

Out of Context

Chico Buarque's *Budapeste*

Eszter Fűrth

One could say that if the problem of address emerges in the case of a literary work, there should be a public that can understand 'intimately' that text, and this makes this public the real, 'engaged' readers of that text. But what happens, when a novel negotiates the engaged status of the readers, who can read it intimately? Chico Buarque's *Budapeste* does something similar with its Hungarian public.

In his study on the problem of address in world literature¹ Michael Allen investigates the question from two aspects: from the aspects of addressing and of reading. As he remarks the importance of the context was underlined on both sides by previous critics. In the case of the writer Allen refers to Sartre, and to the notion of the engaged writer, who can only speak from his own, actual position. In the case of reading Allen uses Sartre's notion of the split public. "We have, then, if we are to speak of split publics, one public for whom the text is a matter of reading and another public for whom the text is a matter of intimate understanding. An engaged writer, it seems, speaks closely to those who can intimately understand while being read by readers outside the immediate situation."²

The one, who can understand the text intimately, is the national, or as Fanon, the other writer used as source by Allen, says, the experiential reader. This reader is a part of the nation the text is addressed to, but this nation is not only an abstract category, but an "ever-present reality of the people". By this contextualization this reader understands all the allusions used in the text, while a non-national, non-engaged reader can recognize some links to the situation, but can never feel these references as deeply as the national does.

Allen's examples seem to be quite relevant in the case when a novel plays with the problem of the address, but rejects the classic model of the "engaged" writer and its text to a national public, and starts to play with the

opposition of an “engaged” and “non-engaged” reader, situation and the opportunity of finding an authentic experience. The Brazilian Chico Buarque’s *Budapest* does play with these categories. This text calls into play the images of a culture known by an engaged and a non-engaged public by changing the perspectives of a Brazilian and a Hungarian context. Buarque’s novel is a perfect example of the post-modern text that deconstructs the position of the author, brings the text back to itself by representing its self-reflective and self-constructing characteristics. However, my aim is not to analyze these textual instruments, but to find the consequences of a Hungarian aspect of reading. The novel tries to represent an authentic Hungarian context, but from a Brazilian point of view. This ‘trick’ had a significant response in the Hungarian criticism, but was always treated as a fault, or was said to be irrelevant for the purposes of the novel. Now I would like to emphasize that these elements have bigger importance, first and foremost from a Hungarian point of view. As we cannot read the text without recognizing these ‘faults’, we should bear them in mind throughout the interpretation. Now my aim is to find a way of reading this novel analyzing how it treats our engaged position, and how it treats the relationship between Hungarian and Brazilian culture.

The novel tells the story of a Brazilian ghost-writer José Costa whose works are very successful, but certainly his discretion not allows him to be a famous personality. Once, because of a crash-landing, the protagonist has to spend a night in Budapest, and falls in love with the Hungarian language. Later he returns to the country and with the help of a Hungarian woman, Kriska, he learns the language and becomes a successful ghost-writer also in Budapest. Later, returning to Brazil, he thinks that his career is finished, but after a while he is called from Hungary to come back, to enjoy his life as a celebrity writer, but whose book was written by another ghost-writer.

Buarque’s novel plays explicitly with the notion of the writer, who puts himself into different contexts, who doesn’t only uses masks, but who changes personality while writing. As Costa says in the book, not the others, owning his writings, were those who wrote into his books, on the contrary: it was he who wrote into theirs. “*Porque para mim, não era o sujeito quem se apossava da minha escrita, era como se eu escrevesse no caderno dele.*”³ After finishing the book for a German man he feels that the words just written down escape from

him: “*Palavras recém-escritas, com a mesma rapidez com que haviam sido escritas, iam deixando de me pertencer. Eu via minhas palavras soltas na tela e, horrorizado, imaginava que elas me abandonavam como o alemão perdia pelos.*”⁴ Costa, when reading the texts of his new rivals in the firm, recognizes that the young employees (who do the work that should have been written by Costa), write the same words that he would have written. As he reads the text of the young boy, he tries to figure out what should the next sentence be, and it stands there, just as he thought, but written by another person. “*Era ter um plagiário que me antecedesse*”⁵ The separated self of the writer comes more explicit, when he starts to write in Hungarian. While learning the language Costa doesn’t speak a word in his mother tongue, Portuguese, in order to forget all his memories and all his previous personality.

The multiplicity of the author in Buarque’s novel draws attention to the ad hoc situation of writing. With the radical fragmentation of the author Buarque makes the position of an engaged writer impossible. He reaches this on the one hand by the fact that Costa is a ghost-writer, who writes in the name of other persons, what makes the seek for the real context of the (real) writer impossible and indifferent. On the other hand, he can negotiate the engaged writer by the multiplicity and ephemerality of contexts, by the immediate “death” not only of the figured writer, but also its cultural context.

Buarque’s text not only dislodges the status of an engaged writer, but also that of an engaged public. The scene of this play is not inside the text, but in its cultural context, in its critical afterlife. The Hungarian reviews and critics of the novel can’t help mocking at the stereotypes used by the text. The main experience, from which the story is developed, is the Hungarian language and the city of Budapest. Costa becomes a great admirer of this culture, but the examples mentioned in the novel sounds funny for a Hungarian reader, as many of them are typical stereotypes, which are never used in reality.

Homi K. Bhabha writes that the stereotype has the characteristic of the fetish, as it hides the differences which are already known. According to Bhabha, the fetish is an ambivalent faith evolved by the recognition and rejection of differences. The desire for the unity of origin is menaced by the fragmentation, and the stereotype, while hiding differences, offers a point of identification, that

is a place of fantasy and defense. Stereotype is a fixed form of representation, which denies the play of differences.⁶ The hiding of differences happens in the *Budapeste*, as Buarque shows some fetishes of the Hungarian culture, like the history of football, the mythical connection with the Huns or the romantic pictures of the Tabán in Budapest.

The Hungarian names in the novel are bizarre, thanks to a special idea, that all the streets, squares and persons in the novel's Budapest are called by the names of the 'golden team' of the legendary Hungarian football of the 50's. This is how Costa names the writer Hidegkuti István, the secretary Puskás Sándor, the poet Kocsis Ferenc, the professor Buzánszky Zoltán, the inspector Grosics, and the publisher Lantos, Lorant&Budai (to be more tricky he changed the forenames). Costa appears on the Czibor square, on the Bozsik alley, and in the Hotel Zakariás. Not only the names are built up by Buarque's fantasy, but the whole city is figured out by him. For example, after the dance on the top of the Tower of Attila (never existed in Budapest), they go to Óbuda (a district full of houses of concrete built in the socialist area) for a walk in this old, medieval part of the city, full with straw-roofed houses (nowadays only existing in open-air exhibitions), and after the walk they listen to some operettas (in reality listened only by grandmothers, tourists and some fans of the genre).

These pictures should be the fantasies of Hungary by a foreigner, who lives very far from Central-Europe. These fantasies are enriched with some non-existing characteristics of the Hungarian language. For example, when Kriska wants to say sorry to Costa, she uses the form, 'punish me infinitely', that is (according to the text) is a usual form of saying sorry in Hungarian. "*Como forma coloquial de se expiar uma culpa, existe a expressão magiar (sic!) végtelenül büntess meg, isto é, castiga-me infinitamente, numa tradução imperfeita.*"⁷ Another non-existing linguistic example is the name of Costa's love and Hungarian teacher. Fülemlé Krisztina has a nickname, Kriska, because, according to the text, in Hungary this is the short form of Krisztina. Unfortunately, the name Kriska is never used by Hungarians, and sounds quite foreign for a native reader.

From a non-Hungarian point of view the real addressee of this novel, who understands all the allusions, cultural, geographical and linguistic references

should be the Hungarians. Although the author is Brazilian, we should be the ones who are engaged in the situation, the cultural context that the text invokes. As we saw by the examples, Buarque is not the 'cosmopolitan' writer who identifies himself with the Hungarian cultural context (as he said, he had only a map of Budapest and a Hungarian dictionary), and the Hungarian readers are not the ones, who are the only understanding addressees. We could say, that any reading public except for the Hungarian one could be the ideal addressee of this novel, any other reading public which don't recognize the false allusions to our culture. Using Sartre's form of a split public, we could say that Hungarians should be those who understand the text intimately, and the other readers should be those for whom the text is only a matter of reading. In case we remind ourselves of the fact that the novel works with stereotypes that are familiar to the foreigners, but are not used/practiced by Hungarians, we can change the previous binary. We can appoint that all those who knows nothing or not much more than a tourist about Hungarian culture can understand the text with their 'hearts' because for them these stereotypes are the elements from which the image of Hungary is built up. While Hungarians who know their own culture from an internal aspect are those who can interpret the novel with their intelligence (considering that these are the elements by which we are known).

However, this turning of the opposition leads us to the delayed status of the engaged, national reader. From the point of view of a foreigner the engaged readers should be the Hungarians, and vice versa, for the Hungarians, the foreigners own this position. As we can see, nobody can truly own the position of an engaged reader, Buarque's novel doesn't offer this position.

In his study Michael Allan arrives to the problem of the authentic experience. As he says "the tension plays out not so much on the level of who reads and who does not, but, more crucially, on the level of what gets deemed authentic experience".⁸ In the case of *Budapeste*, the question emerges whether it is possible to point to a context that could function as an origin of an authentic experience, when the only thing that appears in this novel is the ironic delay of this experience.

It would not be correct to handle Buarque's novel as a false interpretation of Hungarian culture, or as a demonstration of the lack of knowledge in relation

to Hungary or Budapest. As we have seen previously, the novel underlines the notion of the fragmented writer, who can never be located, and who does not have an intimate origin or a language as a native tongue. The same structure happens to the audience of the novel. The stereotypes used by Buarque make it impossible for a Hungarian reader to accept the story as their own, but rather owning an ironic attitude that keeps a distance between the text and its reader. But not only the Hungarian readers can feel this distance, since the other, Brazilian scenes of the novel are constructed of stereotypes as well. Actually Buarque knows the Brazilian context, culture and everyday life very well, so the use of such stereotypes should be the part of a wider notion.

The Brazilian stereotypes are not as explicit as the Hungarian ones, but are present in the novel. The name of the protagonist, José Costa is a typical one, it doesn't have the unique sense a name should have, just like in the case of Kafka's Josef K. José Costa could be as well the Portuguese equivalent of the name, Josef K., being as much a no name member of the society, as Kafka's protagonist. José Saramago uses the name José for the same thing, because it could be anybody. As he underlines it in his novels, the name José and Maria are the synonyms of man and woman in Portuguese. In the *Evangelho Segundo Jesus Cristo* the narrator tells that if someone said Maria, all the women would listen, even if it is not her name, because the name Maria and woman are the same.⁹ The same thing happens with the name José, which is the equivalent of men. The protagonist of the *Todos os Nomes* is called Senhor José, who is an employee of the Central Registry of Births. He is an everyday secretary, who works with names degraded to numbers. He is similar to the files he manages, for he is like a piece of data, using a name, which is between a name and a non-name, like a number, José.

The name José Costa is an empty sign, a typical stereotype of the Brazilian/Portuguese man. Costa's partner in the firm is called Cunha, which is also a typical Brazilian element. The famous Euclides da Cunha was the author of the legendary novel, *Os Sertões* that was one of the most important novels of the independent Brazilian literature. Cunha's novel of the war in Canudos served as theme for many authors, such as Sándor Márai, who wrote his *Judgement in Canudos (Ítélet Canudosban)* under the impression of this novel. Just as the novel *Os Sertões*, so as Cunha is a typical sign of the Brazilian culture. This is

why the name of the protagonist's firm, Cunha & Costa Cultural Agency is a stereotypical element. If this was not explicit enough, the window of the office fronts to the beach Copacabana, which is one of the most important and famous stereotypes of Brazil. When Costa, living in Hungary, thinks of Brazil such typical pictures come to his mind, like the Pão de Açúcar or a child consuming drugs. *"No meio de uma aula podia me acontecer de pensar no Pão de Açúcar, digamos, ou num menino careca fumando maconha, ou na Vanda chegando de viagem, a Vanda perguntado por mim, a Vanda enrolada numa toalha branca, mas se Kriska me surpreendesse desatento, batia palmas e dizia: a realidade, Kósta, volta á realidade. E nossa realidade, além das aulas cotidianas, era a Budapeste dos fins de semana alternados em que Pisti ficava a cargo do pai."*¹⁰

The protagonist thinks of his own country as it was only a tourist experience, built up by typical pictures of the country and personal pictures of his wife, Vanda, which are mixed in his fantasy and become unreal. This is emphasized by Kriska, who calls back Costa to reality. But this reality is also a non-existing fantasy, because their so called reality is Budapest, just as figured as Brazil is in the novel.

It is not surprising, that the picture of Brazil in Hungary is built up by stereotypes, just like the Hungarian culture in Brazil. But there is a main difference between these two schematic images and that is the everyday presence of Brazil in the world's culture. The economic export of this country has been very important since the beginnings of a European-like civilization in that land. Brazil was the jewel of the Portuguese crown, and also a significant fountain of the goods used in the European country. Before the end of the colonial relationship between the two states the economic and natural power of Brazil was bigger than that of Portugal. This resulted in the colonizer state being the one dependent on its colony and not the other way around.

Nowadays the economic export of Brazil is still important, but that of the cultural products has a greater effect on popular thinking. As Fernando Arenas¹¹ points out, the cultural relationship between Portugal and Brazil is not equal because although the Portuguese high-culture is well-known in Brazil, the Brazilian popular culture has such a remarkable effect, that its everyday culture, language and thinking is much more known and accepted in Portugal, than that of

Portugal in Brazil. In Portugal this has a remarkable effect on the language, as in 2008 they decided to enforce the unified spelling rules of the Countries of Portuguese Language (CPLP – Comunidades dos Países de Língua Portuguesa) accepted in 1990, and already ratified in Brazil, Cape Verde, São Tomé and Príncipe. These new rules in many cases accept the Brazilian way of writing, and not the European, so the Portuguese writing suffers a larger alternation than the Brazilian did. This may be an effect of the phenomenon that due to the everyday presence of the Brazilian media culture, the Portuguese understand the Brazilian language, but the Brazilians have difficulties in understanding the European Portuguese.

Not only Portugal, but all Europe has a daily connection with Brazilian culture. Brazil's cultural presence in this side of the ocean is due to its music (Chico Buarque himself is known primarily for his musical activity), its football, its famous sport/ritual, the capoeira and its media culture, first and foremost the telenovels. All these genres mediate information and stereotypes of the country that communicate a coherent image of this culture. In the case of the telenovels this characteristic is typical due to its function of popularizing a nation's features both inside and outside its borders. Not only Brazilian serials use this tool, for example, the Mexican telenovel, *Destilando Amor* dedicated long minutes in several episodes to conversations and inserted mini-films on the procedure of tequila production. This was a communication of an image of Mexico, as the authentic fountain of the tequila, and of a country with a tradition known and accepted all around the world. Certainly this image was a simple romantic picture of Mexico, with the agave plants bathing in golden sunlight and with the beautiful and honest workers, but had the message of a successful economy, constructing a better image of the country both in Mexico and in other cultures.

The Brazilian telenovels also use elements to communicate a good image of the country to the outer world. These characteristics are many times the same that were mediated by the romantic literature of the country that has not only an esthetic significance, but a pragmatic (socioeconomic) importance as well. In the 19th century Brazilian intellectuals tried to construct a grandiose and proud self of the nation. To reach this aim there were eight 'myths' in use, which appeared in literary and journalistic texts: the myth of the grand terrain; the rich nature of

the country; the equality of all Brazilians; the nobility of the Brazilian man; its hospitality and goodness; the patriarchy; the Brazilian woman, its beauty, sensibility and morality; the high level of the Brazilian civilization; and the myth of the 'Pax Octaviana', the state without war. These myths are used nowadays as well, not only in literature, but also in telenovels, this is how these cultural topics arrived to Hungary for example. Just to mention some serials broadcasted in our television, the *Mulheres de Areia* (Women of the Sand) transmitted the myth of the beauty of nature, especially the beach¹². The *Top Model* focused on the myth of the Brazilian woman, while the *Rei do Gado* (King of Livestock) emphasized the abundance of the Brazilian land.

The *A Escava Isaura* (The Slave Isaura) is a telenovel that has a special emphasis on the importance of national identity. The origin of the story, Bernardo Guimarães's novel suggests this theme, as it is an important piece of Brazilian national romantic literature. The serial just as the novel emphasizes the myth of equality of all Brazilians, as it focuses on the 'aboliconismo': the liberation of slaves. The 2004 remake of the legendary telenovel focuses on another romantic topic, the 'indianismo'. The hero of the Brazilian literary romanticism was the Native American, the figure, who—just like the cavalier in the European historical novels of romanticism—saved the poor and the women, fought with the evil, and was the most noble-hearted character in literature. This figure appears in the telenovel, saving the life of a character that was attacked on the road.

As we can see, the presence of Brazilian national myths and stereotypes in Hungary is an everyday phenomenon on television, and this presence is strengthened by the touristic importance of the country, appearing in ads and other forums of dreamy pictures of a summer paradise.¹³ Another factor of the popularity of Brazilian culture is the importance of sports. The immense spread of capoeira clubs brings the fighting technique of the poorest inhabitants of Rio's 'favelas' into the sport clubs of Europe. And—first and foremost—Brazilian football is known all around the world, also as another chance for the poorest to become a star. The Hungarian readers can recognize these well known stereotypes in the novel of Buarque, as they can see the world of telenovels, travel guides and sports magazines in it. The everyday presence of Brazilian culture in Hungary makes the recognition of Brazilian stereotypes for the

Hungarian readers easy. As they see the typical scenes of the telenovels and sports magazines in the novel, they could associate to these genres. This knowledge helps the Hungarian reader in rejecting these images as a native experience of this country, although Buarque is Brazilian. For a Hungarian public then it is obvious that there is no authentic scene in this novel, though it seems to offer two: one for the Hungarian and one for the Brazilian readers.

From another point of view it would be obvious to say that for Buarque, the use of stereotypes, the hiding of differences was the instrument of emphasizing that the scenes, countries and languages don't have any importance. The country beloved so much by Costa could be anywhere else, and the language could be anything that is hard to understand for a Brazilian.¹⁴ And vice versa, the protagonist could have any nationality, there is no importance of what countries and languages are mentioned. The point is only to have two countries far enough from each other to be as alien for the fragmented protagonist as it would be for a child.

However for a Hungarian reader the situation wouldn't be so simple, as he is the reader, who cannot avoid the recognitions that show the stereotypes. These elements, as they cover the differences, remain empty for these readers, and instead of constructing a real engagement, they develop an ironic relationship between reader and text.

If we follow Michael Allen's thinking and look for the answer for not who is reading and who is the engaged reader, but rather what can be considered as authentic experience, we can find that the novel rejects such an experience. Buarque is playing with this experience, as he tries to show it up from a foreign point of view. He shows a mirror for Hungarian culture, but this mirror shows not the Hungarian context itself, but rather a Hungarian culture from a Brazilian point of view. However, this mirror as it shows an image built up by empty stereotypes and unreal elements shows not the observed Hungarian but the observing Brazilian side of the relation. The mirror reflects the observer himself, but as this image is also unreal (as it is also built up by stereotypes), the whole reflective action remains empty. For both sides, the image seen in the mirror will be a foreign one, a collection of stereotypes.

As Renate Lachmann says, there are two ways of existing as a foreigner or stranger in a culture. She differentiates the “the foreign foreigner” and the “native foreigner”. The “foreign foreigner” is the member of another culture, and its otherness comes from its different cultural habits, rules, etc., while the “native foreigner” is a member of the group that treats him as other. The “foreign foreigner” is considered as enemy, while the “native foreigner” is treated as a sorcerer. These two categories keep changing as the differences between insider and outsider appear inside one culture as incorporated otherness. The foreigner becomes a sorcerer inside, constructing a double culture.¹⁵

The same thing happens in the *Budapeste*, when Hungarian culture appears as a foreigner for itself because its culture is seen from outside, and is presented as something strange to the Hungarian context. The image shown by the novel declares itself to be an authentic insight into the Hungarian culture, but remains a foreign, stereotypical view. The Hungarian culture represented as a “foreign foreigner” becomes a “native foreigner” for itself.

From a Hungarian point of view Buarque’s novel plays with the notion of engaged public, in a manner that it does not offer a status like that. The Hungarian reader can read the novel ‘intimately’, but cannot be engaged to it. It also negotiates the opportunity of finding an authentic experience, in which the novel could be contextualized. Though the novel seems to offer two engaged aspects (the Brazilian that observes Hungary, and the Hungarian that is observed by a Brazilian who became Hungarian), what remains is nothing more than the stereotypical images of these two countries. With its stereotypical elements it shows a double mirror for the Hungarian and Brazilian culture, but both sides of this mirror is empty, using a foreign picture of both cultures. For a Hungarian reader this double emptiness can be obvious, and by this recognition the *Budapeste* can be interpreted as a deconstruction of what is called authentic experience.

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¹Allen, Michael (2007)

²Allen, Michael (2007), 7

³Buarque, Chico (2003), 22

⁴Buarque, Chico (2003), 37

⁵Buarque, Chico (2003), 26

⁶Bhabha, Homi K. (2002), 637

⁷Buarque, Chico (2003), 55

⁸Allen, Michael (2007), 17

⁹ Woman in Portuguese is *mulher*, beginning with the same letter as *Maria*. This alliteration is brought into game in Saramago's *Manual de Pintura e Caligrafia*, where the love of the protagonist is called *M*.

¹⁰ Buarque, Chico (2003), 56

¹¹ Arenas, Fernando (2003), 23-27

¹² This has been a beloved theme since the beginnings of Brazilian literature. There are many famous descriptions of Brazilian coasts, just like the first manifestation of the Brazilian literature, the *Carta de Achamento* of Pero Vaz de Caminha, or the famous part of Bento Teixeira's *Prosopopeia*, the *Descrição do Recife de Paranambuco*, etc.

¹³ The image of Brazil as an earthly paradise has its roots in the time of colonization, when the land was communicated as a heavenly place to both the Portuguese crown and the expected settlers.

¹⁴ There is an allusion of this lack of importance in the text, when Costa meets two Romanian people and thinks that they speak Hungarian. He understands some words, but he thinks that Hungarian, just like so many European languages has many words taken from Latin.

¹⁵ Lachmann, Renate (1996), 284