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## Circulation of Queer Ideas in State Socialist Hungarian People's Republic

### Abstract

Inspired by Agata Jakubowska's *Circulation of Feminist Ideas in Communist Poland* (2008) in the paper, I undertake the case study of Russian-born Hungarian artist El Kazovszkij (1948–2008) to discuss the circulation of queer ideas in state socialist Hungarian People's Republic. Cold War-era queer cultural production is primarily associated with the then-establishing cultural and political agency of sexual minorities in the West. Nonetheless, despite the hiatus of queer movements or public dialogue in state socialist Hungary, there were still plenty of related works produced and circulated in both alternative and official cultural scenes. However, the lack of knowledge about the socialist era queer lives led to a homogenous image of socialist states: the individuals in question are still seen as absent or viewed as mere victims of the system, who had also no access to knowledge on non-normative sexualities. Therefore, artistic production addressing queer themes is either overlooked or interpreted as manifestations of the artists' personal struggle, which implies an essentialist understanding of queer art, excluding critical or political connotations of the works and oeuvres in question. My aim is not to prove that queer discourse was thriving in state socialist Hungary. Yet, I argue that queer ideas circulated in Europe between the East and West as well as among socialist countries, offering crucial reference points to artists. Through the case study on El Kazovszkij, it is possible to reconstruct a fraction of these examples from the field of literature, film, visual arts, music, etc., which could contribute to the theoretical and methodological approach to further investigate queer lives of socialist and post-socialist East Central Europe (ECE). Beyond the art historical perspectives, the outcome could become a further step in cultural decolonialism and Piotr Piotrowski's horizontalism to defy the East-West dichotomy within the cultural history of non-normative sexualities.

**Keywords:** El Kazovszkij, queer in Communist Hungary, non-normative sexualities in socialist and post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe

As the present paper seeks to answer pragmatic questions, I do not intend to analyse the role of gender and sexuality in the political and cultural contest between the Cold War-era Western and Eastern Bloc, nor is the purpose of this paper to explore

its long-term epistemological implications.<sup>1</sup> However, I will explain my hypothesis within the context of resulting premises that still firmly hold themselves in public opinion, impacting contemporary political and scholarly discourses on East Central European (ECE)<sup>2</sup> queer<sup>3</sup> past and present.<sup>4</sup> One of these common theses is that ECE had no queer history other than brutal state-imposed oppression before adopting capitalist democracies in 1989/1990 and that homosexuality was illegal and actively persecuted under all communist regimes. Another widespread misconception, which complements the perceived illegality of homosexuality, is that in the ECE region, the state authorities censored or at least inhibited the publication and distribution of queer-related content.

In recent years, research in legal and social history provided a more nuanced picture of the attitude of state authorities towards sexual minorities during this period, both at the national and regional levels. With all these scholarly inquiries, it remains difficult to make general assertions about the social and political norms concerning sexual minorities in socialist systems to distinguish between systemic phenomena, system failures and exceptions. For instance, in state-socialist Hungary, despite the absolute hiatus in social or political discourse towards sexual minorities, a recent study revealed the background of the 1961 decriminalisation of homosexuality as a result of a parliamentary debate based on expert opinions specifically requested

1 The role of sexuality in the construction of cultural hierarchies in the context of the East-West binary was discussed by many. Among others: L. Wolf, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, Stanford, 1994; M. Torova, *Imagining the Balkans*, Oxford, 2009; B. Popa, *De-centering Queer Theory: Communist Sexuality in the Flow During and After the Cold War*, Manchester, 2021.

2 East Central Europe (ECE): The terminology referring to the non-fixed, historically changing geopolitical or geographical region of Eastern Europe varies depending on the context. The most common term I used is East Central Europe, ECE. Following Piotr Piotrowski's *deliberations In the Shadow of Yalta, Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989*, by East Central Europe, I refer to those former Eastern Bloc countries and their successor countries that remained under the Soviet sphere of influence following the 1945 Yalta Conference decision. Including Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, East Germany, Poland, Romania, Hungary and Bulgaria. Piotrowski's definition of this geopolitical entity refers to the cultural and political history and their temporal geopolitical situatedness during the Cold War and its aftereffects. Furthermore, in terms of the intersection of my research between art and queer history, these are also those Eastern Bloc countries where, with the exception of Romania, homosexuality was not criminalised during the Cold War (Poland) or where legislation decriminalised consensual homosexual practices between adults during this period (Czechoslovakia, 1961; Hungary 61; East Germany, 1968; Bulgaria, 1968; and in certain parts in Yugoslavia; Croatia, Slovenia, Montenegro and the Socialist Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, 1977).

3 I am using the word queer as an inclusive umbrella term for all the diverse SOGIESC (sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics) as well as for forms of social or artistic behaviour that oppose cis- and hetero-normative binary concepts of gender and sexuality distinctively from politico-cultural identity rooted in the 1980's American socio-cultural context. The term indicates description and not interpretation.

4 R. Kulpa, J. Mizielska, eds., *De-Centring Western Sexualities: Central and Eastern European Perspectives*, London, 2016.

and prepared for the occasion.<sup>5</sup> Although the abolition marks a cardinal turning point in legal history, other research points towards its low practical impact. Firstly, in the light of the court files, it appears that prior to the decriminalisation, neither the police nor the courts demonstrated any particular effort to enforce the law.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, the abolition did not catalyse further social liberalisation either, and sexual minorities remained collectively “hidden” from mainstream society.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the general social exclusionary attitude forced most members of sexual minorities to construct and live behind a “heterosexual façade”.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, there are numerous recorded cases about – in the narrower or wider circle – openly gay or lesbian persons.<sup>9</sup> Yet, the secret police could and did utilise the social homophobia to frame the socialist party's political enemies or to blackmail individuals to report to the police regardless if they were out or closeted.<sup>10</sup> Generally speaking, it appears that the communist Hungarian state authorities did not pay specific attention to sexual minorities while occasionally benefiting from their social exclusion. This complex and often ambivalent political and social context makes it overly difficult to navigate the interpretation of cultural forms of queer representation in an otherwise weighted cultural field, burdened with foreign and domestic oppression, *doublespeak* and an uncertain semi-official regulatory system.<sup>11</sup>

The latter point is crucial when discussing the imaginary general “communist ban” on homosexual – or more broadly understood queer – representation. No known source supports the Hungarian state authorities implementing any formal provision or consistent practice focusing on these particular topics. Nonetheless, the history of censorship in communist Hungary is an ambivalent matter. The 1949 Constitution declared no censorship in Hungary: accordingly, there were no written rules to be followed either. In practice, however, censorship was practiced. While in the Rákosi-era (named after the General Secretary Mátyás Rákosi, 1948–1956), the state set up external supervisory bodies over cultural institutions, after the 1956 anti-Soviet revolution Kádár-era (names after the General Secretary, János Kádár, 1956–1989), the system primarily relied on self-censorship. It was exercised by publishers and distributors themselves, whose work depended mainly on their tacit compliance with the official state ideology. Consequently, cultural and press outlets were indeed censored if they were deemed politically or morally harmful

5 J. P. Takács, T. Tóth, “Liberating Pathologization? The Historical Background of the 1961 Decriminalization of Homosexuality in Hungary”, *Hungarian Historical Review*, 2021, 10, 2 Issue 2, pp. 267–300.

6 A. Kurimay, *Queer Budapest, 1873–1961*, Chicago, 2020.

7 Ibid.

8 J. Takács, *Melegszázad. Adalékok a homoszexualitás 20. századi magyarországi társadalomtörténetéhez*, Budapest, 2018; Kurimay, op. cit.

9 Eg. in A. Borgos, ed., *Eltitkolt évek, Tizenhat lesbikus életút*, Budapest, 2011; P. Molnár Gál, *Coming Out*, Budapest, 2020.

10 Takács, op. cit.

11 E. Sasváry, S. Hornyik, H. Turai, eds., *Art in Hungary 1956–1980: Doublespeak and Beyond*, London, 2018.

to public opinion.<sup>12</sup> Although social and political taboos set specific frames, the decisions were based on individual judgement and not state authorities' censorship guided by a central directive. In terms of sexuality, one taboo remained throughout state-socialism: pornography, including any graphic depiction of sexual acts, which also applied to the depiction of homosexuality, or other depictions of transgressive gender performances.<sup>13</sup>

Inspired by Agata Jakubowska's paper *Circulation of feminist ideas in Communist Poland*, my aim is not to argue that queer discourses flourished in state socialist Hungary, but to hold forth that queer ideas did circulate between the Eastern and Western Bloc and among socialist countries.<sup>14</sup> Despite the social invisibility of sexual minorities and the lack of relevant public dialogue in state socialist Hungary, numerous related works were published and distributed in the scientific/scholarly and cultural fields. However, without an open discursive context to act as a continuous mediator and preserver, these examples stood and still stand as isolated cases, never entering the collective consciousness linked by their subject.<sup>15</sup> Thus, they remained collectively hidden, influencing the accessibility of the otherwise available sources. The systematic phenomenon not only resulted in the generally accepted view on queer non-representation but also affected research approaches in various fields, including art history.

The described influence is well exemplified by the interpretative historiography of Soviet-born Hungarian artist El Kazovszkij's (1948–2008)<sup>16</sup> oeuvre. His work continuously carried explicit manifestations of queer subjects from the mid-1970s. Following his public coming out as a transgender man with a homosexual orientation

12 Z. Gombár, "Literary Censorship and Homosexuality in Kádár-Regime Hungary and Estado Novo Portugal", in: *Queering Translation, Translating the Queer: Theory, Practice, Activism*, eds. B. J. Baer, K. Kaindl, New York, 2018, pp. 144–156; Z. Gombár, "Dictatorial Regimes and the Reception of English-Language Authors in Hungary and Portugal", in: *Censorship Across Borders: The Reception of English Literature in Twentieth-Century Europe*, eds. C. O'Leary, A. Lázaro, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2011, pp. 105–128.

13 Ibid.

14 A. Jakubowska, "The Circulation of Feminist Ideas in Communist Poland", in: *Globalizing Eastern European Art Histories. Past and Present*, eds. B. Hock, A. Allas, New York–London, 2018, pp. 135–148.

15 In recent years Hungary's oldest LGBTQI NGO, *Háttértársaság*, has started to build a database of cultural products available in Hungarian. Their database is built by processing their own archives, using targeted searches and information submitted by volunteers. You can find further information on their website <https://hatter.hu/>.

16 The artist's name is internationally used inconsistently. It appears both following the Hungarian and English spelling: El Kazovszkij or El Kazovsky. The artist was born under the name, transliterating to Jelena Kazovszkaja in Hungarian or Yelena Kazovskaya in English. Adapting Russian grammar and Hungarian spelling, he changed his family name to the equivalent male form: Kazovszkij, shortening his given name to El. There is no official Cyrillic form of the name "El Kazovszkij" that could be transliterated into English. Additionally, he only used the form "El Kazovszkij" consequently in his artistic practice and not in his personal life. Thus, I follow the original spelling for historical accuracy and treat the chosen name as the signifier of the Artistic Self performed in the Hungarian cultural field.

in 1991, art professionals and scholars accepted his work as a queer oeuvre. However, the interpretations established a profoundly essentialist approach, handling the queer layer of the oeuvre as it was an irrepressible outburst fuelled by the unbearable agony resulting from the artist's identity.<sup>17</sup> These papers demonstrate a particularly unusual way of interpretation in art history focusing on the Cold War period's Eastern Bloc. In biographical research, scholars typically reject psychologisation and emphasise the deliberated reflections on the acquired information in their political and socio-cultural fields. Especially when the artists dealt with hard-to-access or seemingly non-discursive themes in their work. Strikingly, in El Kazovszkij's case, the usually pertinent questions focusing on his sources were never raised. Moreover, scholars missed recognising the queer patterns in the many references the artist shared in his interviews and elsewhere.<sup>18</sup> In line with the idea that queer information would have been unavailable in state socialist Hungary, they simply overlooked the noted rich source material. This attitude can have obvious implications for the interpretation of the oeuvre. In addition to limiting the artistic reflection to a response to one's own emotions, they have excluded the mere possibility of asking whether the oeuvre could have been a knowledge-based, analytically reflective, or even critical artistic approach based on knowledge of gender and sexuality.

Within the limited resources available, the present paper primarily seeks to partially reconstruct El Kazovszkij's cultural capital regarding queer knowledge and cultural representations acquired before the democratic system change in his childhood in the Soviet Union, and from his teenage years in state socialist Hungary. The approach holds epistemologic perspectives beyond the El Kazovszkij oeuvre's interpretation: taking the example as case study, it can offer new directions in the research on the relationship between the Hungarian socialist state power, sexual minorities and queer cultural representation in its ECE context.

The research is based on analysing the artist's interviews in the printed press published before and after the democratic system change, supplemented by semi-structured interviews with the artist's acquaintances, archival material and secondary literature. The results were grouped into three main and several subcategories: clinical and psychological literature, cultural representation and personal networks. In the relevant places, I have preserved the artist's accounts of his childhood years in the Soviet Union (1948–1964) and his teenage and adult years in the Hungarian People's Republic (1964–1989/90). In some cases, I have provided extended explanations to highlight El Kazovszkij's take on the subject to demon-

17 The milestones in the thematisation of queer references were the El Kazovszkij monographs that influenced the overall mainstream narrative surrounding the artist's oeuvre. The most influential of these is undoubtedly the 2015 retrospective exhibition and its catalog. Cf. É. Forgács, *El Kazovszkij*, Budapest, 1996; *El Kazovszkij kegyetlen testszínháza*, ed. G. Uhl, Budapest, 2008; *Látáscsapda – Beszélgetések El Kazovszkijjal*, eds. K. Cserjés, G. Uhl, eds., Budapest, 2012; *A túlélő árnyéka, Az El Kazovszkij-élet/mű*, ed. A. Rényi, Budapest, 2017.

18 The volume of selected interviews with El Kazovszkij was published not long after the artist's death, and became one of the primary sources for art historians. *Látáscsapda – Beszélgetések El Kazovszkijjal*, eds. K. Cserjés, G. Uhl, Budapest, 2012.

strate that the examples result from a consistent interest in queer topics and way of thinking and not mere coincidence.

An additional methodological note is that due to the specificities of the genre, relying on interviews as primary sources may seem concerning.<sup>19</sup> In the present context, however, the aim is not to highlight subjective narrative elements but to identify precise references and specific works. The pragmatic approach allows the availability of each item to be tracked. The added narrative parts are thus interpreted along with consistent and solid material references.

## Medical literature and psychology

Due to the lack of discursive visibility of sexual minorities in the Soviet Union and its satellite state socialist countries, many coincided with non-heteronormative sexualities and gender identities through medical literature. Similarly, El Kazovszkij claimed to have read about related topics in clinical literature for the first time. He recalled, “At the age of seven, I ‘had already possessed’ the entire medical literature as there was a doctor in my milieu, my grandmother”.<sup>20</sup> Although he did not give a detailed explanation, the seemingly exaggerated statement is validated. Firstly, El Kazovszkij’s grandmother Jelena Vasilievna Putolova (1898–1975), was a paediatrician; thus, clinical literature was only an arm’s length away from the child and teenage El Kazovszkij. Secondly, the artist talked on multiple accounts about being literate from the age of four, reading classical Russian authors before entering primary school at the age of seven, mentioning Fyodor Dostoevsky, Alexander Pushkin, Michael Lermontov, Leo Tolstoy, Nikolai Gogol and Pavel Chekov by name.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, he could have read and comprehended other complex texts during the same period, such as medical literature. Nevertheless, El Kazovszkij lived with his grandparents in the USSR until he turned 16; thus, he had ample time to familiarise himself with the said literature before moving to Budapest, Hungary, in 1964.

During his Budapest high school years, between 1964–1968, El Kazovszkij continued to have a keen interest in the psych-sciences: “When I was in school, I started to disassemble myself and my surroundings to understand them, and I had fantastic companions in this during high school, for example, with Ákos Szilágyi we were ‘dissecting’ for four years while reading [Péter] Szondi, [Carl Gustav] Jung...”.<sup>22</sup> When asked about these topics, Ákos Szilágyi added the works of Sigmund Freud to the list.<sup>23</sup>

19 S. Kammann, “Das Interview als Tarnkappe, Andy Warhol und Christian Boltanski”, in: *Potenzial und Potenzierung künstlerischer Theorie*, eds. E. Ehninger, M. Nieslony, Bern, 2014.

20 El Kazovszkij, “Arra vágytam, hogy normális homoszexuális férfi legyek”, interview by Eszter Rádai, *Élet és Irodalom*, 06.06.2008., pp. 6–7.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ákos Szilágyi is a poet, journalist, editor, university professor and researcher on Russia and the Soviet Union. Á. Szilágyi, Personal communication, Budapest, 12.08.2019.



The ambivalent relationship between communist ideology and individual-focused psych-sciences needs some explanation during this period in state-socialist Hungary. From the late 1940s to the 1960s, the Hungarian state-socialist authorities had no recourse to psychological expertise. The private sphere's valorisation following the 1956 revolution favoured the revival of psych-disciplines, which in the 1960s allowed for institutional rehabilitation. University education was restructured and modernised, and the Psychology Committee became an independent department on an equal footing with other departments in the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Psychology was also professionalised and popularised by the increasing opportunities for publication. The increase in publishing interest is traceable even in individual journals. For example, the prestigious social science journal *Valóság* [Reality], between 1960 and 1965, published 133 independent texts on psychology; between 1966 and 1970, the number almost tripled as it rose to 360.<sup>24</sup>

The arbitrarily highlighted example of the *Valóság* journal is, in fact, relevant to El Kazovszkij's life. El Kazovszkij's lifelong friend Ákos Szilágyi recalled that during these years, he was purchasing the issues of *Valóság*.<sup>25</sup> Szilágyi remembered that there were texts describing sexuality and gender due to cultural and social factors in these issues. As El Kazovszkij showed great interest in these topics, Szilágyi showed him concerning articles from the journal and beyond. He highlighted the importance of the articles published by prominent psychiatrists Béla Buda (1939–2013) and Judit Sas H.. During this period, both authors frequently published on the pages of *Valóság*, among other topics often covering, psychological, social and psychosexual development of young adults.<sup>26</sup> According to Szilágyi, El Kazovszkij followed these authors' careers even later. For instance, he reported, that El Kazovszkij purchased the volume by Judit Sas H. *Nőies nők és férfias férfiak. A nőkkel és a férfiakkal kapcsolatos társadalmi sztereotípiák élete, eredete és szocializációja* [Feminine females and masculine males. The life, origin and socialisation of the social stereotypes about women and men].<sup>27</sup> Moreover, even earlier El Kazovszkij knew Buda's 1972 book titled *A szexualitás modern elmélete. A szexuális viselkedés lélektana* [Modern theory of sexuality. The psychology of sexual behaviour].<sup>28</sup> Published by the State Textbook Publisher Company, the university textbook summarises contemporary international literature on sexual development and behaviour psychology. In detail, Buda discussed the differences between sex, gender and sexual orientation. He elaborated on gender roles and gender identity, psychosexual development, homosexuality and

24 Based on the *Arcanum Digitheca*'s analytical tools, using the keyword *pszichológia*, I have found that between 1960–1965 they have published 133 individual texts mentioning psychology, while between 1966–1970, the hits reach 360. *Arcanum* is a Hungarian database including scientific and professional journals, weekly and daily newspapers, etc., enabling full-text search on their digitised material.

25 Á. Szilágyi, Personal communication, Budapest, 12.08.2019.

26 Judit Sas H., for instance, frequently published in the column titled *Iskola és család*.

27 J. H. Sas, *Nőies nők és férfias férfiak. A nőkkel és a férfiakkal kapcsolatos társadalmi sztereotípiák élete, eredete és szocializációja*, Budapest, 1984.

28 B. Buda, *A szexualitás modern elmélete. A szexuális viselkedés lélektana*, Budapest, 1972.

transgenderism and possible surgical sex change. Additionally, Ákos Szilágyi said that beyond reading their works El Kazovszkij knew Buda Béla personally.<sup>29</sup>

El Kazovszkij not only read about the psy-sciences but he also mentioned undergoing therapy in two interviews. He talked about visiting the praxis of a “very prominent psychologist”, which “laid on different grounds”, but from the brief description, it is clear that El Kazovszkij discussed his identity and sexual orientation with a professional in the frames of therapy.<sup>30</sup> The short report suggests that the professional environment felt informative and safe for the artist. Additionally, whether this particular therapist was Béla Buda himself to date remains unclear.

In sum, it is confirmed that by his young adulthood, El Kazovszkij gained comprehensive knowledge of the clinical, psychoanalytical, psychological and sociological approaches to sexuality and gender roles, non-heteronormative sexualities, gender-dysphoria and transgenderism. Furthermore, he was aware of the social construction of gender and the diversity of sexual orientations and the natural individual differences within them.

## Culture

El Kazovszkij’s legendary intellect and cultural appetite provides a large part of the personal myth. In his published interviews, he gave numerous examples of determinative cultural experiences. Strikingly, almost all references have particular queer purport due to the artist’s specific interest, mostly homosexual subjects, which the artist often directly reflected upon. One subcategory of these examples includes works depicting explicit homosexual content, while the others focus on the manifestation of the homosexual authors’ subjectivity. In the latter case, El Kazovszkij repeatedly mentions the relationship of the authors to their subjects, be it the person who is the subject or object of literary works or the lead actor of a movie. In other cases, he made vague allusions to the authors’ general worldview’s affinity with his own. In these cases, the artist implicitly alluded to homosexuality as a connecting complex “way of existence”.<sup>31</sup>

Although El Kazovszkij had a vast range of interests and preferences in music, theatre and visual arts, for the present framework’s sake, I will focus on the two main areas where the most examples can be found: literature and film.

## Literature

Beyond the occasions El Kazovszkij has spoken about his defining literary experiences, the source material is greatly enriched by a list of literature left by the artist.

29 A. Szilágyi, Personal communication, Budapest, 12.08.2019.

30 El Kazovszkij, “Arra vágytam, hogy normális homoszexuális férfi legyek”..., op. cit.

31 El Kazovszkij, “Barokk mozi. Jarman és Caravaggio”, interview by László Baán and Gábor Lajta, *Élet és Irodalom*, 06.06.2008.



The artist has written two bibliographies on the back of the object, *The Grim Reaper Angel* (dated 1985). The first is in Russian, listing the works read before the age of 13, and the second is mainly in Hungarian, for works read later.<sup>32</sup>

Apart from William Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, the queer references of El Kazovszkij's literary entries can be divided into three categories based on simple chronology: Ancient Greek culture; modernist and symbolist literature from the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century; and examples of contemporary literature from the post-World War II period.

Ancient Greek culture was undoubtedly a significant influence on the young El Kazovszkij. He claimed that one of his childhood's most important cultural experiences was the frequent visits to the Hermitage's collection of ancient Greek art when he accompanied his mother, art historian Irina Putolova (1925–2020).<sup>33</sup> Beyond the sensual reception of sculptures and vase paintings, his interest extended beyond art to Greek mythology and philosophy. As a generic reference, *Greek Mythology* is listed as a separate entry in the first list, and he specifically names Homer's *Iliad*. Additionally, among the early readings, he mentions Nikolai Kun's *Greek Myths and Legends* while on the second list, he adds Károly Kerényi's *The Mythology of the Greeks*.<sup>34</sup> His interest also included Ancient Greek philosophy: his early readings include Plato's *Dialogues* and Diogenes Laertius' *The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*. Each mentioned item contains treatises that depict relationships between men in many forms, whether stories from ancient Greek mythology, the attraction between interlocutors, parables or lengthy philosophical discussions of love.

Moving onto modernist literature, El Kazovszkij mentioned Paul Verlaine and Arthur Rimbaud on both lists. In a 1987 interview, he recalled the reading experience as follows: "I was shocked when I discovered the relationship between Rimbaud and Verlaine. I was spellbound. And I knew that what was inside me could not be dealt with."<sup>35</sup> In another interview, almost two decades later, he said, "My first experience of real love was when I was thirteen or fourteen years old, reading poems by Rimbaud and Verlaine, and realising that those were the imprints of love. [...] I don't know how I learned about their love affair, but it radiated from every poem."<sup>36</sup>

While in his interviews, El Kazovszkij did not elaborate on further works from the modernist period, on the lists, there are further entries to be found, including relevant homoromantic or homosexual plotlines. The works of Thomas Mann are mentioned at several points: *Tonio Kröger* is on the early reading list, while *Death in Venice* is on both. On the second list, El Kazovszkij added Thomas Mann's *Journals*.<sup>37</sup>

32 The list was published in A. Rényi, ed., *A túlélő árnyéka. Az El Kazovszkij-élet/mű*, ed. A. Rényi, Budapest, p. 18. The list was dated 1985, which is surely impossible, since the work published in 1988 is also included, thus the final form cannot be earlier.

33 El Kazovszkij, "Arra vágytam, hogy normális homoszexuális férfi legyek"..., op. cit.

34 N. Kun, *Легенды и мифы Древней Греции*, Moscow, 1914; K. Kerényi, *Görög mitológia*, Budapest, 1977.

35 El Kazovszkij, "Elveszett nyelv", interview by Attila Kristóf, *Magyar Nemzet*, 07.02.1987, p. 4.

36 El Kazovszkij, "Arra vágytam, hogy normális homoszexuális férfi legyek"..., op. cit.

37 T. Mann, *Naplók I. (1918–1921, 1933–1939)*, transl. G. Soltész, P. Schweitzer, Budapest, 1988.

He also mentioned Jean Cocteau's *Les Enfants Terribles* and *Le Vivre Blanc*.<sup>38</sup> Following the two specific works, the artist uses 'etc.', which can refer to many of Cocteau's poems and novels. They have seen several editions in Hungarian, in single and multiple-authored collections and literary journals. Another relevant example is Robert Musil's *The Confusions of Young Törless*.<sup>39</sup> A further entry on the list is Chapter XIII from Roger Martin du Gard's *Lieutenant-Colonel de Maumort*, published as a separate section on the pages of the literary journal *Nagyvilág*.<sup>40</sup>

Regarding post-WWII literature, El Kazovszkij described a realisation – similar to the case of Rimbaud and Verlaine – regarding Hungarian poet János Pilinszky (1921–1981). "I had this experience with Pilinszky's early poems. It was evident that it was about homosexual love; I don't know how maybe from the parallel [with El Kazovszkij's own life experience]."<sup>41</sup> On another account, he said: "The early Pilinszky poems had aspects of a life that resembled my own... I only got to know him four years before his death, and it turned out then that those poems were written in the conditions, in the life, in the necessities of life that I was living in."<sup>42</sup> On the lists, El Kazovszkij names four of Pilinszky's early volumes.<sup>43</sup>

Another example from the second list that El Kazovszkij elaborated on was Polish author Jerzy Andrzejewski's (1909–1983) novel, *The Gates of Paradise*. The artist encountered the novel describing a love triangle between two boys and a man in the mid-1970s.<sup>44</sup> He stated: "What I wanted, to be a *normal* homosexual man, could not be achieved with this body. [...] I became aware of this renunciation at a very early age, and it was also then, after a literary experience, after reading Jerzy Andrzejewski's *The Gates of Paradise* [...] At first, I was blown away by the experience because in that book, in some of the motifs, I saw my fantasy described in black and white, which was a joy to encounter as if it had happened to me."<sup>45</sup>

El Kazovszkij included a further fitting work by Jerzy Andrzejewski, the *Odyssey* paraphrasis *Nobody*.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, on the lists, there are other relevant entries,

38 Cocteau's *Les Enfants terribles* has been published in more than ten editions under three different titles since its first Hungarian edition in 1942. Cf. J. Cocteau, *Vásott kölykök*, transl. A. Gyergyai, Budapest, 1942. El Kazovszkij references to the 1966 edition. *Le Vivre Blanc* is not translated into Hungarian. Cf. J. Cocteau, *La Livre blanc*, Paris, 1927.

39 R. Musil, *Törless iskolaévei. Három elbeszélés*, transl. A. Bor, G. Szabó, Budapest, 1965.

40 Chapter 13 from *Lieutenant – Colonel de Maumort* was published separately as *Baleset* in literary journal *Nagyvilág* in 1983.

41 El Kazovszkij, "Az alkotás a 'lét bőre' volt, most viszont az emberre tapad", interview by Péter Adorján, *Allegro kulturális diáklap*, October 1993.

42 El Kazovszkij, "Kutya és kötél. El Kazovszkijjal beszélget Bartis Attila és Dékei Kriszta a sivatagi homokozó bejáratánál", *A Céh*, 1990/4, pp. 43–47.

43 J. Pilinszky, *Trapéz és korlát. Versek*, Budapest, 1946; *Hamadnapon. Versek*, Budapest, 1959; *Nagyvárosi ikonok. Összegyűjtött versek 1940–1970*, Budapest, 1970; *Szállkák*, Budapest, 1972.

44 J. Andrzejewski, "A Paradicsom Kapui", *Nagyvilág*, 1966, 10, pp. 1491–1537; J. Andrzejewski, *Jó hegyeken szökelve*, transl. B. Murányi, J. Elbert, E. Sebők, Budapest, 1971.

45 El Kazovszkij, "Arra vágytam, hogy normális homoszexuális férfi legyek" ..., op. cit.

46 J. Andrzejewski, *Senkise*, transl. R. Gimes, Budapest, 1987.

including *Other Voices, Other Rooms* by Truman Capote,<sup>47</sup> the screenplay of *Rocco and his Brothers* by Luchino Visconti,<sup>48</sup> *Amado Mio* and *Ragazzi di vita* by Pier Paolo Pasolini<sup>49</sup> and *A Book of Memories* by Péter Nádas.<sup>50</sup> The last entry to be mentioned is the oeuvre of Jean Genet, whom El Kazovszkij claimed to be his favourite 20th-century author of all time.<sup>51</sup>

A unique non-fiction addition to this section is Susan Sontag's *Notes on Camp*, known as one of the milestones of theorising queer visual culture.<sup>52</sup> The artist's friend Ákos Szilágyi confirmed that among other Sontag essays, he and El Kazovszkij were reading and discussing *Notes on Camp* in the early 1970s.<sup>53</sup>

## Cinema

El Kazovszkij was a self-claimed cinema fanatic: he watched some of his favourite movies 30 and more times. In 1992 he gave a thematic interview to Gábor Lajta titled *The Film Again and Again – El Kazovszkij Talks about Cinema*. After hitting it off with naming the film adaptation of Jean Genet's *Querelle* (1982) by Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Derek Jarman's *Caravaggio* (1986) as his all-time favourite movies, the interview, among other movies, addresses and thematise queer relevance of the mentioned pieces.

On the one hand, Kazovszkij and Lajta discussed movies' explicit representing homosexual desire mentioning Luchino Visconti's *German Trilogy*, emphasizing *Death in Venice* (1971) and *Ludwig* (1973).<sup>54</sup> He also mentioned Visconti's *Rocco and His Brothers* (1961), Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Mamma Roma* (1962), *Theorem* (1968), Stephen Frear's *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), Derek Jarman's *Caravaggio*, Reiner Werner Fassbinder's *Querelle*, *In a Year of 13 Moons* (1978), *The Gods of the Plague* (1970), Ingmar Bergman: *The Silence* (1963).

Beyond the plots, El Kazovszkij explained his interest in homosexual subtexts or the manifestation of the homosexual gaze, referring to the interpersonal relationships between the directors and their subjects, characters and actors. On one

47 T. Capote, *Más hangok, más szobák*, Budapest, 1964.

48 This reference cannot be clearly traced. The original novel *Il ponte della Ghisolfa* (Milano, 1958) by Giovanni Testori was published in French as *Le pont de la Ghisolfa* (Paris, 1961). Since El Kazovszkij's family was strongly Francophile, it is possible that the volume was in the family's possession, or he could have accessed it through the library of the Institut Français in St. Petersburg.

49 P. P. Pasolini, *Ragazzi di Vita*, Milano, 1955; P. P. Pasolini, *Amado Mio*, Milano, 1982.

50 P. Nádas, *Emlékiratok könyve*, Budapest, 1986.

51 El Kazovszkij, "Csábopera. Kultuszmozi: Fassbinder Querelleje", interview by Erzsébet Bori, *Filmvilág*, 2002/11.

52 S. Sontag, "A camp-ről", in: eadem, *A pusztulás képei*, transl. Á. Göncz, Budapest, 1971.

53 Á. Szilágyi, Personal communication, Budapest, 12.08.2019.

54 Luchino Visconti's *Death in Venice* (1971) had its Hungarian premier in 1972 and his *Ludwig* (1973) in 1975.

account, he explained, "... men prefer different boys than girls. And because the film consists of a "human spectacle," they [homosexual directors] use different actors. And this 'screams' from the screen."<sup>55</sup> He claimed that he sensed the energy of Luchino Visconti's adoration of Alain Delon in *Rocco and his Brothers* or Helmut Berger in *Ludwig*, and Rainer Werner Fassbinder's relation to El Hedi ben Salem in *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (1974). On queer subjectivity in movies, El Kazovszkij further elaborated in two specific interviews. In one, he talked about Jarman's *Caravaggio*, stating that he identified with Jarman, who identified with Caravaggio. When the interviewer questioned Jarman's emphasis on Caravaggio's homosexuality, El Kazovszkij defended the director the following way "Even if you cannot tell from the biography, you can tell from the pictures. The pictures have a life of their own. Therefore, it does not matter what the so-called real life was" then he follows it up, "He depicts boys' bodies as the homosexual eye sees them. All homosexuals can identify with his eyes."<sup>56</sup>

Returning to the 1991 interview, El Kazovszkij touched upon another social factor of homosexual subjectivity:

Gábor Lajta: You once mentioned that homosexuals have a layered, rasterised vision. Do homosexuals really see things differently?

El Kazovszkij: It could be due to the complexity of the way of existence. The heightened sensitivity, the narrowed adolescence. The predicament. Compensating, being more perceptive. It is a minority situation. So, there is a particular sensitivity, and there is a particular aesthetics.<sup>57</sup>

This analysis resonates well with how El Kazovszkij stressed the feeling of communion with such homosexual directors, such as Marcel Carné, Pierre Pasolini, Derek Jarman, John Waters, Stephen Frears and Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Although the examples listed above are only a part of El Kazovszkij's queer cultural capital, they demonstrate that the artist was aware of many cultural representations. Moreover, he had an explicitly analytical stance on the different layers of homosexuality manifested in cultural representations, which was projected onto the authorial subjectivity behind the fictional storytelling, as he juxtaposed the existential situation of the authors with his own life.

## Personal networks

At the same time, El Kazovszkij was not only trained in theory and cultural references. In the 1970s, from his mid-20s onwards, he became involved in the inner-Budapest queer semi-public sub-communal milieus. Despite the lack of social

<sup>55</sup> El Kazovszkij, "Barokk mozi. Jarman és Caravaggio", interview by László Baán and Gábor Lajta, *Élet és Irodalom*, 06.06.2008.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

and political discourse and thus the lack of social visibility of queer groups, there were still specific subcultural and sub-communal spaces in Budapest and the rural cities during the socialist era. In addition to the house party gatherings relegated to the private sphere, there were a few public venues that homosexual audiences mainly visited. The most known among these establishments in the 1970s Budapest were the Anna Presszó and the University Presszó.<sup>58</sup>

Although the literature often depicted El Kazovszkij as a loner, he had an extended professional and private network, the latter consisting of a determinative group of homosexual men. El Kazovszkij highlighted the value of the companionship of gay men on multiple accounts.

"For the first time in my life, very, very late, at the end of College, I made an acquaintance, who was involved, [i.e. was homosexual] quite by accident. [...] I started going with him to the University Presszó on Kossuth Lajos Street, which was an incredibly good place. No club has ever suited me since. [...] to stand at the bar and talk to him about the boys... for the first time in my life, I finally experienced it. I was at least twenty-five at the time: it was adolescence for me. [...] He was obnoxious: I actually hated the guy, but it was so nice to stand there with him and experience what I did not experience as a teenager."<sup>59</sup>

According to Ákos Szilágyi, the man in question was Elek 'Lexi' Lisziák (1939–2007), a filmmaker, whom El Kazovszkij had met in the atelier of György Kovásznai around 1973–1974. According to Szilágyi, although this acquaintance had no discursive role in El Kazovszkij's life, it allowed him to immerse himself in the queer subcommunities of Budapest.<sup>60</sup>

In an earlier interview with El Kazovszkij from 1991, he mentioned his broader integrity among homosexual men, primarily based on their use of language:

El Kazovszkij: Then, in my adulthood, I found a group of people whose language I understood, among homosexual men who liked young boys. Until then, I thought I could not talk to anyone about it, even though you want terribly to chat about boys or girls in some group in adolescence, but it never happened. When I started talking to homosexual friends in my twenties, it was my language perfectly. Except that they were at home in a life that corresponded to that language, and I was a complete outcast from sexual practice.

Melinda Kalmár: But it was still the closest.

E.K.: The language was, and otherwise, it was an enjoyable, friendly environment. [...]

M.K.: What was important to you in that language?

E.K.: That one could talk about boys as [men usually talk about] girls, and they were not symbolic. They were real boys, and we really talked about them as about girls. [...]

58 L. Tóth, *A homoszexualitásról*, Budapest, 1994.

59 El Kazovszkij, "...akkor már a máglyán is el lehet égni...", interview by Tamás Halász and Zoltán Fehér (1995), *Parallel*, 2017, no. 35, pp. 42–49.

60 Á. Szilágyi, Personal communication, Budapest, 12.08.2019.

M.K.: What is the difference between how girls talk about boys and how men talk about boys? What is most important for men?

E.K.: Beauty. For men, beauty and sexuality are linked at a primary level. First among the values is how handsome boys are, how young they are, what their skin looks like, their legs, how they smile."<sup>61</sup>

The exact delineation of linguistic performativity can be paralleled with El Kazovszkij's understanding of the socio-cultural determination of the homosexual gaze or the subtextual manifestations of the creators' sexual interests.

Furthermore, these friendships and acquaintances made in queer circles during the state-socialist era provided a socio-cultural integrative habitat and inevitably created a flow of additional information and a kind of closed discursive space related to the same interests that held the community together beyond the societal abjection.

## Conclusion

This fragmentary reconstruction shows that El Kazovszkij had a grounded scholarly and cultural knowledge regarding gender and sexual minorities. Furthermore, this preparedness enabled him to interpret the related cultural products beyond their subject and plot. He turned analytically to the idiosyncratic expressions of homosexual authors' subjective aesthetical and moral stands. Not only did he juxtapose stories with his own but also the biographies of the creators and pursued a certain communion with them. At the biographical level, the present research findings allow us to consolidate new foundations for interpreting El Kazovszkij's oeuvre. New opportunities opened that allow us to treat the queer subjects manifested in El Kazovszkij's art as analytical reflections instead of or alongside the previously dominant psycho-biographical approaches.

In the light of the examples explored, the presumptions mentioned at the beginning of the paper that determine the image of queer history in the Cold War ECE region have been partially refuted. All of the above-mentioned references were legally and officially accessible since all the material from the fields of psy-sciences, literature and film were published by institutions under the influence and surveillance of the Hungarian communist state. The few examples mentioned by the artist under their original titles, such as the literary works of Cocteau or Pasolini, were indeed not translated into Hungarian but were most likely available in the collections of the French and Italian cultural institutes.<sup>62</sup>

El Kazovszkij's uniquely transparent example demonstrates that it was possible to acquire complex knowledge about non-cis and hetero-normative gender and

61 M. Kalmár, "Múlt századi férfi tudattal nőttem fel", *Nappali Ház*, 1991, pp. 1–2.

62 The Instituto Italiano di Cultura Budapest opened in 1943 and the Institut Français in 1947. Like other cultural institutes representing Western national culture under State Socialism, they served as important information centres for artists and cultural workers. The libraries housed books and journals and magazines that were unobtainable elsewhere.



sexuality in the cultural field of – at least certain regions in – the Eastern Bloc. However, the case study highlights that although the resources were available, access may differ from case to case. El Kazovszkij's example illustrates that, besides coincidental encounters, the geo-temporal modalities and the acquired cultural and network capital influenced by the individual hereditary habitus are also determinants of access.

Furthermore, the queer cultural capital accumulated in the individual gives a partial insight into the hybridity of knowledge circulating about alternative sexual and gender performativity in the ECE region. While the official communist ideology focused on the heteronormative, productive and reproductive bodies, it allowed various forms of classical and modern cultural representations of same-sex attraction and romantic relationships. Additionally, from the 1960s onwards, some of these works were certainly the products of, or under the influence of the Western queer emancipation movements and early, emerging neoliberal identity politics.

Research should be further pursued in several directions. Firstly, El Kazovszkij's queer cultural capital can be further explored if the archive becomes accessible again once the probate proceedings currently encumbering the El Kazovszkij Foundation are completed. On the other hand, the results encourage further research into official and underground examples of the circulation of queer cultural products in state socialist Hungary. Getting a more detailed picture of the volume and nature of queer-related cultural publishing, editorial choices and trends, can provide insights not only into the assertion of power itself, but also into reflections on social attitudes and the possibilities and reception of domestic cultural production.

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