young man will never be "hers" since he loves Milan, she castrates him next to Milan's grave.

Although it might seem that religion – or religious faith – have a lot to do with the tragedy of the two men, Kenan emphasises at the beginning of the film:

The Serbs who are of Orthodox religion, hate Muslims. The Muslims of faith don't like the Serbs. The Croats also live there, they're Catholic, sometimes they like Muslims, mostly they don't... But this will end some day. They will lay down the guns and forget about the massacres. But they will continue to hate homosexuals as before. (Imamovic 01:35)

In other words, it is not his religious difference (Kenan being Muslim) that turns him into a victim of physical assault and mutilation, but his sexual otherness. This marginal rural space might tolerate religious otherness under cover, but it does not allow for sexuality. As Kenan puts it, “on the Balkans it is easier to bear if someone in the family is a murderer rather than a faggot” (02:27). Homosexuality is the limit of tolerance and acceptance, it is too great of a transgression to be endured.

In *The Country Teacher* the protagonist’s aspiration to seduce a young boy results in hatred, exclusion and attempted suicide. Here, his rejection by the local community has nothing to do with religion, it is heteronormativity that is at work. However, tragedy proves to be avoidable, since he is saved by the boy’s mother, who re-integrates the young teacher into the heteronormative world of the village, makes him a useful member of her family as a substitute father. Being integrated into the institution of heteronormativity might spare his life but not his sexual identity.

The preservation of sexual otherness in the countryside without tragedy seems to be possible only in the narrative of *In the Name of*, however the priest’s strategy has its own limits. After his semi-self-acceptance and coming-out to his sister via skype, we can see him in the next scene leading the Pentecostal march. Although from a queer point of view it might be interpreted as a regressive, surrendering movement, I argue that the priest’s strategy outlined in this scene is the only method of queering rural space that seems to be working in the patriarchal and heteronormative surrounding, yet it is at the same time a complex symptom of the opposing strata of rural space. On the one hand it is an attempt of the priest to channel his individual crisis into a communal form, since the rural population is present here as a community. On the other hand, this marching community consists of people who are marginalised, put on the periphery of society either as a result of geographical, cultural, financial distances or sexual difference: I interpret this scene as a specifically Eastern European Pride March. What is most stunning at first in connection with the scene is the discrepancy between images and music. Instead of religious songs traditionally sung by people during such marches, the scene has extradiegetic music: a rock ballad, a secular song. As a result, the original, religious meaning of the march – celebrating Christ’s ascent to heaven – is distanced from the spatial and cultural environment. We could also say that the religious tones of the march are silenced. What remains is a march decorated with flags and people’s best clothes, lead by a man with concealed homosexuality, who is followed by people marginalised for different reasons. It is significant that right before this scene the priest acknowledges his homosexuality in front of a close kin, which – although concealed from the village-community – is transferred into this next scene as well. I argue that this scene represents the priest’s utterly intimate, hidden and secretive relation to and also reinterpretation of space and culture. This pride march loses its political, resistive and revolutionary edge (which lead to deaths in the other analysed films), and cannot be interpreted as an act of public coming out. Instead of revolting against the established power structures and normalising practices, this Eastern

European pride march offers an intimate and private connection with space, and results in a split consciousness, nearing schizophrenia, which is also visualised during the scene. As he is carrying the monstrance, its shadow is cast upon his face, covering half of it. In other words, religion and patriarchy, are inscribed upon his body, emphatically, upon his face, the primary signifier of identity and subjectivity. It is only in these short moments when re-interpretation of established practices and meanings is possible: the priest most probably will not change anything in the course of heteronormativity, his secret self-accepting moments cannot be communicated to the public, however, as opposed to the other films, at least tragedy is avoidable.

Crises

Although rural spaces are depicted as spaces of heteronormativity and patriarchy, I argue that their heightened homophobia and aggression towards queer incomers are results of the rural inhabitants' sense of inferiority. Therefore they are compelled to create their own others, as a compensational strategy for their marginalisation and peripheral position in relation to mainstream society. As Madina Tlostanova puts it: "[t]hose who are unhappy with their place (which is the case of many post-socialist Eastern European countries reduced to service states) are frightened to think of losing this precarious position or being associated with those who are still lower in the hierarchy of humanity" (Tlostanova 30). The new inhabitants represent different politics of gender and sexuality, and in the homophobic Eastern European environment are perceived of as occupying an even more marginalised position in society than the geographical and cultural periphery of rural spaces. Therefore they are an "ideal" target group of victimization and othering, or – as Tlostanova asserts – for "projecting their humiliation onto those who are still weaker and more dependent" (Tlostanova 40). Apart from being perceived as even lower in socio-cultural hierarchy, the attempts of queering rural space are also considered and experienced as threats to the patriarchal and heteronormative world of rural spaces. Even if patriarchy proves "stronger" in these films than sexual otherness, heteronormativity and patriarchy are still depicted as in crisis: two basic institutions of heteronormativity are represented as dysfunctional – fathers and the family.

As Ewa Mazierska describes, "after 1989 we also notice a proliferation of 'poisonous fathers' in Polish and Czech cinema, as indeed in the films of other ex-socialist countries – overpowering, cruel or at least authoritarian men who are unable or unwilling to understand their children" (127). However, these fathers, and father-like figures are not just cruel or lacking understanding, but are themselves dysfunctional, not the omnipotent heads of patriarchy any more, their masculine strength, and especially authenticity is questioned in the films considered here.

Maybe the most dominant and powerful father figure – even if only seemingly – is the abbot of the monastery in *Beyond the Hills*. As I already pointed out, the nuns call him "Papa" (daddy) instead of the official "father" and live like obedient daughters.

He knows and sees everything that happens in the community, dictates the rules, and there are certain chambers that – according to the rules of the Orthodox faith – can be entered exclusively by him. However, as it turns out, he is an inept patriarch. First, the community is usually in need of basic supplies such as food and firewood. Second, he fails to carry out a successful exorcism: according to his beliefs, Alina's schizophrenic symptoms are the signs of possession by the devil which can be cured if the devil is driven out of the girl. However, instead of curing her, his inhuman torture kills Alina. Third, as a result of his disagreements with the leaders of the diocese, their church building remains unconsecrated and will remain a profane space.

In *Land of Storms* there are two father figures in Szabolcs's life, his German coach, a symbolic father, and his real, biological father in Hungary. Although the two men are depicted as different characters, they can be interpreted as the embodiments of the same idea of fathering. As opposed to mothering, the term fathering usually only refers to the conception of a child, and lacks the caring overtones attached to the former. The two fathers exemplify a strong, ruthless, insensitive and intolerant attitude to youngsters, however, neither succeeds. The German coach fails to turn Szabolcs into a professional footballer, partly because of his cruel and humiliating coaching methods that prompt Szabolcs to return to Hungary and give up professional football altogether. His biological father is no less a failure. First, we learn that the professional football career was his and not his son's. The father's self-pity dominates his paternal attitudes, and his failure as a coach (of a nameless local team in a nameless football league) is amplified by Szabolcs's eventual rejection of football. Furthermore, he is similarly unsuccessful in preventing his son's love affair with Áron, the village boy. Although he catches the two boys sleeping in each other's arms in Szabolcs's run-down house and grabs his son by the hair to take him home, after a quarrel he stops the car and lets him go. His tense silence is not a sign of accepting his son's decision, but the inability to prevent it.

The crisis of patriarchy is most pronounced and prominent in the already analysed figure of the village priest in *Go West*: a vulnerable, impotent, physically dysfunctional body embodies the burden of patriarchy: a tradition still in force and struggling to conceal its utter paralysis.

The nuclear family, as a basic unit and reinforcement of patriarchy and heteronormativity is also in close association with rural spaces, as Jo Little contends: "The association between the family and the rural community has always been very strong; the sense of friendliness, honesty, supportiveness, tradition etc. celebrated as part of the rural community being frequently linked to the survival of the family" (Little 368). Similarly to patriarchy and father figures, the family is also depicted as dysfunctional, or even non-existent in the films, none of which present a happy, functional or even complete family. Even if there is a family behind the protagonist, as in *The Country Teacher*, it does not operate according to the patriarchal model, as the dominant and successful mother emasculates her husband and son equally.

In the case of *Land of Storms* and *Go West*, mothers are missing: we know nothing about Szabolcs's or Milan's mother, yet their lack is felt as a haunting cavity in the fabric of the traditional family. Furthermore, when the mother is present, as in the case of Áron, the other central figure of the film, she is chronically ill and permanently needs his son's help: she is depicted as a burden, as if she were the dysfunctional heritage or the morbid consequence of the patriarchal crisis burdening the son's future. The domestic space is also symbolic, most significantly in Szabolcs's case: when attending the Sunday service, the father locks up the still sleeping son in the family house, who after waking up leaves the house through the balcony as if escaping from a prison. Furthermore, in *Go West*, the only mother figure present in the village is Ranka, the "witch" who eventually causes Milan's death and Kenan's suffering.

Beyond the Hills and *In the Name of* approach the dysfunctionality of the family through its lack. *In the Name of* is set in a home for troubled youngsters and young adults with unexplained family backgrounds. Although the newly transferred priest attempts to create a familial atmosphere founded on caring, "the characters almost unnoticeably cross the hardly perceptible, but always corporeal limits of masculine bonding, playfulness and teasing" (Gyenge 32) and become violent. The monastery in *Beyond the Hills* also functions as a sanctuary hardly better than the orphanage where the two protagonists grew up. Both places come through in the film as founded on discipline and fear rather than nurturing love.⁷

Conclusion

The films – applying an attitude present in public discourse as well – depict rural space as a remnant of the past, associated with heteronormativity and patriarchy. What is more, the films create a dichotomy, even if only on the basis of imaginations, between rural and urban spaces, as carriers of conflicting values, where the first is seen as a conservative, patriarchal, aggressive, and rejecting space, and the second is imagined as enlightened, liberal, peaceful and welcoming. As such dichotomies inevitably carry a hierarchy as well, the city becomes superior to the village, and rural communities are depicted as affected by their sense of inferiority. In other words, to protect and strengthen their position and self-image, they create their own others. As the arriving gay characters embody a new and different politics of gender and sexuality, they become a threat to the existing order, which is already perceived as inferior and in crisis, which is represented by dysfunctional fathers and families. Therefore, villagers react to their attempts of queering space with heightened homophobia and aggression. Since the gay characters are depicted as ignorant of the complexities of the spatio-cultural politics of rurality, their attempts of queering rural space end either in tragedy or the total repression of homosexuality. Although patriarchy and heteronormativity are represented as in crisis, their symbolic power is still present, and lays an insurmountable obstacle in front of the queer characters.

Notes:

- * *Land of Storms* dir. Ádám Császi, 53:22.
- 1 If not indicated otherwise, the quotations from Hungarian texts were translated by me.
 - 2 Csurgó also calls attention to how the idealising attitude towards the countryside is complemented with the notions of “stillness, peace of mind and soul, being close to nature and belonging to a community” (52).
 - 3 Instead of giving up the chance of sexuality in the bodily sense, he tries to leave behind sexuality as part of one’s identity.
 - 4 Although the age gap between the priest and his love interest might seem improper for some, I must emphasise that Humpty is clearly not underage, therefore neither the film nor its central character is connected to pedophilia.
 - 5 It is emphatic in the film that most nuns or would-be nun chose this place because they have nowhere else to go; their motivations vary from violent husbands through financial bleakness to having nothing and nobody in the world.
 - 6 She discovers that Kenan is a man, but fails to recognise his homosexuality, therefore she imagines that with Milan dead, she might be able to keep Kenan for herself.
 - 7 Although Alina’s foster family could provide a positive example of a supporting family, Alina decides to leave them in order to force herself into the role of a nun, only to live with Voichita in the monastery. Seemingly her foster-parents care about her and try to make her stay, the fact that they have already got a new girl to fill Alina’s place, and Alina’s comments about how she had to pay rent while living there, and her warning to the new girl about how the foster-parents will try and rip her off, undermine the possibly positive image.

Works Cited:

1. Császi, Ádám. Dir. *Land of Storms*. Proton Cinema, 2014.
2. Csurgó, Bernadett. *Vidéken lakni és vidéken élni. A városból vidékre költözők hatása a vidék átalakulására: a város környéki vidék*. Budapest: Argumentum, 2013.
3. Feldmann, Fanni. “Előbújni a vasfüggöny mögül: a szexuális másság ábrázolása a magyar filmekben a rendszerváltás előtt és után.” *Tér, hatalom és identitás viszonyai a magyar filmekben*, Győri Zsolt, Kalmár György eds. Debrecen: Debrecen UP, 2015, pp. 183-201.
4. Foucault, Michel. “Of Other Spaces.” Translated by Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16.1, 1986, pp. 22-27.
5. Gyenge, Zsolt. “Húsba zárva. (Malgorzata Szumowska: Az Ő nevében...)” *Filmvilág*, 2015, pp. 32-34.
6. Imamovic, Ahmed. Dir. *Go West*. Compnex, 2005.
7. Kalmár, György. *Formations of Masculinity in Post-Communist Hungarian Cinema: Labyrinthian Men*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
8. Kovács, Éva. “Identitás és etnicitás Kelet-Közép-Európában.” *Társadalmi önismeret és nemzeti önazonosság Közép-Európában*, Fedinec Csilla (ed.). Budapest: Teleki László Alapítvány, 2002, pp. 7-22.
9. Little, Jo. “Gender and sexuality in rural communities.” *The Handbook of Rural Studies*. Paul Cloke, Terry Marsden and Patrick Mooney (eds.). London: Sage, 2006, pp. 365-378.

10. Margitházi, Beja. "Az Ördög háta mögött. (Dombokon túl)." *Filmvilág*, 2013, p. 47.
11. Mazierska, Ewa. *Masculinities in Polish, Czech and Slovak Cinema*. New York, Oxford: Bergahn, 2008.
12. Mungiu, Cristian. Dir. *Beyond the Hills*. Mobra Films, 2012.
13. Sággy, Miklós. "Gonosz Vadkelet – Civilizáció és barbárság határvidéke a kortárs magyar filmben." *Filmvilág*, 2015, pp. 15-18.
14. Shields, Rob. *Places on the Margin: Alternative geographies of modernity*. London, New York: Routledge, 1991.
15. Sláma, Bohdan. Dir. *The Country Teacher*. Negativ, 2008.
16. Szumowska, Malgorzata. Dir. *In the Name Of*. MD4, 2013.
17. Takács, Judit & Szalma, Ivett. "Homofóbia és az azonosnemű partnerkapcsolatok intézményesítettsége Európában." *Szociológiai szemle*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2012, pp. 61-68.
18. Tlostanova, Madina. „Postcolonial Theory, the Decolonial Option and Postsocialist Writing." *Postcolonial Europe? Essays on Post-Communist Literatures and Cultures*. Dobrota Pucherova, Robert Gafrik (eds.). Leiden, Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2015, pp. 27-46.
19. Vravnik, Vesna & Srdan, Sremac. "Strange Bedfellows: (Non/mis) Alliances Between Nationalists and Queers." *Facta Universitatis*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2016, pp. 71-82.