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18-year-old Hungarian students' perceptions about a Hungarian feature film made during the Stalinist period of Hungary

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Introduction

The issue of democracy in education has developed rapidly in Hungary in the past decade. Not only is it a value system penetrating the National Curriculum, but it has been part of many educational initiatives. Among other civic and professional societies, the activities of the Civitas Association represents a good example. Two main methods of teaching democracy – or of teaching citizenship in a democratic system – can be distinguished. In the first the teacher imparts information that will become the students' knowledge; in the second the skills that are important for taking an active and responsible part in a democratic society can be acquired or developed through special student activities.

We believe that as part of democracy teaching, other ways of community-forming should also taught, together with their value systems and roles. Students should understand that in our democratic societies behavioural patterns such as those which imply the superiority of a person or a group, or leadership forms that include elements of tyranny, are not acceptable. By recognising such attitudes and behavioural patterns, students will better appreciate the values of democracy and be more committed to it. Similar ideas are already applied in several educational initiatives. Banks (1986), whose aim was to develop education on a multicultural basis, stressed that the realisation of such a school environment should include knowledge of racism: it is expected that students will then be able to identify and fight against racism more effectively.

Therefore we suggest that students should also have knowledge about leadership systems different from democracy, and that relevant experiences can be gained from various group activities. One group game of this kind, quoted from a publication of the Civitas Association (2000), divides the class into groups of four or five. Each group has the same task (they are to build constructions of toothpicks and straws) but each group follows a different way of leadership (democracy, feudalism, dictatorship, anarchy etc.). Before starting the activity, the groups draw a card from a pile on which a leadership type and the relevant rules can be found. After the activity students evaluate the constructions and discuss how their groups worked and how they felt while working.

In this paper we outline the results of a related group activity. We believe that showing a propaganda film, made in 1950 during the Stalinist period of Hungary, would help students better understand that part of Hungarian history, and the expected behavioural patterns of a dictatorial system, which are easy to identify in the film.

Hungarian feature films in the early 1950s

In the years following World War II, rapid changes took place in Hungary. Although the Smallholders' Party was the most popular, the influence of the Communist Party was increasing, and by gerrymandering the elections in 1947, they took over power in the country. In a very short period of time a one-party-system was introduced in politics and, in the economy large scale secularisation took place. The Communist regime considered it important to demonstrate to all members of Hungarian society that Truth was represented by the only progressive political power, the Communist Party, and absolute loyalty to the Party was the only way towards building a new society – first socialism, then communism – of justice.

One way to implement this, possibly the most effective, was to make feature films with propaganda content. The first films of this kind, made in the late 1940s, merely made fun of the typical characters of the previous system, but in the following years, especially from 1950 onward, the films were about workers and their direct environment, and the forces that they might encounter and which might influence them. The scenes therefore included factories, assembly halls, workers' houses, and other depictions of their lives. Filmmaking was under heavy political control and served political aims. As Nemes (1972) formulated, "the basic features and events of the society were directly linked with the heroes of those films: any other intermediate factors were excluded [i.e. mainly the artwork, and the ideas of the filmmakers. A.G.], the individual characters are obscured, and that was the way to realise guiding in a clear and obvious form." So the characters represented types, rather than complex personalities, and the stories were also clear-cut, moving towards an obvious end, where the communist workers will win against those hindering the building of socialism.

The film that we chose for our research (*Singing Makes Life Beautiful*, 1950) shows these traits very clearly. In the film, the main conflict that needs to be resolved occurs between a reactionary and conservative conductor, who leads the workers' choir in a factory, and those wishing progression. The latter are supported by the secretary of the local Communist Party (party organisations were also present at workplaces). The ideological suggestions are both expressed in his speech and are implied by his and the progressive workers' behavioural patterns.

Singing Makes Life Beautiful, like other similar films, realised its ideological function in a comedic context. The hard line communist propaganda is loosened and thus made more 'consumable' by humorous acts and a caricature-like depiction of the negative hero, the conductor. This duality of the film was important when we chose it – some other films of the period are devoid of funny moments and today they would be considered boring, especially for students.

General questions, hypothesis

Our main question was whether our students could understand the message of *Singing Makes Life Beautiful*, which was directed at the public of 1950. If so, we can then use such films or parts of films in teaching about that period. We believed that showing students such a film would make them feel the spirit of the period in a way which difficult to achieve with other means of teaching. However, we also thought that although students are able to understand the main motives of the film, they may feel the film was too far

removed from their own way of thinking – an issue, which might limit the applicability of the method.

The subjects, method and questions of the research

We asked 19 12th grade students (18 years of age) of the Leöwey Klára Secondary Grammar School in Pécs to watch the film and then answer a set of open questions. Our aim was not to achieve a statistical analysis; we wanted to assess attitudes and opinions, and to examine qualitatively students' responses to our general questions. The students already had some knowledge of the period concerned, so we believed their answers would be supported by their previous knowledge.

The questionnaire included the following questions:

1. Did you like the film? Please tell us in brief why or why not.
2. What did the film tell you?
3. What do you think the film told the people of that period?
4. Why do you think the film was made?
5. What is an ideal member of the society like, according to the film?
6. What societal roles or groups can you distinguish in the film?
7. Do you think such a film would be possible to make these days?
8. If you have other comments on the film, please write them down too.

As a note to Question 5, we must underline a basically conformist attitude – taking over behavioural patterns that are accepted or encouraged by the communist leader in the film. These behavioural patterns include or are based on denial of the reactionary, telling the truth, being loyal to the communist collective.

Question 6 also needs some explanation. As mentioned earlier, the characters were simplified and thus they represented clearly distinguishable societal groups. Each of the societal groups had their own special roles in the film. The societal groups, which are also present in *Singing*, are the following (from 'top' to 'bottom' in the hierarchy):

- **Communist leaders** (they are absolutely credible and never make mistakes; however, they are not particularly active in the plot, being facilitators rather than actively promoting events etc.)
- **Workers with communist orientation** (follow the communist leader's advice, agree and demonstrate that life is so beautiful, our dream has come true etc.)
- **The main hero** (also with communist orientation but would give up the mission easily, or has difficulties, so needs encouragement from the communist leader; this character leads the story)
- **Workers with reactionary orientation** (would insist on older traditions that are refused by the communist system, have links with the reactionary leaders)
- **Reactionary leaders** (prefer the old, pre-communist system, would hinder progress, perform acts of sabotage etc.)

In other films, representatives of two other groups occur, and these make the societal structure above more complete. The Soviet comrade plays the role of a good fairy: when a hero cannot solve a problem, the Soviet comrade providentially appears to help him out. At the other extreme, the representatives of American capitalism, whose world-wide evil plans endanger the peace of the country, is ready to sabotage events even at national level. These two character types are not present in *Singing*, but they are referred to several times (the reactionary conductor refers to an American professor when talking about music, but the communist party leader refers to Zhdanov's book on arts – the title page of the book is shown in the film).

In the following section the students' responses are summarised, question by question.

Research results

- Q1. All students but four said that they liked the film. One wrote 'no', three wrote 'interesting' rather than good. Some of the 'yes' people said though that it was enjoyable to see once, they would not be interested in seeing it again. The reasons for liking it included: a good representation of the period, good humour, good music. The reason for not liking it: denying the period itself, refusing the communist administration and any means that promoted it.
- Q2. Most answers implied that the film reflected the societal circumstances of that period. Most of the answers underlined a societal cohesion that was demonstrated by the film: "Different organisations (choir, dance group etc.) were especially important to keep the workers together." Or "We are a big family, they said." One student wrote "Work and production are the most important. Cultural life strengthens production." Another response: "It was shocking to see how the Soviet ideology influenced life in Hungary."
- Q3. Most responses reflected the feeling that the film, for the people in the early 1950s, was not unusual. "They probably liked it because it was full of humour." "The problems depicted in the film were present in real life..." "and the film demonstrated that the communist system was indeed very good." One typical answer: "Maybe it showed them how to live: you can have a good life, but you have to want it." A very good response: "As it was made at the turn of two periods, it showed example to the audience. It reminded them of the possibility of a different life."
- Q4. Most students (13) understood the main idea of the film and answered: "propaganda", "teaching" or "having the socialist system accepted by the public". Three students wrote "entertainment" and one "calling attention to the mistakes"; one wrote "expressing the importance of work" and another thought "it gave an accurate picture of the society".
- Q5. As to the ideal member of the society, most students (17) wrote: the one doing a perfect job, in a happy mood. Eight students also mentioned participation in cultural life. Interestingly enough, only four referred to a conformist behaviour or accepting the communist system. One student wrote: the secretary of the communist party was the ideal member of the society.
- Q6. Most students (10) distinguished two main groups: workers and leaders. Five wrote "those faithful to the communist system and those against it". Three students only wrote "workers".

- Q7. Eleven students said “no”, because in a democratic country, where politics are based on a multi-party system, people’s thinking is not determined in such a way.” Two of them thought that such films may be made in countries that are still communist. Seven students said “yes”. Three of them said that such a film would criticise or parody that period. Other answers (one student each): “such a film could express the problems of the youth today too”, “the media has power so it is possible”, “as an artistic film, it is possible”, “such films are being made, with different ideological content”. (Some students gave several answers.)
- Q8. Only a few students answered this question. They mostly said that they liked the comic acts, liked some actors, or disliked the amount of music.

Analysis of the research results

In the research we found that our students were in general able to understand the message of the film. Since we did not prepare them with any special knowledge or keys for observation, it is especially interesting that many of them were able to identify the major functions of the film. They also understood that many details of the film are different from what we would expect of a film today, made in a democratic society.

The fact that most of the students liked the film reinforced our belief that it is worth using such a film for teaching history or citizenship. Many of them appreciated its humour and this made watching the film more motivating – otherwise the story might have been too boring for the youth of today.

The film was, however, somewhat distant from the students. In response to Q2, only one of them described their feelings (‘it was shocking to see...’), or what it meant to them personally. They interpreted what they had seen rather than talking about what they learned from it. It is worth mentioning that in answering Q3 and Q4 students were able to work out why the film was made. They did not use the terminology usual in talking about a moral tale, for example noting that the Good will be rewarded and the Evil will be punished, which would have been very appropriate. The function of the film is comparable to that of a fairy tale - the representation of values and teaching morally acceptable patterns of behaviour. The plot also stressed that no alternatives can be accepted: the words ‘consent’, ‘tolerance’, ‘agreement’ etc. are missing from the dialogues, together with related behavioural patterns. The students did not refer to these ideas.

The film does have very clear implications about an ideal citizen of the system, and work is only one aspect of that. In answering Q5, most of the students focused on the work depicted rather than the necessity of obeying the communist leadership. This reflects that the students’ way of thinking is different: in watching the film they were more sensitive to the productive activities, rather than to an ideology that is strange for them.

The responses to Q6 can be compared with Q4 – roles and positions in the community. In general, ideas were good, but we had expected rather more sophisticated classification. “Workers” and “leaders” are too general and do not imply any tension which would induce activity (some added: “the rich” or “the bureaucratic leaders” without any further explanation). “Workers” is acceptable, but it also obscures the different roles that different workers take in the film. The distinction between “the faithful” and the “opposing” is better but would need more clarification. We concluded that the students did not

understand the hierarchical societal structure explained above, and were somewhat puzzled about social roles in the film.

Q7 was probably the most interesting, since it linked that period with present day. Most of the students expressed their democratic feelings by refusing to believe such a film could be made in the present. (None of them mentioned though that the story of the film was played out in a dictatorial society.) This thinking could be classified as 'aims-oriented', as could that of those students who thought such a film could be made with the purpose of criticism or parody, or in countries that are still communist. Those students who felt such a film *could* be made now in Hungary could be classified as demonstrating 'method-oriented' thinking, since they removed the film from its political context and thought of it only as a framework to be filled with a current ideology.

Conclusion

Overall we found our hypothesis justified: the students understood the main issues of the film, so we believe it is a possible means to teach about dictatorial systems. The use of a questionnaire is, however, not part of the teaching method - we used it for research purposes only. Focus group discussions with different topics may help students elaborate on their ideas and might lead them to a forming a common point of view. Division of a larger group into smaller ones with differentiated tasks (e.g. listing approved behaviours, values, describing characters etc.) would probably help them understand how a dictatorial system worked. We think similar methods can be used for teaching about dictatorships, other political systems or special situations (war propaganda) in other countries and contexts too, hoping for a deeper understanding of history and a higher appreciation of democracy.

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Singing makes life beautiful*Plot*

1950. The Silver Lyre Choir celebrates its 25th anniversary. The conductor, although claims that he supports socialist ideology, insists on singing of old, demoralising songs ("We are starving and we are suffering" etc.) Such songs are, however, inappropriate in the new, communist world. Understanding this, and encouraged by the local secretary of the communist party, some workers decide establishing another, progressive choir, called "New Tone". The conservative conductor tries to hinder their activities by inducing conflicts between the old and younger workers in the factory. Their struggle also hampers the work.. When it is revealed that the conductor caused the conflicts, and the new choir turns out to be strong and progressive, all members of the old choir leave him and join the new choir. In the end, they sing their oratory "Singing makes life beautiful", together at the National Choir Festival.