

**THE CULINARY CLUJ-NAPOCA OF ANDRÁS CSERNA SZABÓ. THE
GASTRONOMIC ELEMENTS OF THE TRANSYLVANIA-REPRESENTATION**

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*Abstract: In his first novel, **Szíved helyén épül már a halálcsillag (The Death Star Builds in the Place of Your Heart)**, András Cserna Szabó, known for his short stories and gastro-writings, guides his readers through the contemporary Cluj-Napoca, where the protagonist sets off to find the cathartic love. The supposed happiness arrives unexpected, like a wildfire into his leisurely, bleak life. We travel through a Cluj-Napoca mystified by the particular gastronomic specialties of the region, by popular local catering units, by street names and historic built environment from the beginning of the last century, by the acknowledged names of Romanian poets and prose writers. Our protagonist experiences unforgettable, happy, and painful days with the mysterious girl from Cluj-Napoca, in Transylvania's „treasure city”. The reader is served everything, from the Bulgakov Café to the Krajczár Pub, from „mici” to Ursus beer. In my presentation, I will attempt to outline the shaping of the Transylvanian space, focusing on the Transylvania-representation refined by gastronomic characteristics.*

The research topic of my ongoing PhD-research aims to find the answer to the question: what kind of space-representations have the Transylvania-related literary works of the last few years, increasingly present on the European book-market created, and how are they capable of shaping the image of the region? The author of this paper intends to choose the literary works for analysis according to an own methodical model, and also intends to gather data about the chosen authors and poetical components through which the representations can be optimized during the demonstration.

Keywords: literature, representation, region, Transylvania, multicultural

The author's writings are less known in Transylvania, even though the region appears in most of his short stories, due to his Transylvanian origins. In his first novel, *Szíved helyén épül már a halálcsillag (The Death Star Builds in the Place of Your Heart)*, published in 2013, he guides his readers through the contemporary Cluj-Napoca.

The book, based on experiences of the pop culture, fuses many different genres and styles with the characteristic expressions of the mass culture. Modern genre-specific features allude to the *picaresque novel*, in which the main character is a peripheral figure of society, an adventurer, who attempts to succeed with the help of their skills and acumen. Picaresque, in

the modern prose is a form of narrative, the main formal characteristic being the free sequence, and interchangeability of the different episodes. In the film industry, Quentin Tarantino is known to be fond of the elements of the picaresque genre in his movies. This is why critics have pointed out the Tarantino-effect in Cserna-Szabó's novel: because the hero is a kind of adventurer in his own chaotic world. Furthermore, reality and vision, absurd, transcendental, all mingle in the novel, and the language is accommodated to the situation: it becomes either like a script, or lyrical, or coarse.

Its postmodern characteristic is the metafiction, or the *metanovel*, their specific theme; the problematization of the role of the author, the self-referencing narration is included in his work by Cserna-Szabó. Bundás Emlék, the "contemporary novelist" reflects about himself: "I have had material difficulties regularly. I've never understood why I've constantly been broke, since I've always had work and advance payment. (...) Formerly, I've had written a few short stories every now and then, but nothing for years. I've been art-free for two years. So, I've been living trouble-free. Hamvas was right: the one that quits writing can enjoy other people's written words without a sense of envy. (...) I haven't had any problems in life, except for my life being as empty and dark as a gym of an elementary school of a dead town at night." (...) "I enjoyed loneliness. I've been over several disappointments, and I couldn't have agreed any more with Schopenhauer: only those who are content with themselves are happy. I liked cooking alone, and ponder over a glass of Bodrikutya over the uselessness of life (...)."

The main character, Bundás Emlék is writing a western novel at the request of his publisher. The western "story" becomes the parallel of the main storyline, thus becoming "novel within a novel", in which the reader meets both Bundás Emlék, and his western novel's fictional story, the story of the Band of the Dirty Eleven, while the characters of the latter start gradually showing up in the space of the metanovel.

The adaptation of numerous novels', films', theoretical writings' elements confirms the pop culture's influence. Bundás Emlék's life is actually a perfect cultural hybrid: he reads the works of Lawrence Block and John Le Carré with Beethoven's music as soundtrack, and while the tranquil construction of the Mókus-love starts building up around the hero, the walls start quaking from metal music.

Pop-art welcomes the reader from the cover of the book that evokes the *Albatrosz*-book series with its ready-worn pulp fiction-design. We see the Star Wars series' stylized Death Star, the western-style typography, and the typical femme fatale from the 70s' pulp fiction next to each other.

The novel's different storylines are connected by the central motif of a fatal love, the one that "kills, makes you stupid and penniless". The love for a Romanian tattoo artist, Léna, sentences the hero to suffering, and it chases him from one emotional cul-de-sac to another. According to the critics, Cserna-Szabó created an anti-hero that locks himself away from the world, either into a bathtub, along with a rubber ducky, either to Pécs or Cluj-Napoca, into the arms of women; the Hungarian Lebowsky, whose comfortable, disorganized world-order is shaken up by love.

The mingling cultural levels are kept together not only by love, but also by gastronomy, which is usually included in Cserna-Szabó's writings. The talk about gastronomy has become general nowadays, and it can be found on almost any communication platform, but "it often speaks about something completely different than at first sight: about life, death, tradition, and self-expression, about the choice of life-styles. This is why the culture of food and drink, the linguistic-semantic aspects of it regularly elicit the interest of litterateurs, communication researchers."¹ Here, on the other hand, gastronomy is present as crime story and film; the different levels of Hungarian and foreign, contemporary and historic gastronomy are not separated, but applied to different moods, or on the contrary, they build up on the life and spiritual crisis of the hero, thus spoiling the mood.

Bundás Emlék's favourite pastime is cooking, roaming through the exciting universe of cook books and the art of food preparation. He often looks up cook books from the last century to escape the barren reality of his life. "I snuggled back under the duvet and studied an 1881 cook book by Teréz Szekula, with special consideration of the Szegedian chowder, made of sterlet, carp, catfish and holster. Terézke, the phenomenal niece of captain Szekula appeared in front of my inner eyes, carefully opening up the fish, not to pop the gall-bladder. The one throwing the bloody fish into the cauldron, feeding spoonfuls of pepper, wriggling carefully the cooking dish."

Contemporary researches draw conclusions about the familial and regional cooking and eating trends from the internal structure of recipe collections. These researches point out the bequeathing of gastronomic knowledge and experience, and also, the important role of writing in organizing and communicating the knowledge about gastronomy.² This is why, in researching nutrition, cook books have become a major source in the last several years. The

¹ <http://www.szepirodalmifigyelo.hu/pdf/2012/12-1-010-gintli.pdf>

² Keszeg Vilmos: *Gasztronómia és emlékezet*. Erdélyi Múzeum LXXIII. (2011) 1. 177–188.

recipe collection lives its very own life in this novel; Emlék reads it not only in order to prepare food, as homemakers do, but also, with a literary demand, under the auspices of some kind of complex somaesthetics.

Léna's "Ararat lamb was heavenly, her meatball pumpkin soup and trout stuffed with ginger, rice, and raisins, also. The origin of her cooking could not be located exactly; she cooked Armenian foods with the same excellence as the Romanian tripe soup, the Greek dolmades or the Jaffa chicken."

The very first *Cluj-Napoca-experience* visits our hero in the form of an envelope from Léna, even though it has always been present under the form of Léna in the myth of the unreadable woman. "Mircea Eliade was smoking his pipe on the stamp, wearing a jacket, a white turtleneck sweater, and thick-rimmed glasses. In the bottom right corner, a <<CLUJ NAPOCA>> seal." Emlék responds to the call of love; he rushes into the former capital city of Transylvania on the train that is all too well known to anyone, who frequently travels the distance between Cluj-Napoca and Budapest: the Harghita IC (Inter City). His first encounter with the average local Romanian culture is through a conductor that salutes him on the platform of the train station in Cluj-Napoca: „Bună ziua, welcome to the jungle.”

Transylvanian Hungarian ethnics regularly use the „old Hungarian” street names from the last century. The streets of Cluj-Napoca have two names, an official and a non-official one, as the author points out: „She came for me on a tandem bike. I sat behind her, and we flashed through the old city, along the Horea Road. –This road used to be called Horthy Miklós Street, but it need not be mentioned a lot (...).” Péter György, in his stream of essays entitled *Állatkert Kolozsváron – Képzelt Erdély (Zoo in Cluj-Napoca. Imaginary Transylvania)* mentions that „Trianon meant the loss of an indistinguishably natural and cultural space that – though in a falsely self-deceiving way – was believed and presented as being our own; a ruthless and unprecedented change of scale in the national history, which could not be without any consequences.”³

The eloquent pieces of the built environment reflect the duality of the „bequeathed heritage” of the regime changes, such as the Romanian National Theatre, „built by two architects from Vienna, the same blokes that had built the Vígszínház. It was completed after the turn of the century. Of course, back then, it was called the Hungarian National Theatre.” Péter György writes that „past and recent past, the time experienced as being the direct present

³ György Péter: *Állatkert Kolozsváron – Képzelt Erdély*, Magvető Kiadó, Budapest, 2013., 133 old

are greatly context-sensitive, they somehow depend on the series of experiences we went through in the cultural space. (...) time and space do not objectively frame the historical events, they form a correlation system of constructions that create and facilitate meaning, a system that is culturally determined, that changes constantly and accordingly to the given political context.”⁴ Bundás Emlék does not care about any of this. The fact that they talk to him about this, that he maybe should know about this is not an obstacle, not a challenge to him. Léna, on this other hand, is a tough nut to crack; because of her, he becomes the pantless victim of Hellerr’s desperate search of a tattoo in the Bulgakov. Ethnical conflicts, symbolic occupation of space are infinitesimal compared to this.

Romanian high culture, in the novel is embodied through the statues of renowned poets: Mihai Eminescu and Lucian Blaga. „I’ve already known the poems of the former. I’ve first encountered the latter on a plastic, 200-lei banknote, on the train.” After this, he guides the reader to the riverside of the Someș River, regarded as one of the most beautiful sights of Cluj-Napoca. But this time, only as pub goers. We expect the description of the Promenade, the view from the Belvedere in vain; all we get is an inventory of pubs, and the surprise of the narrator over the character of real estate. This is all an intellectual from the Y-generation, from Budapest sees of Cluj-Napoca. „We drank two pints of Ursus beer in the Republic, we passed by the Hungarian Theatre, through the promenade, we passed across the Someș river on the Garibaldi Bridge. Léna was living in a villa with a garden, on the Eremia Grigorescu Street, in a round tower-room. The villa seemed to be cut out from a hundred-year old picture book; princesses are usually rescued from towers like this by Prince Charmings, on a rope. I’ve later found out that the aboriginals call this villa <<The Palace of Tears>>. A pawnshop owner had built it. – This street used to be called Rákóczi. And that, there is our tower. We will be living there. Scriitor în turn – she said.”

We travel through Cluj-Napoca’s most popular „Romanian and Hungarian places”, that must be seen by every tourist; a true culinary trip. „We had tripe soup in the Fair Play, pastas in the Wok’n Roll, veal T-bone steak in the Baracca, sous-*vide* Mangalica centre-loin in the Via. Saturday morning, we had Mititei on the jumble sale. Sunday afternoon, we got drunk in the students’ pub zone, the Nausea Alley, in the evening, we went to a CFR game. We were making ecstatic love in the tower for days. We drank beer in the Ursus factory. We strolled on the Promenade. We watched the Someș running by from the Belvedere. We wandered through

⁴ György Péter: *Állatkert Kolozsváron – Képzelt Erdély*, Magvető Kiadó, Budapest, 2013., 91 old.

the Hajongard Cemetery, we kissed among the tombs and crypts. We bar-hopped all night, flitting from one place to another: Bulgakov, Insomnia, Euphoria, Atmosphaera, Republic, Krajczár...” A catalogue of clichés and stereotypes.

The „heritage” of the Communist regime appears in the form of the Hotel Transilvania; the hero orders a cup of tripe soup, three Mititei’s with Mujdei sauce from the “fake Szekler” waiter, it comes served on a “flower patterned china plate from the peacetime”. In these symbolic scenes we encounter that kind of Transylvania that is stigmatized by Communism, the one that has consciously become a kind of brand: a pure Szekler paradise, reserved for oafish tourist from Hungary.

The “fake Szekler” uses that Szekler accent, which is very attractive to tourists to list the following meals: “-Tötött árdé, sárgalegény, pityókatokány, bócu, lófiggombás laska, kirlánflékeny, hecsempeccses pankó, kokjzás lapótya, agycsorba.” (stuffed peppers, hominy, potato stew, another kind of hominy, pasta with puffball mushrooms, steak, donuts with rosehip jam, pastries with blueberries, Ciorba made of brain). The Szeklerland, less known by the majority of the tourist from Hungary appears as an imaginary land, and it becomes exotic, regardless of its actual geographic coordinates.

The lovers plan their common future to be set in Budapest, where they would open a unique Romanian restaurant.

The most important nodes of the city are also mentioned in the book: “the OTP ATM of the main square”, the Café Bulgakov, the Calvinist Church on the Kogălniceanu Street, the Castle Street, the Carolina square, or the Hajongard Cemetery. Bundás Emlék has spiritual encounters with the well-known figures of Transylvanian Hungarian culture from Cluj-Napoca: „Afternoons, I go to Dsida’s house to play chess, we talk about God, we discuss the lyrical short story with Andor Bajor until morning light, we light up a cigarette with Count Bánffy in the sunset, and we ponder the future of Transylvania.”

Based on Péter György’s work it is justified to state that the Hungarian public’s threshold of response can be reached by the presence of the well-known, authentic Transylvanian personalities and scenes, which are emphasized and placed into the narrative. Through this process, Cluj-Napoca is transformed into a „cultic space”, in an „unhistorical” time in Cserna-Szabó’s novel. This appears to be a Cluj-Napoca image placed together by a tourist that spent a week in the city in 2011-2012.

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