

RURALISING MASCULINITIES AND MASCULINISING THE RURAL IN MÁRK KOSTYÁL'S *COYOTE* AND BOGDAN MIRICĂ'S *DOGS*¹

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Introduction

Márk Kostlyál's *Coyote* (*Kojot*, 2017) and Bogdan Mirică's *Dogs* (*Câini*, 2017), a Hungarian and a Romanian film share a uniquely similar plot. Both feature young men from urban areas who inherit their deceased grandfather's estate, come into conflict with the local patriarchal order, participate in masculine bonding rituals, strain their relationship with their female partners and are drawn into acts of violence. Each film's protagonists are compared to canines, the coyote and the dog respectively, that have long served as cultural symbols of fierceness, loyalty and masculinity. The films narrate a symbolic departure from modernity and consumer society towards the ancestral land, one littered with conflicts that calls into mind the typical locations of neo-western cinema.

Despite their narrative similarities the two films have distinct cinematic styles. *Coyote* bears the mark of fast-paced action cinema with dynamic camera movement and quick cuts in many scenes, while *Dogs*, produced in the wide screen format, prefers long takes and a static camera to capture the stagnation of characters who gradually kill each other off on the barren plains stretching infinitely under the scorching sun. Rural Hungary and Romania, portrayed as wild and lawless eastern frontiers, offer themselves to be read as richly layered contact zones. They are presented as spatial contact zones between urban Europe and "its rural other," cultural zones of negotiation where identities are re-masculinised and de-masculinised, and temporal contact zones between past and present. In addition, the films offer themselves to be read as contact zones between different genres and styles of filmmaking. First, I will examine these layers in a reverse order, addressing first the choices filmmakers make to promote audience identification with protagonists, their situation and the diegetic universe as a whole. Second, I describe the conflicts that characters face, which are expressions of the historical antagonism of rural and urban realities: the backward looking attitude of the former and the future-orientedness of the latter. While both protagonists arrive to the countryside to claim their material heritage (land and house), they are deeply entangled in the local social dynamic shaped by historical factors. In the case of *Coyote* this is the dependence of village life on paternalism which I explore with reference to Imre Kovách' research on de-peasantisation/re-peasantisation (Kovách 2012) in the post-socialist era. In *Dogs*, it is the historical resistance of Dobrogean² identity to be colonised as theorised by Constantin Iordachi and (2002) Doru Pop (2010, 2017) and the resulting fracturedness of national space. Thirdly, I turn towards the relationship of the rural and the masculine and ground my investigations on Hugh Campbell's and Michael Mayerfeld Bell's broad categories of "the masculine in the rural" (masculine rural) and "the rural in the masculine" (rural masculine) (2000). I propose that Kostyál portrays the protagonist's as well as his adversary's rediscovery of archaic male dispositions and re-masculinisation in rather stereotypical terms as the masculine rural while Mirică concentrates on de-masculinisation which I identify as a portrayal of the rural masculine. I also propose that Dobrogean masculinity allegorises hegemonic generational relations characteristic of Eastern Europe.

Styles, Models, Audience Appeal

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² Dobrogea lies in the southeast part of Romania along the Black Sea.

Doru Pop claims that Romanian director Bogdan Mirică breaks with the realist pact as *Dogs* “is no longer a ‘documented’ reality, as it was with the movies of the New Wave stylistics” (2017, 260).³ He adds that the director “builds his narrative with a clear negative spatial differentiation from stories set in urban environments, busy cityscapes and apartment flats, the typical settings of the ‘New Wave’ films” (2017, 259) and employs a technique of localisation that “functions only within the rules of the genre” (261). The protagonist’s slow submersion in a world without moral restraint and apathy captured by painterly compositions is in stark contrast with the cinema verité techniques of New Romanian Cinema that treats the camera as an almost natural extension of reality, an unobtrusive and objective mirror of the lives of families and individuals. In addition, the unique stylistic syntax of films labelled as New Romanian Cinema is merged in *Dogs* with a more accessible storytelling. Pop identifies this uniqueness in the use of “long takes, fixed camera, Dogma 95 style of lighting, urban settings and minimalism of the storytelling” (2010, 24–25) adding that the “long shot disposition coupled with the accentuation of depth of field – used as a punctuation form – generates one of the most important tropes in the structuring of the “‘new-wave’ grammar” (2010, 32).⁴ While these qualities are not absent from Mirică’s film, furthermore the choice to feature Dragoș Bucur and Vlad Ivanov in leading roles puts on screen two iconic actors of New Romanian Cinema, the story does not embrace the unobtrusive grammar of capturing the habitual.

Already the opening scene of *Dogs* – a long take at the end of which a human foot comes to surface in a small moorland pond – sides with the extraordinary and the grotesque instead of new wave’s persistence on the ordinary. The scene of the local policeman, Hogaș, examining the rotting human foot on his dining table subverts the representations of the kitchen space in New Romanian Cinema. In contrast to the intimate space of feeding, the location of communal feasting and lively discussions, as in the films of Cristi Puiu, Cristian Mungiu and Corneliu Porumboiu, here is governed by a clinical silence and calls into mind the genre mechanics of forensic television series. Allusions to forensic cinema nevertheless carry parodic overtones: instead of an antiseptic environment, the half-naked policeman undertakes his forensic investigation using a plate and a fork, wears oversized dishwashing gloves and drinks beer. Car scenes, another distinctive feature of new wave cinema, also appear in modified forms as trivial conversations are substituted for tense car rides and graphic violence. Most importantly the employment of the long-take aesthetics is overridden by the shots of shorter length, continuity editing and poetic camera angles. As a result, diegetic time is both more fragmented and the narrative spans over a longer period of time than in classic pieces of the new wave.⁵

Although Doru Pop rightly claims that Mirică breaks the rules of Romanian New Wave to create a narrative “similar to that of the classical western or thriller genres” (Doru 2017, 262), most notably the Coen brothers’ *No Country for Old Men* (2007) and *Fargo* (1996), his rural crime story would be still hard for Hollywood-bred cinemagoers to handle.⁶ This is because despite its appeal for a more mainstream audience, *Dogs* fits the weakened type of classical narration which Gilles Deleuze calls the small form of the action image. Deleuze’s characterisation of the neo-western space as a milieu no longer living and organic but functional (1997, 166), where grandiose action disappears (168) and constantly shifting or highly ambiguous alliances between groups are frequent (167), sits well with *Dogs*’ hardly recognisable spaces and the filmmaker’s outspoken wish to play down the psychological motivations of actors and present them as larger than life. As Mirică put it in an interview, “I wanted them as stereotypes, more than anything” (Malinjođ 2016). In addition, the elliptical nature of storytelling, the lack of sociocultural references, the unexplained histories of protagonists, the characters’ uncommunicativeness and lack of emotions weaken the all-encompassing structure of classical cinema. Distinct from what Deleuze calls “the *respiration-space* of the organic form,” *Dogs* constructs “a *skeleton-space*, with missing intermediaries, heterogeneous elements which jump from one to the other, or which interconnect directly trivial action lacking dramatic interventions” (italics in original, 1997, 168).

Kostyál’s film also pays tribute to the western genre, however, its action-driven and spectacle oriented narrative subscribes to the classical epic form of strong casual links. This appeal to genre cinema suited well the preferences of the Film Fund (Filmalap), the central agency of Hungarian cinema funding until recently, for movies with Hollywood-style cinematography. *Coyote* delivers all these, and unlike recent films set in a rural environment, most notably *Well (Kút)*, Attila Gigor, 2016), it features an identifiable, instead of a dislocated space. If *Dogs* portrays a reality stripped to the bone, to basic instincts and the primal fears of canine existence, *Coyote*

³ While Pop consequently uses the term New Wave Cinema, I will refer to this strand of filmmaking as New Romanian Cinema for reasons described by László Strausz in his *Hesitant Histories on the Romanian Screen* (2017, 9).

⁴ László Strausz also emphasises the realist-modernist language of these films, the unique “visual mode which makes use of lengthy takes, verisimilar mise en scène, and complex in-depth staging, but in which the central component seems to be the constantly hovering mobile frame” (Strausz 2017, 2).

⁵ The story of *Dogs* unfolds in 3-4 days while Puiu’s *Stuff and Dough (Marfa și banii)*, 2001), *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu (Moartea domnului Lăzărescu)*, 2005), *Sieranevada* (2016), Porumboiu’s *East of Bucharest (A fost sau n-a fost?)*, 2006) and Mungiu’s *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days (4 luni, 3 săptămâni și 2 zile)*, 2007) narrate events in the course of a single day.

⁶ Mirică has described his film in the following terms: “I think it’s a mix of genres. It’s a Western, I think it’s a Noir, or a Neo-Noir, I think it’s a thriller and I think it has something of the realism of the Romanian New Wave, and I try to make it my own thing” (Aiano 2016).

concentrates as much on sociality: on the rural pack that breathes together. As such, the latter film complies better with the classical rules of creating organic narration, space and form.

Kostyál's film also breathes with the lay audience in its strong appeal to psychological realism, forceful insistence on causality, presenting rural and urban worlds along well-established stereotypes, and can thus be described within the theoretical framework of western films. With equally stereotypical features, the protagonist is especially appealing to the audience. He manifests the archetypal qualities of the modern cinematic cowboy who

arrives from nowhere, with only the infinite horizon ahead and behind him. Law has no power over him since he creates his own rules. He lives outside of society. He is never afraid, though his life is in constant danger [...] Without family, job, or woman to hold him back [...], he is ready to die for the right cause⁷ (Hadas 2012, 184).

At the beginning of the story, Misi Bicsérdi (Misi) is not yet a cowboy. He has a firm urban identity, a clerical job at the bank (he later abandons) and is not only married, but is also planning to extend his family. It is the death of his grandfather and the miscarriage of his wife that brings him to the village, yet he must learn to master fate and becomes a rural hero only after acquiring an active masculine agency. This is what Deleuze regards as the genre mechanics of classical western: “[i]t is as representative of the collectivity that the hero becomes capable of an action which makes him equal to the milieu and re-establishes its accidentally or periodically endangered order” (1997, 146). While this passage primarily describes how the narrative ascribes empowerment and agency to the hero in the diegetic world, Deleuze will later claim that heroic agency, above all, is achieved through a social consensus, “a consensus which allows it to develop illusions about itself, about its motives, about its desires and its cupidity, about its values and its ideals: ‘vital’ illusions, realist illusions which are more true than pure truth” (148).

Of all genres, the western is especially suited to call forth collective respiration and allow for each nation to envision its own American dream. This requires the protagonist to gain individual empowerment in any given social, cultural, historical background of the film's country of origin. Empowerment tinted with culture-specific colours, that is, embracing the specifics of a culture is capable of transferring the sense of empowerment onto the audience. Kostyál's choice for a generic model seems to be a sophisticated one. *Coyote's* generic choices demonstrate its maker's awareness of past Hungarian attempts to translate the western formula, most notably the early films of György Szomjas –*The Wind Blows Under Your Feet (Talpunk alatt fűtyül a szél, 1976)* and *Bad Guys (Rosszemberek, 1979)*. As a consequence, the protagonist not only finds the right cause to fight for according to the heritage of the western hero, but since his milieu is the European East, he also resembles legendary Hungarian peasant heroes and 19th-century outlaws (the so-called “betyárs” including Rózsa Sándor, Sobri Jóska, Angyal Bandi, Zöld Marci).

Misi's heroic agency emerges after gaining full command of a culturally constructed masculinity, after joining the ranks of popular folk heroes. *Coyote* emphasises the connection between the masculine and the national by telling the story of Misi's re-masculinisation in parallel with his peasantisation. To inherit his grandfather's house is a legal affair, while becoming worthy of the name Bicsérdi is a gender affair. The real heritage of the grandfather, who is consistently referred to by fellow villagers as a man amongst man, can only be claimed after Misi “grows balls” and proves his manliness.

Deleuze's argument about the ability of the western, but also of other popular genres, to serve as a social machine of engineering consensus and collective imaginations about reality is especially relevant to both of the films analysed here and the way they promote or problematise the national space. Even more so in the case of *Coyote* which makes uncompromising reflections on contemporary Hungary.

Intervention (of the Political Kind)

Disappearing from cinemas almost immediately after its release in 2017 with under three thousand viewers, Márk Kostyál's debut film, *Coyote*, was not widely advertised and has been unavailable on DVD ever since. In 2018, even though it was awarded the Best First Film Prize by Hungarian film critics, the production company, Megafilm, withdrew it from the programme of the Hungarian Film Week organised in February, for reasons unexplained. After this scandal, and avoiding regular distribution practices, the production company offered every Hungarian cinema a free copy of the film but was met by relative indifference on the part of movie theatres. Moreover, the audience requested the film to be uploaded on Youtube, a demand that was met by its producer, Gábor Kálomista, but without the consent of the director. This incident pointed to irresolvable differences between the makers of *Coyote* and prompted another wave of hostile comments on social media sites. As a result of these animosities, the film is unlikely to make a spectacular reappearance in Hungarian cinemas in the foreseeable future.

⁷ This and all other Hungarian quotations are my translation.

Speculations circulating in the media about the reasons for the above situation propose three scenarios. The first claims that the Hungarian National Film Fund – responsible for the distribution of state funds, the development of film projects, the overseeing of pre-production and production activities, and the support of marketing activities – failed to provide the necessary funding for the latter, that is, it did not advocate *Coyote* with proper advertising campaigns (Ficsor 2017a, Ficsor 2017b). Although details of marketing funding for the film were later revealed (Csákvári 2017), representatives of the Fund admitted that the financial support for advertising Hungarian films needs to be increased. According to the second scenario, the invisibility of the film for potential audiences and its withdrawal from the program of the Cinema Week by the producer was a consequence of disagreements and compromised relationship between Kálomista and Kostyál (Csákvári 2018), which further deteriorated after some members of *Coyote*'s production crew complained about late payments and accused Megafilm of unprofessional conduct (Pálos 2017). As a further twist to the story, after voicing concerns about *Coyote*'s improper distribution, Attila Janisch (film director and tutor at the University of Theatre and Film Arts) was sued by Kálomista on charges of libel: the case is now in the trial stage. The third, most speculative scenario, emphasises the shared political views of Kálomista and the reigning right-wing government and makes a tentative connection between the above discussed drawbacks and the film's unfavourable political commentary. Attila Benke claims that *Coyote* voices the "anger of Hungarian society towards the present political climate," adding that it offers a vehement social critique rare in today's Hungarian cinema (Benke 2018). Orsolya Nagy also notes that Kostyál's film "offers a frank portrayal of a dark corner of Hungarian reality [...] the all-pervading corruption, the tyranny of rural potentates, the corrupted public institutions" (2018, 85). According to Bence Inkei and Bence Kránicz, *Coyote* stands as a rare exception in the Andy Vajna-era of film finance as it addresses the present political model and "portrays the powerful oligarchs of the countryside in negative light" (2019), an attitude, the authors suggest, that might have contributed to the film's regrettable fate.

Although it has failed to reach a large number of cinemagoers, a cult has formed around *Coyote*, mainly as a result of its availability on video-sharing websites. The hysteria surrounding its reception diverted attention from its sharp political commentary and shifted it to the film's graphic depiction of violence and its presentation of masculinity. In my interpretation, Kostyál's gritty rural story does not only employ a masculine poetic but can serve as an inspiring narrative about masculinity because it sheds light on contemporary rural oligarchies and what these stand for.

The Making of Rural Identities: Dependence, Resistance, History

The imaginary Hungarian village of Tűzkő (literally Firestone) in *Coyote* reflects the changing face of countryside settlements and rural social dynamics. In his seminal book *A vidék az ezredfordulón* (The Countryside at the Millennium, 2012) Imre Kovách identifies de-peasantisation as the crucial transformation of rural Hungary in the post-communist period. According to Kovách the de-agriculturalisation of the economy came without the depopulation of the countryside (described as a structural cause) (2012, 199). Most peasant families could not extend their reproductive capacity and failed to become significant players on the food market unlike full-time farmer-entrepreneurs who understood the dynamics of the market and the logic of agricultural subsidies but were not deeply embedded in the local community. A related cultural factor in the process of de-peasantisation follows from the loss of traditions – the weakening of shared symbolic practices, paths of socialisation and collective methods of problem solving – that used to keep rural communities intact. In the post-traditional present, Kovách argues, "people are not able to exist as coherent and definite subjects, they lose control over their lives and are faced with ready-made choices, while self-responsible and autonomous individuals prevail" (193). As a result, human interaction in villages becomes increasingly mediated and authoritarian (194), personal trust and the willingness to cooperate are subordinated to individual strategies of coping.

While growing scholarship in the field of rural studies has addressed the emergence of new power structures, it is cultural representations, including films like *Coyote*, which translate the interpersonal dynamic of village communities into daily experience. Kovách's argument, for instance, about the role of charismatic and creative local leaders in the development of villages (2012, 201) and the increasing demand to brand the countryside according to global trends in tourism (193) are all present in the film. In fact, the conflict of *Coyote* results from the Szojka family's grandiose plan to buy small parcels of land from owners, unite and sell them to Scandinavian investors, and use the money to develop local infrastructure and village tourism. Disregarding their plans, Misi begins to rebuild his life on his grandfather's land, an enterprise that calls into mind traditional strategies of rural survival.

The commercialisation of the land, as Karl Polányi in *The Great Transformation* contends, treats natural resources as a competitive market good, like real-estate bought and sold for capital gains, and in doing so violates

the established dynamic of local social groups and institutions.⁸ Open violence is one measure to adjust social relations to a system of economic objectives, nevertheless the film describes multiple ways – including local legislative action, administrative pressure, emotional bribery – through which aggressive business attitude enforces a hegemonic system onto the community. New rural entrepreneurial power requires a corruptible local administrative staff and the annihilation of self-sustained agrarian families who, without land, become employees and, thus, dependents of tyrannical nouveau riche. Polányi’s arguments about the effects of disembedded economy corresponds with Kovách’s analyses of de-peasantisation: in both cases the individualised treatment of land weakens the human substance of society.

In *Coyote*, Pál Szojka is the main financial beneficiary of the above described transformations. Depicted as an oligarch, his aims are those of the new rural entrepreneur, yet his methods resemble those of an archaic landlord aspiring to build a dynasty. His professional experience as a lawyer comes handy in the legal manoeuvres to buy locals’ lands, while his quest for authority urges him to rely on archaic communal hierarchies and systems of loyalties. Szojka’s dependence on the worst aspects of village life such as self-righteousness, intimidation and resentment suggest that this empire built on the countryside’s long history of parochialism will thrive until dehumanizing and subjugating social dynamics are allowed to prevail, until villagers accept their servitude as incontestable. For the Szojka clan family interest and communal interests are identical. This belief serves as justification for archaic and violent means of pressurising villagers who resist to sell their lands, as Szojka declares at one point: “This is not about us, it is in the interest of Tűzskő.” Such claims call into mind the feudal world of patrons and clients, a world where a single person decides what is beneficial for the community, exemplifying the exact autocratic practice peasantisation hoped to end by calling into being methods of collective decision making. In the post-millennial Hungarian countryside rhetorical appeals to shared interests translate as a masked intent to foreground individual benefits.

The gritty social critique voiced by *Coyote* lies in portraying not the uneducated locals but the representatives of the official establishment as servile individuals: policemen, local government officials and administrators. Kostyál’s film suggests that in today’s Hungary, oligarchs can corrupt public and legal services, the law enforcement and the administrative establishment much easier than common citizens, as if these democratic institutions were no more than the support organisations of private, exploitive and unethical business dealings. For Szojka, democracy serves the aim to legitimise a greedy oligarchic regime. In vivid brushstrokes, the film sketches up a world unmistakably similar to today’s Hungary (and other Eastern European countries) where the democratic Establishment is infantilised and the much propagated illiberal-populist democracy re-establishes a paternalistic system of governance.

The Dobrogean countryside, the setting for *Dogs*, is a borderland of diverse ethnic composition between civilisation and wilderness. According to Constantin Iordachi, Dobrogea was “the country’s main asset in becoming a western (anti-Russian) military bastion, a guarantor of political stability in Eastern Europe and an essential link in the commercial transit between the Occident and the Orient” (2002, 15). Iordachi’s characterisation of the geopolitical value of Dobrogea emphasises its significance as a contact zone, and the presumed mandate to carve out a piece of the Balkans in order to both assimilate it into the nation state’s administrative system and modernise its economy. As the author contends, “Dobrogea was stigmatised as a backward, uncivilised part of the Orient and it was Romania’s noble ‘European mission’ to introduce high culture in the province” (15). Although Iordachi examines the process of internal orientalism and the region’s role in the remaking of Romanian identity in the 19th and early-20th centuries, his arguments have both a more general appeal⁹ and, to a large extent, are valid today.

In *Dogs*, Dobrogea is portrayed as *terra incognita*, a land where the formal institutions of law and order exist only to record and catalogue rather than control crime. It is a rural and insular region stuck in the swamp of history that stages the archaic conflict of nature and civilisation with the urban character, Roman, symbolizing Europe-oriented Romanianness, while his adversary Samir standing for Balkanic roots. The etymology of names is already symbolic: Roman means a citizen of the Roman Empire, thus a representative of civilisation, while Samir is of Arabic origin meaning loyal companion that establishes his character’s commitment to the heritage of Uncle Alecu’s illegal business activities. Also, Roman is planning to sell his inherited land to a foreign investor from the European Union¹⁰ through a lawyer from Bucharest to finalise the deal. In contrast, Samir runs his criminal business enterprise using violence, thus his decision to eliminate the lawyer, renounce the legal way and uphold the code of honour among thieves should come as no surprise. The killing of the lawyer fits into the framework of

⁸ According to Polányi disembedded economy, that is “the control of the economic system by the market is of overwhelming consequence to the whole organisation of society: it means no less than the running of society as an adjunct to the market” (2001, 60).

⁹ According to Hans-Christian Maner, the perception of Romania as the last battalion of Europe has governed national historiography for the past two centuries and, as such “Europe has become an abstract conceptual tool intensely used for defending national sovereignty and for maintaining the state’s borders” (254).

¹⁰ By comparison, in *Coyote* it is the antagonist who plans to sell a large portion of land to western investors but only in order to strengthen the family business and its control over the village.

the antagonism between the urban and the rural and the latter's rejection of the former's civilizing mission. Manslaughter is a rejection of the civilizing process described by Norbert Elias as the historical narrative of

how constraints through others from a variety of angles were convened into self-restraints, how the more animalic human activities were progressively thrust behind the scenes of people's communal social life and invested with feelings of shame, how the regulation of the whole instinctual and affective life by steady self-control became more and more stable, more even and more all-embracing (1994, 365).

Urban and rural communities reacted differently to this civilizing process and accepted or rejected transformations of behavioural strategies at different speed and depth.

The uncle's farm house itself stands on the threshold of civilisation and nature, worlds opposed consistently by the film. More than a century earlier Petre Grigorescu, owner of the newspaper *Constanța* claimed that "merchants, industrialists, functionaries, and professors lose their citizenship rights in Dobrogea, and, as soon as they choose to live in this land of the pest, in this Siberia of Romania, the authorities from the other side [of the Danube] do not accept them back into the *polis*" (italics in the original, qtd. in Iordachi 2002, 49–50). Such accounts render legible the historically unchanging fractures between the city and the wilderness, as constitutive of Dobrogean identity.

The symbolic distance between the periphery and the metropole is best measured in psychic habitus and civilised conduct which Elias derives from "the moderation of spontaneous emotions, the tempering of affect, the extension of mental space beyond the moment" (1994, 370). The colonising discourse identifies this distance as a civilizational deficit and at the same time creates a counter-discursive site of the colonised who will regard the monopolisation of physical violence as a form of domestication. In the scene where Samir tries to convince Roman to settle on his grandfather's farm, he speaks this counter-discourse:

The city is like being in a cage. I would go crazy there. Here, if I want to cross the street, I cross the street and that's it. I can't do it in the city. We have to wait for a green light. You can only cross when the green light is on. And you know what I've seen there? Dogs. They cross at the green light, too. So you, a full-grown man, have to wait alongside a dog until they let you continue walking. I, a man, equal to a dog?

These sentences regard self-restraining urbanites as weaklings, disoriented and domesticated people, who no longer possess an autonomous agency. While Samir holds city dwellers in contempt for behaving and letting themselves treated as dogs, he finds it natural to treat *others* as dogs. The unsentimental attitude of the locals towards animals, like the wild boars they hunt down and burn for fun, is allegoric of the unromantic relationship between people. In Samir's definition, Dobrogean identity is not only founded on principles like the survival of the fittest but is the proud rejection of civilisation and culture: "We fight, we kill each other. We aren't educated people, so we get bored." Against the grain of popular depictions of the countryside as a pastoral and unspoilt place for retreat, the unreserved anti-romanticism of this statement disturbs the discourse of internal orientalism.

The uncanny farmhouse of Uncle Alecu with its eerie cellar containing a rusty bed frame and shackles drilled into the wall resembles a medieval dungeon at the centre of a diabolic rural universe. There is also an oversized map of Dobrogea on of the walls shown in a prolonged shot. Even though Doru Pop contends that in *Dogs* "[t]here is nothing that could localise the cinematic space within the 'national space'" (2017, 256) and that diegetic space is an "impersonal space that has no national identity, a deterritorialized zone with no spatial stability, no identifiable elements that would allow us to define its specificity" (2017, 258), I regard the lengthy shot of the map as an explicit attempt to localise the narrative. Nevertheless, Pop is right to assert that Mirică's Dobrogea is more of a symbolic than a real space since the film leans on the director's childhood rural experience of irrational bursts of violence amongst villagers to a much larger extent than on a sociocultural study and scholarly literature on Dobrogea. Referring back to Deleuze, space and its actors become functional, allegorical. As Mirică claims,

what puzzled me the most was not the violence but the randomness of it. These guys didn't need a reason to enter a fight – they just wanted to see who would come out on top. For all their savagery and lack of morals, there was a sort of ancestral purity about their acts. I can still remember that feeling. That's what *Dogs* is all about" (Malinjud 2016).

With its long history of being both a periphery and subjected to consecutive efforts of assimilation and modernisation, Dobrogea offers itself to be treated as an allegory of an untamed world, a symbolic stage for the revolt of archaic instincts against domestication.

Boys Will Be Boys

In *Coyote* de-peasantisation and the spectre of the locals' increasing vulnerability, while in *Dogs* the widening gulf between ancestral traditions and modernity serve as bleak social context of post-millennial rural life. Both films link domesticated cosmopolitan existence with the crisis of masculinity and present rural spaces as environments in which the protagonists strive to counter their fears of de-masculinisation.

In this light, the two films show the process of how de-masculinisation – defined by Miklós Hadas as a historical transformation – runs parallel to Elias's civilisation process. According to Hadas,

during the course of de-masculinisation the masculine character of social relations erodes as males lose the self-evident exclusivity of their dominant position, and above all, their monopoly to legitimately vindicate their violence-based power both in the public and the private spheres. The discursive framework of the masculinist ideology [...] is contested and made illegitimate, leading to the disintegration of systemic masculine domination, the patriarchy [...] The course of de-masculinisation is not linear but interrupted from time to time by periods of re-masculinisation (2012, 528).

Instances of re-masculinisation do not only prevail though a historical continuum but can also serve as an individual strategy to increase one's self-confidence and create a positive self-image through establishing a dominant position within the family, among peers, at work, etc. As such, isolated "gender projects" never exist in a vacuum but at the intersection of social practices and broader historical processes (Kalmár 2017, xx–xxi).

The gender ideologies of the countryside and the city are directly contrasted at the beginning of *Coyote* offering snapshots of Misi's urban existence. His hegemonic masculinity is contested in all major spheres of life: at work, during pursuing leisure and in the family. As a bank clerk, Misi not only does feminizing office work, but is expected to tolerate the clients' insults with much patience and self-constraint. At the martial arts class, itself a much controlled and civilised form of physical contest, he clearly underperforms and is criticised, while his family life centres around his pregnant wife, Eszter, whom he escorts to Lamaze classes. As final proof to his ensuing domestication, when Misi starts a quarrel with the doctor after Eszter's miscarriage, he is ordered by his wife to moderate himself and leave the room. These episodes of cosmopolitan de-masculinisation will be reversed after the couple moves to the village.

Misi's re-masculinisation in Tüzkő is portrayed by the process of utilizing rural themes for the construction of the hegemonic male figure. According to this discourse – defined by Hugh Campbell and Michael Mayerfeld Bell as the *rural in the masculine* (rural masculine) – "associations with rurality bring an air of the natural to images of masculinity, legitimating them as allegedly in touch with truths that are deeper than the merely social" (540). Male bonding through feasting, the joint efforts to rebuild the house, and standing up for each other during fights are central themes of the film. Misi's two helpers, the older local handyman, Lajos, and the younger tough Transylvanian loner, Attila, epitomise rurality already by their appearance: the former with a pony tail and bushy facial hair, the latter with a distinct Hungarian moustache. Their fraternal relationship is strengthened by sweat, dirt and blood that comes with building a new roof for the house and attending a village wedding that culminates in a public brawl. Sequences of physical activities link rurality with masculinity and establish Misi as the bearer of hegemonic masculinity what Hadas calls the *archaic libido dominandi*, the human alpha male (2016, 224–226).

Images of the rural masculine exploit (imaginary) signifiers of archaic male dispositions without requiring a deep engagement with specific rural spaces. The Hungarian village serves only as a backdrop of re-masculinisation, which explains why the protagonist of *Coyote* returns to the city after having resolved his masculinity crisis. Since he decides to put his renewed identity to good use in cosmopolitan space, Misi does not alter the process of de-peasantisation. In order to comprehend the effects de-peasantisation on the rural gender order and understand how it results in de-masculinisation for the majority of the community and re-masculinisation for the selected few, we have to explore the gender hierarchies of the Szojka family. They allow us to study what Campbell and Bell term *the masculine in the rural* (masculine rural) (2000, 532), that is, the construction of masculinities and their relations in particular rural environments. I will specifically address the hegemonic masculinity of Pál Szojka, the subordinate masculinity of his son, Kispali, as well as the invisibility of women.

Pál Szojka's masculinity is constructed through his financial power, relationship capital and strong patriarchal authority within both the family and the local community. As such, his character can be analysed in terms of the hegemonic type of masculinity, a category proposed by Connell (besides the complicit, the marginalised, and the subordinate). As Connell contends,

there is some correspondence between cultural ideal and institutional power, collective if not individual. So the top levels of business, the military and government provide a fairly convincing corporate display of masculinity [...] It is the successful claim to authority, more than direct violence, that is the mark of hegemony (2005, 77).

The elderly Szojka shows no affection for his fellows, he only admires Hungarian grey-cattle bulls and calls his latest purchase "a God," "my dear." Ascribing such sublime qualities to the animal, and allowing no one but himself to touch it are both acts of fetishisation and self-fetishisation. The animal is his double and its grandeur is the reflection of his own. Apart from the bull, his other hobby is target shooting and although he is not good at it, his attraction to weapons masculinises his personality. So do the numerous animal trophies hanging on the wall

of his living room.¹¹ Szojka is also a patriotic patriarch, as a close-up of a portrait of István Széchenyi¹² hanging on the wall of his office suggests, yet his grandiose visions to modernise the village are out of touch with reality and seem as a symptom of megalomania.

Bearing in mind Connell's assertion that the position of hegemonic masculinity is best grasped through a "relational approach" (2005, 76), I next examine Pál Szojka's relationship to his son and women. First of all, the father-son relationship remains emotionally unfulfilled due to the psychosocial mechanism of infantilisation. Within this intersubjective dynamic, the patriarch achieves his hegemonic masculine position at the cost of treating his adult son, Kispali, as his subordinate. The name Kispali – the contracted form of junior and the nickname of Pál – is the linguistic form of infantilisation. For the oppressive father he is hardly more than an easily manipulated instrument: Szojka exploits his son's social alienation. The village of Tűzkő offers little cultural activities and lacks people Kispali could intellectually relate to, as such he is naturally drawn towards Misi and his wife who come from a vibrant metropolitan environment. Their initial companionship, marked by such gestures as Kispali's employing Eszter as a private tutor for his son, is later undermined by the obligation to follow the business interests of the Szojka dynasty. Kispali serves as a bait in his father's larger scheme to convince the newcomers to sell their land. When this plan fails and things get violent, Kispali's marginal and inferior position within the family is revealed. While the elder Szojka does the non-violent and, therefore, more dignified verbal coercion, his son deals with physical persuasion, for instance hiring thugs to intimidate Misi.

Still the most humiliating moment for Kispali in the film is when he threatens his father to move to the capital with his own son and the patriarch replies that he can start packing but the grandson stays. The explanation he offers blows Kispali's remaining self-esteem into bits: "I don't want him to grow up into a dream-world. Look at what you became: a candy-ass mommy boy. We don't need another one in this family." Being ascribed a feminine character effectuates his symbolic castration and adds to his inferiority complex. This instance also threatens to deprive Kispali of fatherhood, his sole relationship in the film founded on unconditional love. His position as a father is seriously compromised not only by the family patriarch who spends all of his free time with his grandson (whose lack of contact with peers leaves him chronically lonely) but also by Kispali's mother. At one point she describes her bond to the young boy less as a grandmother-grandson than a mother-son relationship. The hint of Kispali being the older brother of his own son imposes on him yet another painful infantilizing limitation.

Kispali's powerlessness undermines his masculinity as much as his attempts to construct the identity of the "rural yuppie." In order to avoid social alienation within the village community, Kispali pursues urban and openly consumerist lifestyles. His words directed to his father – "We have enough money to buy us a life in Pest. A life of luxury" – clearly express his appeal to cultural middle-classification and embourgeoisement. In contrast with the elder Szojka, he embraces generational status symbols of wealth, the stylish clothes he wears and the expensive sports car he drives, yet these aspirations to modernity are constantly challenged by his father who only cares about Hungarian grey-cattle, hunter's trophies and guns, symbols of an archaic, or rather, of an imagined archaic life. The generational clash of different value systems is palpable in Kispali's annoyance when his father calls his sports car a wagon (in Hungarian "kocsi") which is at the same time a linguistic marker of the antagonism between modernity and archaism.

To contextualise the opposite aspirations of father and son within the scholarship on post-millennial rural Hungary we might say that the elderly Szojka reacts to the reality brought about by de-peasantisation with a strong appeal to the past, even if this past only exists in his imagination. On the opposite end, Kispali subscribes to middle-class modernity, epitomised by the city: its abundance of goods and services, non-violence, gender-equality and sociability. The desire to escape the isolation of the countryside and the nostalgic longing for an ideal past are closely connected to the way these characters strive to strengthen their masculinity. For Kispali, the city is the escape from being subjected to infantilisation, while for his father investing into the well-being of the village serves the purpose of strengthening his own patriarchal masculinity.¹³

As an outspokenly misogynist, the elder Szojka's hegemonic masculinity also prevails in his relationship with females. In line with Campbell and Bell's observation, that the invisibility of women is essential for masculinity to remain the marked category within rurality (2000, 540), the patriarch systematically relegates women to the role of domestic servants. We never see him talk to his wife and in the scene when Eszter begs him to leave her family alone, he laconically replies: "I don't negotiate with women." Even the wedding, the social occasion that places the bride in the centre of attention, becomes dominated by men whose engagement in physical violence forces female guests to hide, retreat into invisibility. In the case of Szojka's wife, this invisibility and neglect supposedly plays a crucial role in her alcoholism.

¹¹ Kostyál plays on the character's embeddedness in rural culture and the image of the headstrong peasant, a character featured in numerous Hungarian films, most notably in *The Brute* (*Dívad*, Zoltán Fábri, 1959) through the temperamental Sándor Ulveczki.

¹² A 19th-century Hungarian political figure, patriot and reformer, István Széchenyi is regarded by many as an outstanding statesman and called the "Greatest Hungarian."

¹³ For a recent exploration of father-son relations in post-communist Hungarian cinema, see Kalmár 2017, 115–132; for a detailed study of 21st-century shifts in European masculinities and their cinematic representation, see Kalmár 2020.

The almost total absence of women in *Dogs* is consistent with the film's portrayal of Dobrogean identity as predominantly masculine. When Roman's girlfriend, Ilinca, unexpectedly arrives from Bucharest she brings civilisation into this dog-eat-dog world both with her fashionable clothes, perfect make-up and affectionate but feeble femininity. Her presence hinders Roman's activities in so far as he will need to take care of her. Moreover, the civilisational sentiment of care and responsibility towards the weaker sex is the indirect cause of his death: with the intention to appease Ilinca, he returns to the house and unknowingly becomes the victim of Samir. Other female characters featured in the film are the female companion (wife or lover) and the children of Samir who appear in one scene yet remain largely invisible. The girls are shown out of focus and in the background of the composition, while the lady is lying on her back enjoying the sunshine with her face hidden from the camera. Such aesthetic tactics underline the invisibility of the feminine within this masculine world, an invisibility essential for masculine principles to prevail. When the lady asks Samir why they live separated from one another – "Why don't you live with us? Why don't we live with you? –, he replies: "Because it cannot be." These are not the words of an estranged man but someone who perceives of the family and intimacy as a risk, a force of de-masculinisation.

Other male characters of *Dogs* are either without a female companion or put up a barrier between themselves and their partners. Masculinity is associated with isolation as males live a dog's life, akin to the dreary existence of Alecu's dog the restless barking and agitated growling of which is a sign of a mistrustful nature. Alecu might have named his female watchdog Police either because of her vigilant temper or as part of his cynical perception of local law enforcement officers, who are effeminised. More importantly, the canine qualities of the masculine rural type are also reflected in pack mentality and fierce temperament. In the sequence that calls to mind the lifestyle of archaic masculinity centred around hunting, cooking on open fire, and drinking, two half-naked and half-drunk subordinates of Samir start an old-school wrestle match and fall to the ground, resembling ferocious dogs fighting to the last breath. By looking upon Samir as the alpha and accepting his hegemonic masculinity, even allowing him to call them girls and bitches, these men fully embrace the masculine ideology and acknowledge the male dominated gender order. In Connell's taxonomy, "masculinities constructed in ways that realise the patriarchal dividend, without the tensions or risks of being the front line troops of patriarchy, are complicit in this sense" (2005, 79). One of Samir's elder subordinates describes collaborative attitude as a key to survive, a rule applicable to both animal and human worlds: "there are large ones and there are small ones. The little ones have to make a pact with the big ones so that they won't get eaten." Complicit masculinity, according to the film, remains loyal to hypermasculine ideals: it passively, and often instinctively, supports the survival of hegemonic masculinity.

Hogas, the local police chief also uses canine and other animal allegories when talking to people. At a secret meeting with one of the criminal associates of Samir, he greets Pila in the following manner: "You're like a cat, Pila. I haven't heard you arrive. Or rather like a dog. Are you a faithful dog?" Therefore, besides interpersonal dynamics, social relations are also animalised in the film. Hogas himself is depicted as a hunting dog, who eagerly follows Samir's every step in hope of catching him red handed in some criminal act. Despite his official status as representative of law enforcement, he enjoys little respect amongst locals and generates even less fear in the criminals. He is repeatedly referred to as a crazy, old cop, a useless, sick man, that is, his masculinity is persistently belittled. His character fits the type of masculinity that rests upon marginalisation, "always relative to the authorisation of the hegemonic masculinity of the dominant group" (Connell 2005, 80–81). Connell comprehends the creation of marginalised masculinity in relation to ethnicity and class, however, as Hogas' case testifies, age can also serve as grounds of exclusion. Furthermore, the policeman suffers from terminal stage lung cancer, thus the double burden of age and illness, as embodied qualities, point to the absence of masculinity ideal. As Gabriela Spector-Mersel contends "while in relation to early and middle adulthood we find clear models of dignified masculinity, these become vague, even non-existent, when referring to later life" (2006, 73). It is in comparison with the ideal form of such hegemonic masculinity that Hogas' masculinity is understood as defective and marginal.¹⁴

Not unlike *Coyote*, Mirică's *Dogs* also perceives of the agency of masculinity not as an essentialist but a relational phenomenon and presents its empowering and disempowering effects. Still, Misi and Roman receive their grandfather's heritage very differently. Misi finds the path of re-masculinisation and finally sells the land, while Roman will be crushed by the patrimony. Alecu's legacy is a disavowed agency, the radical curtailment of free will. The inherited Dobrogean land is useless for a man of civilisation (which Misi in *Coyote* wisely recognised) and can be turned into a source of income only at the cost of moral corruption and joining the criminal's ranks. Alecu's heritage has only value if Roman becomes a crime lord, that is, after he agrees to treat others like dogs and embrace the endless spiral of violence inherent to the rural life depicted in the film. Otherwise he dies like a dog.

¹⁴ On the importance of non-idealised cinematic masculinities in Eastern European cinema see Kalmár 2013; Kalmár 2015; and Kalmár 2017, 52–53.

Conclusion

The late-Alecu's estate and its gradual transformation into a prison might be the allegory of the communist heritage which prevents rather than encourages change. *Dogs* depicts the hegemonic relations of a post-communist society where younger generations are forced to conform to the value systems and attitudes of their elders, a message also articulated by Cristian Mungiu's *Graduation (Bacalaureat)*, 2016). As the "rural other" of Mungiu's urban story, Mirică locates infantilisation in a countryside environment, highlighting the motifs of symbolic castration and impotence of men. The common theme is the impotence of modernity in the face of archaic animalism.

The Dobrogea of *Dogs* resembles the Tüzkő of *Coyote* with the situation of Roman mirroring that of Kispali. The unsuccessful efforts of these characters to gain control over their lives and reject their bondage to the (grand)-parental heritage make them representatives of subordinate masculinity. Through these characters and their relationships, the films allow us to map the contemporary situation of the masculine rural and advance understanding of Eastern European rural specificities of the four types of masculinity proposed by Connell. Bearing in mind the predominance and symbolic nature of the link between grandfathers and grandsons, instead of the father-son relationship, the films seem to emphasise a broken lineage of masculinity and foreground masculine ideals that date back to the communist era. The bond between the first (Old man Misu and Alecu) and the third generation (Misi and Roman) nevertheless remains symbolic as these family members have no personal contact with each other. May the absence of the middle generation represent their entrapment in a historical discontinuity, characterised by the double failure to put the communist era behind themselves definitively and to lay down the foundations of something new? Does the period of the fathers' generation begin with the downfall of state socialism in 1989 and end with the financial crisis of 2008? Will this period be remembered as the lost decades of ambiguous closures and false beginnings, and if so, what made this generation somewhat doomed, directionless and impotent? While neither of the films answer these questions, they are aware of their gravity.

My investigations touched upon such topics only marginally, nevertheless I am convinced that cinematic representations of the masculine rural are not only relevant for the study of gender orders but the social relations that produce them. Hopefully my analysis of *Coyote* rendered legible how issues related to de-masculinisation and infantilisation are embedded in the sociocultural transformation of the post-millennial Hungarian countryside where patron-client systems have one again emerged. In the case of *Dogs*, hegemonic masculinity fuels the resistance against the civilizing process with Dobrogea presented as a spatial metaphor of violence. Kostyál and Mirică chose the countryside to talk about the social construction of masculinity and can do so because rural conflicts, anxieties, imaginations, value sets and coping mechanisms, through which identity is formulated, are indicative of Eastern Europeanness as a whole.

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