

“The big red giant will explode”: Géza Hofi’s political implicatures from the happiest barracks in the socialist camp

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Abstract

By taking a pragma-rhetorical approach, this article characterises the genre of Géza Hofi’s political humour, developed during the communist Kádár era in Hungary, and investigates implicature as his main rhetorical device for conveying politically sensitive messages to the audience. Three of his most popular and representative performances from the mid-1970s and early 1980s are selected for a thorough investigation of how the use of tropes and certain figures of thought creates implicatures and identification between the actor-humorist and the viewers/listeners. It is demonstrated that Hofi’s theatrical stand-up comedy (or performance comedy) makes a monologic genre quasi-dialogic, another necessary component of the special atmosphere of his performances. The analysis is embedded into the East-Central European political context of the Cold War. In addition, the Hungarian societal climate of that time is also touched upon in order to provide better insight into the Hofi-phenomenon.

Keywords: implicature; pragmatics; rhetoric; political humour; Hungarian humour.

1. Introduction

Actor and comedian Géza Hofi (1936–2002) played a significant role in the public life of Hungary over the last nearly two decades of the Kádár regime (1956–1988). His extremely popular political one-man cabaret performances, broadcast on New Year’s Eve by Hungarian Television and sold on LPs and cassettes by the tens of thousands, had rendered him the

leading humorist of his country. Many of his sayings, phrases and jokes have passed into common use. The genre he developed is unique, but has deep roots in early Hungarian stand-up comedy, which emerged in the first half of the 20th century and was represented by compères such as Endre Nagy (1877–1938) and László Békeffi (1891–1962), the latter best known for his jokes about Hitler (Kövesdi 2012: 97). However, Hofi was also an excellent parodist, actor and singer, too versatile to be easily categorised along with his crossover genre. He was so impressive on stage that none of subsequent generations of Hungarian humorists have dared follow in his footsteps. Another reason the latter tend to refrain from adopting Hofi's suggestive manner of speaking is perhaps that after the change of regime in 1989–90, freedom of speech was achieved. Looking back to the second period of the Kádarian “soft dictatorship”, it was a subversive and intimate experience for the audience to be involved in a quasi-dialogue which, albeit mostly indirectly, gave voice to the doubts ordinary people had about the workings of the political and economic system. In fact, Hofi seemed to be braver and more outspoken than the risk he actually took, because the communist state authority needed a “safety valve” through which ordinary citizens could vent their everyday frustrations. Since 1990, political humour in Hungary has become less sophisticated.

In light of these historical circumstances, we should not be surprised that Gricean (1975) particularised implicatures abound in Hofi's talk production. The challenge he faced as a humorist under the administrative opinion-control of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party was how to criticise social and political issues in a witty way, without being censored, let alone banned. If the presence and frequency of implicatures depends on the character of one or another conversational enterprise (cf. Grice 1989: 369), we can expect that his complex speech genre is at least as rich in implicatures as “concerted talking” privileged by Grice. My focus in this paper concerns the rhetorical tools of creating implicatures in three of Hofi's cabaret performances, all containing an elaborated critique of the communist political system (*Építem a csatornámat* ‘I am building my gutter’, 1975; *Tiszta örültekháza* ‘A total madhouse’, 1980; *Nevezd csak Cucinak!* ‘Just call me Cuci!’, 1982). Before embarking on this analysis, I begin with a brief outline of the main points of Hofi's career and the genre of theatrical stand-up comedy. Equipped with such a background, we can then carefully scrutinise the verbal and non-verbal clues he employed with the use of his exceptional acting talent to signal implicatures. I wish to emphasise in advance that the feeling of a kind of conspiratorial wink between the performer and the audience is due to the ample use of implicatures.

2. The Hofi-phenomenon and the genre

Hofi's career did not start out smoothly. Since he was not admitted to the Hungarian Academy of Dramatic Arts (perhaps partly because his father was a gendarme under the Horthy era, and partly because he was not good enough at reciting poetry in front of the entrance exam committee), he began to work as a painter in a porcelain factory. He grew up in Kőbánya, a working-class district of Budapest. His mother, from whom he inherited his musicality, was a Stahanovist labourer in a cannery, while his father, who had a great sense of humour, found employment in a tobacco warehouse. In addition to the daily grind at the workplace, Hofi enrolled in the theatrical school run by Kálmán Rózsahegyi, a well-known

elderly actor. He was offered his first contract in 1960 by director József Szendrő, and he joined the company of the Csokonai Theatre of Debrecen, the third largest city of Hungary at that time. (It is now the second). Szendrő suggested that Hofi should change his surname (he was born Géza Hoffmann) to something more attractive to audiences. After spending three years as a young actor in Debrecen, Hofi decided to move back to the capital and he asked permission from the National Directing Agency to present his gigs throughout the country. He felt the genre of parody to be the closest to him, and he was right. Thanks to a radio broadcast on New Year's Eve 1968, he became famous overnight with his brilliant parody of the then-popular Hungarian pop music festival. János Komlós (1922–1980), appointed as the director of the newly established Mikroszkóp Stage, immediately recognised Hofi's talent and encouraged him to spread his wings in his cabaret theatre. Hofi accepted the offer and remained the favourite artist of Mikroszkóp's public until 1982.

Komlós was a controversial figure in the cultural life of the Kádár regime. He studied to be a rabbi, was sent to a labour camp during World War II, and after the communist takeover, joined the ÁVH (Office of State Defense), the infamous security police. Being personally involved, as Kövesdi (2012: 98) writes, in the torture of several innocent people, real or alleged political enemies of the dictatorship, he was later very unpopular among his colleagues, although this aversion was never communicated openly. Following the Soviet suppression of the 1956 revolution, he turned into a literary journalist and worked for two leading newspapers. His assignment as the director of the Mikroszkóp Stage raises questions even today about the intended function of this cabaret theatre, launched in 1967. In any case, Komlós was an educated writer, cabaret author, and the last Hungarian *compère par excellence* whose seemingly critical political satires and humorous monologues – through multiple twists and turns – implicitly supported the aims of the Party-state (Kaposy 2001: 163; Kövesdi 2012: 99). It was he who encouraged Hofi to become involved in political cabaret. In the beginning, they appeared on stage together. Then, as Hofi's skits attracted more and more viewers and his name became a guarantee of success, the cabaret transformed into a one-man show, but the two continued to co-author the scripts of the performances. Meanwhile, Hofi had not stopped making musical parodies and singing; the animated film *Megalkuvó macskák* ('Expedient cats', 1979), featuring crooner János Koós, and the song *Próbálj meg lazítani!* ('Try to relax!') are evergreen. Komlós died in 1980, and Hofi left the Mikroszkóp Stage for the Madách Studio Theatre in 1982, where there was always a full house at all his performances for many years. After the change of political regime, he did not come out in favour of any newly (re-)founded party or candidate, although it was evident from his words that he was not completely consistent when ridiculing those in power. At that time his health started to deteriorate (he put on weight, suffered a heart attack, and had an eye operation), but in February 2002, he made a brief return to the stage. Two months later, in the last days of the election campaign, he passed away in his sleep. It is no exaggeration to say that he created a special genre of humour under a totalitarian government and that his cabaret performances and other productions enjoyed great success among the public. He was awarded several artistic and state prizes such as the Jászai Mari Prize for actors (1970, 1973), the Merited and Excellent Performer Awards (1977, 1988), the Karinthy-ring for humorists (1979), and the Kossuth Prize (1998), the highest award for performers in Hungary (Furdy 2002; P. Török 2003).

Hofi's appearance has been described as follows: he walks sluggishly on stage, his stature has something lovably elephantine in it (Balogh *et al.* 2002: 9–57); he expresses a rich

range of emotions and opinions with his eyes, face and lips, or by knitting his bald forehead or eyebrows. He has a wide but surprisingly mobile waist, and, hence, he is able to take dozens of postures, which he accompanies by meaningful gestures. With a bit lazy pronunciation and an air of provinciality, he speaks the language of the ordinary man, using colloquial phrases, and, rather than declaring things, lets the audience guess the underlying message on the basis of their shared everyday experience. “To understand my show – I hope it does not seem immodest – one has to live here”, he said to a reporter. He himself can meet all the requirements of the genre of cabaret: he imitates and parodies different types of people, creates and releases dramatic tension in a flash, spices his performance with jokes, short stories, sketches, music, song lyrics and dance moves. As a chronicler of the current time, he filters what he and everyone else sees, hears and reads here and there through his own point of view, in order to call attention to something important which is liable to be overlooked. Revealing the weak points in the characters he depicts, he allows the viewers to look at themselves and the world around them honestly. In doing so, he draws his audience into the game.

The Janus face of the Hofi-phenomenon amidst the soul-numbingly dull public life of the Kádár era may be summarised in a question: Was he a genuine spokesman of the societal problems and daily agonies of communist Hungary, or just a puppet in the service of the Party who amused people? (Balogh *et al.* 2002: 9). As for the latter possibility, instead of promoting democracy and pluralism, a book written by a boulevard journalist has accused Hofi of actually helping to sustain the regime by leading his public astray; what’s more, at the top of his success in the 1980s, he was interested only in money, and often treated his colleagues unfairly on tours in the country (Menyhért Mészáros 1991). “Inside the door”, of course, he was seen differently. His nephew, Péter Ambrus (2006, 2012), published two volumes of interviews with relatives and acquaintances, while his first wife’s nephew, László Vnoucek (2005), shares his own family experiences. They reveal that Hofi was undemonstrative but charitable, lived an austere life with his wife and mother-in-law in a small flat (on the other hand, he had a Mercedes and a summer house in Visegrád, in the Danube Bend, and, like many Party bigwigs, he was fond of hunting). He had a lot of gigs, and worked out the smallest details of his performances with meticulous care. His grandfather, of German descent, was a well-to-do village mayor, while his wife’s parents were deported after World War II from Upper Hungary, annexed to Slovakia by the Treaty of Trianon (1920). Remarkably, he was married in a Roman Catholic church in 1959, during the anticlerical period of the communist era, which is worth bearing in mind when interpreting certain hints in his performances, as we will see in the following section. It is also true, nonetheless, that prominent members of the Party were regular visitors of his cabarets and, according to his sister, he could ask Kádár, whom he parodied many times, anything. (“Bravely, Comrade Hofi! Just more bravely!” Kádár once encouraged him in the theatre). When György Aczél, Kádár’s powerful Minister of Cultural Affairs, wanted Komlós to be relieved of the directorship of the Mikroszkóp Stage, Hofi was called in twice, but he refused to take the position (Ambrus 2006: 64, 83–84, 2012: 82, 102).

In today’s Hungary, the most fashionable genre of entertainment – especially among the younger generations – is stand-up comedy, a new style of humour imported from Anglo-Saxon culture (Kövesdi 2012). The typical format frames the evening by a “host” who warms up the audience, introduces the performers, and, in the end, closes the show. His (or her) “guests”, usually three young stand-up comedians in succession, recite their routines made up

of real-life or invented stories and short jokes called “bits”, embellished with rhetorical ornaments such as hyperbole, metaphor and irony. As Greenbaum (1999) argues, humorous narratives of stand-up comedians are inevitably rhetorical, being designed to create and maintain a credible stage persona or comic voice that controls the situation, to bridge the gap between the speaker and the heterogeneous audience, and to convince them to adopt a comic vision that challenges the mainstream view of the social order. One feature essential for gaining the applause of the audience is the impression of spontaneity fostered through the continuous stream of story telling. The stories are bound together through loose associations, their “heroes” or targets are family members, (alleged) friends, celebrities and politicians, but the “protagonist” is the performer. Contrary to this “pure” form of stand-up comedy unknown in Hungary in the 1970s and 1980s, Hofi (with Komlós’s help) amalgamated the genre of political cabaret and monocomedy into theatrical stand-up comedy or “performance comedy” (Mintz 2008: 290–292) in which – using costumes, sets and props – he takes a character who reflects the economic and political state of affairs from his perspective. The dramatic setting of the “play” is counterbalanced by an informal (at times impolite but not obscene) style and occasional heckling directed at those in the audience who seem to be shocked or who are slow to react to a “politically incorrect” utterance. In effect, Hofi’s scoffing manner is an inherent part of his stage persona that seeks to engage in a permanent (albeit only apparent) dialogue with the public.

3. The rhetorical patterns of Hofi’s political implicatures

In a chapter of a book dedicated to Hungarian humour, I have provided evidence of humorous violations of Grice’s (1975) co-operative and Leech’s (1983) politeness maxims and humorous clashes between them from early Hungarian film comedies starring Gyula Kabos and the novel *Kornél Esti* written by Dezső Kosztolányi (Nemesi 2012: 15–24; cf. Goatly 2012: 224–246). In this study, Kabos’s characters are quoted as making fun of obvious implicatures by failing to infer or contradict them (24–26). Concentrating on Géza Hofi’s political cabaret, the present article focuses on “flouting”, or, more precisely, “exploitation”, the situation “that characteristically gives rise to a conversational implicature” (Grice 1975: 49, 1989: 30). I will not deal with the grey area between explicit meanings and particularised implicatures, ranging from presuppositions to generalised conversational implicatures (see e.g. Sperber & Wilson 1995 [1986]; Davis 1998; Bach 1994, 1999; Levinson 2000; Carston 2002; Atlas 2004; Horn 2004; Potts 2005; Huang 2011). Only particularised implicatures (used here without the genre-defining adjective “conversational” and abbreviated as PIs) are those cases in which the intended meaning *q* (the implicatum) “is carried by saying that *p* on a particular occasion *in virtue of special features of the context*” (Grice 1975: 56, 1989: 37, emphasis added). Research has highlighted the importance of intonational and visual markers – such as tone of voice, “blank face”, smile, movements of the head, eyebrows, eyes and mouth – in the perception of PIs, especially with sarcastic content (Attardo *et al.* 2003; Caucci & Kreuz 2012). As will be detailed, Hofi utilises a wide variety of multimodal contextual clues in his performances in order to elicit PIs.

Central to the study of the verbal art of political humour is the fact that PIs tend to appear as tropes or figures of thought (Nemesi 2013: 139–148). Not surprisingly, ancient rhetoricians were the first to note the function of suggesting or even hinting at what is not

actually said (e.g. Aristotle 1926: 1357a; Cicero 1939: Orator, 39–40; Quintilian 1921: 9.2.65). Hofi and his associates were well aware of the impact the bold implicatures had on their audiences. I aim to point out which figures of speech he employed repeatedly to convey implicatures. Contrary to what Gu (1994) and Liu & Zhu (2011) claim, I believe that a precise borderline between pragmatics and rhetoric cannot be established, and, hence, it is useless to sharply demarcate the pragmatic and rhetorical level of discourse analysis. Instead, combining their intellectual resources may help to elaborate a basis for a fully-fledged theory of language use and understanding (Dascal & Gross 1999; Keller 2010; Nemesi 2013). According to Leech (1983: 15), who is not reluctant to call his conversational-maxim approach to pragmatics “rhetorical”, the effective use of language is a general endeavour in human communication, not restricted to skilful persuasion, public speaking or literary expression. If so, “pragmatics, rhetoric and social psychology (as a study of social behaviour in general) are collaborators in coping with the extreme complexity of talk exchanges” (Gu 1993: 430).

Let us now pursue the idea that exploitations are carried out “by means of something of the nature of a figure of speech” (Grice 1975: 52, 1989: 33). More radically, the bulk of PIs is hypothesised here to occur as figures of speech (classical tropes and/or figures of thought). Hofi’s televised performance comedies chosen as data sources contain plenty of PIs. I will explore each of the three in turn.

3.1. “Épitem a csatornámat” (‘I am building my gutter’, 1975)

Mature Kádárism is commonly referred to as “goulash communism”, a metaphorical name bringing to mind a traditional Hungarian dish and attempting to capture the relatively decent living standards of the country compared to the other Soviet-style systems in the Eastern Bloc, which in Hungary were achieved by a cautious reform policy of small improvements and concessions (Gough 2006). However, this slight deviation from orthodox Marxism could not be practised without serious anomalies. In the 1970s, for instance, people commonly undertook extra work in addition to their official jobs; what is more, they worked on their own account on their company’s time and with the company’s materials (a mundane activity called *fuszás* in colloquial Hungarian, from the German word *Pfuscher* ‘bungler’). Hofi addresses the topic by slipping into a tinsmith’s clothes (Figure 1) as if he were an actor “in the daytime” who “in the evening”, after the performance, builds gutters. With a tool box and a small ladder in his hands, he appears on stage whistling and begins singing a rousing rallying song, but, as he glances around, he breaks off and modifies it:

- (1) *Elvtárs, a csákányt... ellopta valaki.*
[‘Comrade, the pickaxe... has been stolen by somebody.’]

Rhetorically speaking, (1) can be interpreted as a complex figure of *reticentia* (in Greek, *aposiopesis*; breaking off an utterance already begun), *correctio* (in Greek, *epanorthosis*; correcting an improper utterance), allusion and irony (for the classical definitions and illuminating examples, see e.g. Quintilian 1921; Quinn 1982; Preminger & Brogan 1993; Lausberg 1998). What happens here is that Hofi recalls the lyrics of a rallying song which the audience is supposed to be familiar with (allusion), and recontextualises them ironically by the figures of *reticentia* and *correctio*.



Figure 1. Preparing to work. (See on DVD: Hofi tükre No. 2. Hungaroton, 2003.)

It turns out, thus, that some people do steal things from their workplace, even though such conduct is irreconcilable with communist ideals. This embarrassing implicatum is reinforced by (2), in which Hofi comments on the new slogan “Do it yourself!”

- (2) *Ez egy ilyen új mozgalom, mer' eddig mi volt helyette? Hogy „elvtársak, és akkor fogjunk össze, és akkor kollektíve, és akkor, elvtársak, és akkor együtt, és akkor felépítjük ezt...” [...] Most akkor ezt félre: „vidd haza, oszt' csináld magad”. [...] Egyébként, visszatérve erre a „csináld magad” dologra, ez se teljesen új, mer' eddig is hazavitték... Csak akkor már kész vót, úgyhogy... Ááá, van gond, higgye el, van gond.*

[‘It is sort of a new movement, ‘cause what was being said before? That “Comrades, and then let us unite, and then collectively, and then Comrades, and then together, and then we will build this...” [...] Now, then, set it aside: “Take it home, and do it yourself.” [...] By the way, coming back to this “Do it yourself!” thing, it’s not totally new either, ‘cause things had been taken home before now, too... But they were taken home when they were all done, so... Ah, there are problems, believe me, there are problems.’]

We can inferentially derive that ‘people working in producing firms stole and still steal, only the method changes’. Roman rhetoricians like Quintilian (1921) would call this form of PIs *emphasis*, a figure of thought “which is used when some latent sense is to be elicited from some word or phrase” (9.2.64). It is interesting to note that Quintilian seems to grasp the importance and the main functions of creating implicatures in the following passage:

Similar, if not identical with this figure is another, which is much in vogue at the present time. For I must now proceed to the discussion of a class of figure which is of the commonest occurrence and on which I think I shall be expected to make some comment. It is one whereby we excite some suspicion to indicate that our meaning is other than our words would seem to imply; but our meaning is not in this case contrary to that which we express, as is the case in *irony*, but rather a hidden meaning which is left to the hearer to discover. As I have already pointed out, modern rhetoricians practically restrict the name of *figure* to this device, from the use of which *figured* controversial themes derive their name. This class of figure may be employed under three conditions: firstly, if it is unsafe to speak openly; secondly, if it is unseemly to speak openly; and thirdly, when it is employed solely with a view to the elegance of what we say, and gives greater pleasure by reason of the novelty and variety thus introduced than if our meaning had been expressed in straightforward language (9.2.65–66).

Beyond the PI pointed out above, Hofi's monologue in (2) contains an ironical twist ("Do it yourself" as 'Steal it') and another attitude-implicature (Nemesi 2004, 2010, 2013) parodying the demagogic style of agitprop. The rhetorical triggers of this scornful attitude-implicature are the figures of *sermocinatio* (fabricating statements, conversations or soliloquies to characterise persons) and *polysyndeton* (the repetition of conjunctions in close succession), supplemented by intonational (rising-falling pitch glides repeated in the rhythm of the *polysyndeton*) and non-verbal (mocking enthusiasm on his face, shaking his fists) clues. When he stresses the word *this* in the clause "and then we will build this" shaking his fists, it evokes, albeit ambiguously, a well-known rude gesture (*bras d'honneur*) expressing vigorous denial.

Theft at the workplace is not the only sign of moral decline. Hofi's tinsmith character is an unindustrious worker, which reflects the mentality of the whole of society. His poor attitude to work is manifested in his exaggerated reaction to the spontaneous move of taking a piece of gutter in his hand during story telling. He throws it away indignantly and kicks it for good measure:

- (3) *Teljesen össze vagyok zavarva már, de tényleg... [...] Kicsit nem figyelek oda, mindjárt dolgozni akarok. Én még ilyet...*
[‘I’m totally confused, really... [...] If I don’t pay attention for a moment, I want to start to work immediately. I haven’t seen such a...’]

Therefore, the natural behaviour would be to work, but people force themselves not to work because it is not worth it. Further, the habit of excessive drinking has spread among the workers represented by one of Hofi's colleagues in his stories, another actor who, allegedly, always drinks and causes awkward situations (they form a two-member socialist brigade). The "boors" who do not solve but only cause difficulties are also criticised: there are so many of them in different positions that "they could encircle the Earth twice". The performance is saturated with verbal and non-verbal exaggerations (hyperboles).

"Cultural goods" are primarily transmitted to the workers through the transistor radio, so Hofi turns it on for a while. Consider the PI involved in an *interrogatio* (rhetorical question):

- (4) *Zene, ó, zene... Nemhogy inkább egy olyan kis gazdaságpolitikai szöveget mondanának. Hát nem? Hát... zenén ki alszik el?*
[‘Music, oh, music... They should broadcast something good on economic policy instead. Don’t you think? After all... who can fall asleep listening to music?’]

The implicatum is obvious: talking about economic policy broadcast by the radio is usually so boring that listeners feel like going to sleep.

One of the core messages of the performance is that the intelligentsia as a social stratum should not be reduced in favour of the working class and the peasantry. Hofi puts this metaphorically in (5), utilising the polysemy of the verb *ráfázik* ('catch a cold' and 'get one's fingers burnt'):

- (5) *Szerintem ezért mondhatta a rádióban Buga doktor, hogy „Ötöcködjünk rétegesen, mer’ ráfázunk!”*
[‘I think that might be why Doctor Buga said on the radio, “Remember to dress in layers, ‘cause we may catch a cold/get our fingers severely burnt!’”]

Of course, it is (Hungarian) society that needs to “dress in layers” at the level of what is implicated. But metaphors are creatively employed throughout. 1975 was the year of the Apollo–Soyuz “space rendezvous”, the first joint US–Soviet space flight that symbolised the end of the space race and the new policy of détente between the two superpowers. Making fun of the TV broadcast of the event, Hofi demonstrates the docking of the two spacecrafts with two gutter pipes, one longer than the other (Figure 2). At first he “mixes up” the pipes, representing the American Apollo with the longer piece (non-verbal humour), and the Soviet Soyuz with the shorter piece. Then, after quickly correcting himself, he begins to explain the process using the word *légkör* (‘atmosphere’) both in its literal and metaphorical senses:

- (6) *Azér’ kell zsilipelő kamra, mert mind a két űrhajóban más a légkör. [...] Azér’ kell zsilipelő kamra, hogy a jó légkör [szovjet] ne mehessen át ebbe a...*
[‘A lock chamber is required because the atmosphere in the two spacecrafts is not the same [with “blank face”, the audience bursts in applause]. A lock chamber is required so that the good atmosphere [moving his mouth to say “Soviet” without any sound] should not go into this... [indicating the shorter pipe with an exaggerated grimace of disgust].’]



Figure 2. The two spacecrafts. (See on DVD: Hofi tükre No. 2. Hungaroton, 2003.)

Likewise, the theme of house building offers the metaphor of being upstairs, working on the roof (pertaining to the leaders of the state who make decisions of great influence on society), and being downstairs (pertaining to the citizens who are affected by those decisions):

- (7) *Na, szóval, múltkor láttam egy másik táblát – az meg egy ilyen munkavédelmi tábla volt –, ilyen szöveg, azt mondja: „Vigyázz, a tetőn dolgoznak!” Hát, kérem, hogy fönt a tetőn komoly munka folyik, azt az emberek, ugye, érzik. Én csak azt nem értem, hogy azért, mert fönt komolyan dolgoznak, mért mindig lent kell vigyázni.*
[‘Anyway, the other day I saw another sign – it was a safety sign – with the following text: “Caution. Men working overhead.” Well, you see, that there is serious work going on overhead on the roof, people feel it. The only thing I don’t understand is, when people are working seriously overhead, why is it always those who are down that should be cautious.’]

As a key element of the metaphor (or allegory) BUILDING HOUSES IS BUILDING SOCIALISM, Hofi seems to be sceptical or even ironic about the statement that “everything else is ready now, only the gutter is missing” (the clues are the intonational contour, the raising of the eyebrows and a meaningful sigh). The bottle opener and the beer flowing out of the bottle represent symbolically the “desire for freedom” (“Is it a Western beer?” he asks in an aside). The co-occurrence of *reticentia* and *correctio* can be observed once again in (8) when he

“accidentally” uses the folk phrase *isten-isten* (literally, ‘God-God’) that is rooted in religious tradition and means ‘cheers!’, implicating that religion is ideologically stigmatised:

- (8) *Hát akkor isten-ist... illetve, szabadság, elvtárs!*
[‘Well then, God-G... or rather, freedom, Comrade!’]

There would be much more to say on how Hofi makes allusions to current issues, connecting them to form a well-rounded performance, but I hope my discussion provides at least some insight into the rhetorical elaboration of his PIs. The audience is continuously heckled and provided with a wide array of vocal and non-verbal clues to help them make inferences. (He has a stooge, dubbed *Beszédes* ‘Talkative’, who sometimes makes comments and helps achieving the intended dialogical effects.) Being addressed and intellectually stimulated, people enjoy reading Hofi’s thoughts in the belief that official politics may be criticised in a sophisticated fashion without negative consequences.

3.2. “*Tiszta örültekháza*” (‘*A total madhouse*’, 1980)

The 1980 performance offered an even better opportunity for Hofi to demonstrate his acting abilities. According to his role in the show, he has been mentally confused and has been committed to a psychiatric ward. The cause of his illness can be attributed, at least partly, to the social and political circumstances, which constitutes a very daring criticism of the system, exploiting the wider margin of outspokenness allowed “a patient in a madhouse”. This is the first time that he addresses the audience as “te” (informal ‘you’ in singular), using the familiar form, which is inappropriate and impolite in Hungarian between adult strangers. His humorous depiction of daily and societal affairs discloses several defects and paradoxes in the socialist state organization, its economy and cultural policy. He touches upon the failures in public supply (gasoline restriction, sugar shortage), poverty, and the bad decisions of the leaders in general, but what he deals with in more detail is the crisis of the planned economy and of industrial production. There is a plastic injection-molding machine in the ward that produces white bedpans for inpatients (from time to time a ringing is heard and the machine spits out half a dozen of these bedpans). Hofi’s character does not know what to do with the ever increasing number of bedpans: he speculates that they could be sold as slippers to the ethnographic museum, as safety helmets to “the Minister Comrades” for factory visits, as political mirrors in Africa, or else griddles or tennis rackets. However, the object proves to be unsuitable for all of these functions. Unsalable merchandise hoarded in stocks is symbolised by the bedpans kicked under the bed. But after a time they cannot be hidden, even though our protagonist tries to cover them with a blanket, “borrowed from the neighbouring ward”, with a huge one dollar banknote on it. However, he soon realises that “it’s not good either because it should be given back”, namely, loans taken in dollars to finance the deficits of state enterprises will have to be repaid. “What will our neighbours say looking at our successes?” he asks ironically. Hence, the unnecessary number of bedpans metonymically and metaphorically maps the overproduction and bad structure of the Hungarian planned economy.

Indeed, the visual and verbal components of figurative meaning generation go hand in hand throughout the show. In the opening scene we see Hofi hanging on a rope (Figure 3). Later he expounds this visual metaphor:

- (9) *Nekem teljesen modern betegségem van, tudod? Neked elmondom, de nem ám elpofázni ám... Én vagyok egy nagy magyar vállalat. Azér' vagyok felakasztva, mert így legalább úgy látszik, mintha állnék. [...] Nehogy megzavarjon valamelyikőtöket: amin itt lógtam, az nem kötélt... Ez az állami támogatás. Csak ennek egy hibája van: a testtől mindig a fejet választja el. Fej nélkül meg nem megy ám...*

[‘I have a bona fide modern disease, you know? I will tell you about it, but mind, don’t you go babbling it out, all right... I’m a big Hungarian company. I’m hanging because this way at least it looks like I’m standing. [...] Don’t let yourself be confused, it is not a rope I’m hanging on... It is state subsidy. But it’s got a fault: it always separates the head from the body. And without the head, nothing doing...’]



Figure 3. “I’m a big Hungarian company.” (See on DVD: Hofi tükre No. 3. Hungaroton, 2004.)

The closing point implicates a more sarcastic opinion of the industrial production of the time. Although, in a strict sense, it breaks the coherence of the metonymical metaphor THE BEDPANS ARE THE PRODUCTS OF THE HUNGARIAN STATE COMPANIES, the metaphorical shift added in (10) renders the message of the show unequivocal:

- (10) *Egy megoldást még megpróbálok. Figyeljél! Egy nagy cocialista vállalattal kötök egy nagy cocialista szerződést, azzal fogok nagy cocialista kooperálni úgy, hogy én gyártom az ágytálat, ők meg a beleválót!*

[‘I’m going to try one last solution. Listen! I’m going to enter into a large socialist contract with a large socialist company, with which I will large socialist cooperate so that I will produce the bedpan, and they will provide what goes into it!’]

Grammatical and agrammatical repetition of expressions (*geminatio*) is not the only sign of the patient’s “disturbed” state of mind. Sometimes he keeps humming to himself or shouts at the audience nervously with a bewildered look on his face; sometimes he calms down and becomes communicative, introducing his new stories by the phatic presequence “Te, haver, figyelj, gyere! Képzeld el...” (‘Hey, buddy, listen, come on! Just imagine...’) with a question-like “Would you?” intonation. Getting tired of the agitprop language, he stutteringly reiterates the irregular derivative *cocialistailag* (‘socialistically’), changing the

first consonant *sz* (s) to *c* (ts) affectedly (the figure of *antisthecon* in rhetoric), which here is also a form of irony or sarcasm.

Another metaphor that comes from his “disturbed” imagination is that of cycling down a slope, exploiting the polysemy of the noun *kormány* (‘handlebar, steering wheel’ and ‘government’). The “bicycle” is the iron frame of his bed:

- (11) *Most jut eszembe, nem is kell hajtani. Annyira a lejtőn megyünk, hogy itt már nem... [...] Nemcsak én megyek a lejtőn: a csomagtartó, a váz, a kerék, a kormány... Az meg így keresztbe van, tudod?*
[‘It’s just occurred to me that there’s no need to pedal at all. We are going downhill so fast that there is no more need here to [applause]... It’s not only me going downhill, but also the basket, the frame, the wheel, the handlebar [‘government’]... it’s turned crosswise, you know?’]

Many further puns are woven into the comedy of Hofi’s show. For instance, the patient – allegedly – suggested to his neurologist that psychiatric patients should not be treated with electric shocks but with newspaper reading shocks. The effect would be the same, though “in the newspaper there is no ‘volt’, only the future, Comrades” (in Hungarian the word-form *volt* is homonymous, referring not only to the unit of electric potential difference, but also to the past: ‘was, were’ and ‘ex, former’). As illustrations, he cites two foolish articles from *Családi Lap* (‘Family Magazine’) and *Iffjú Kommunista* (‘The Young Communist’), making fun of them. He says about the Carpathian basin that it is a windless area but, as such, “the stink” (in a loose metaphorical sense) cannot be removed from it easily.

The audience’s impression of being part of a dialogue is unceasing throughout. After the politically cutting utterances, the hospitalised character usually quips – just like the “actor-tinsmith” did in the 1975 performance – to one of the viewers who seems to disapprove of the criticism (e.g. “Are you scared, Bunny?”, “Is it different from what they tell you in the seminar? Why didn’t you come here right away?”). By doing so, Hofi, stepping out of his role for a moment, calls attention to the presence of risky implicatures. He often uses the figure of *simulatio*, pretending to identify his stage character with the official ideology of the Party as if he were very angry with capitalists and petits bourgeois, just like the Party members during the “two-minutes hate” in George Orwell’s dystopian novel *1984*. However, his character’s anger is exaggerated by intonational and non-verbal means (speaking faster with a higher pitch, knitting his eyebrows, grimacing) to yield a dissociative attitude.

As I indicated above, multimodality in creating figurative meanings is a central feature of the show. The protagonist is seemingly eager to show off his “new suit”, a pyjama shirt with lots of military and political medals pinned on it (Figure 4). There is a medal on his back, another on his arm, and there are many more on his left chest. He pretends to be very proud of them, especially the one on his right chest with a five-pointed red star, perhaps the best-known symbol of communism, but he adds that he has a kilo and a half of these at home, which he won at cards. This comment, made in a scene which is actually based on complex multimodal hyperbolic irony, implicates that such medals worn by leaders of the army and other law enforcement agencies are worthless.



Figure 4. The bedpan as a mirror and the “new suit”. (See on DVD: Hofi tükre No. 3. Hungaroton, 2004.)

The People’s Republic of China is metonymically linked to the yellow pill that the patient does not want to take because of “the recent border incidents” (occurring at the time between the Soviet Union and China). And finally, when he applies for more and more subsidies by pulling the rope mentioned in (9), first we hear the bells ringing, and then water flushing in the toilet. These metaphors concerning the state budget combine the visual and the sonic modes (Forceville & Urios-Aparisi 2009).

Overall, there seems to be no difference between living “inside” or “outside” the madhouse. Whenever the patient utters (12), the story is about the outside world:

- (12) *Tiszta örültekháza, mi?*
[‘A total madhouse, isn’t it?’]

He jokes that he was the one who locked up the mental hospital in order to prevent “all those silly people” walking outside from coming in, also commenting that he would grant women equal wages for equal work only under an attack of nerves (under “normal” circumstances, he would not). The audience ultimately comes to realise that the “madhouse” is to be metaphorically understood as a distorted mirror-image of society.

3.3. “*Nevezz csak Cucinak!*” (‘Just call me Cuci!’ 1982)

Two years later, the setting of the political cabaret is not a mental institution but a general hospital, and the specific situation is a special surgery for a special patient. The theme music of the then-popular Czechoslovak television series *Nemocnice na kraji města* (‘Hospital on the Outskirts of Town’), as an allusion, helps to contextualise the performance even before Hofi enters the stage with a tray of champagne flutes in his hands (Figure 5). He greets the public in a familiar style and proposes a toast to the New Year, suggesting at the same time that they ceremonially switch to mutual first-name informality – his trademark for the rest of his career. (The over-familiar behaviour of the “mad” character in the previously discussed comedy skit could be put down to his “mental problems”).



Figure 5. Proposing a toast to the New Year. (See on DVD: Hofi tükre No. 5. Hungaroton, 2006.)

He warns the audience in advance that what they will hear are rather delicate matters and, as a narrator of his own play, he sets up the situation:

- (13) *Nagyon jó, hogy eljöttetek, mer' segítség kéne. Az az igazság, hogy igen-igen komplikált felvétel következik most – a végén majd te is meglátod, hogy igazam van. Sok mindent nem tudom, hogy hogy kéne mondani, meg hogy hogy szabad, meg hogy hogyan akarom, meg hogy hogy lehet. Arra kérek benneteket, hogy segítsetek: mikor valami valahogy úgy kicsit rázósabb, komplikáltabb, akkor így csinálni [...], és akkor, akkor [...] világos, és már ugrom is, jó? Na hát akkor kezdünk neki. Hát, kérlek szépen, hogy mondjam csak, szóval, ez egy ilyen kórházi műtő lesz itt, gondold el, illetve látod is. Benne lesz egy ilyen műtőasztal, azon fogok majd feködni, és orvos mondja, hogy „Kapcsolja be az altatógépet!”. Gombot megnyomnak, és az jön a hangszórón, hogy „a szocializmus építése, az üzemi demokrácia éves szinten...” [...], s már mind el vagyok kábítva, tudod? Olyan, mint az ópium, nem?*

[‘It’s good that you’ve come because I need help. The truth is, a very, very complicated recording is coming up now – you will see in the end that I was right. I don’t know how I’m supposed to say a number of things, how I’m allowed to, and how I want to say it, and how I can speak about things. I want you to help me: when something becomes a little bit ticklish or too complex, do this [showing disendorsement and shaking his head], and then, then [placing his index finger on his mouth] it’ll be clear, and I’ll got off the subject, okay? Well, let’s go at it. So, what I want to say is, this will be a hospital surgery here, just imagine it, or actually, you can see it yourself. There’ll be an operating table here and I’ll be lying on it. The doctor says, “Turn on the anaesthesia machine,” someone pushes a button, and what comes through the loudspeaker is “The building of socialism, the workshop democracy in a one-year period...” [pretending to be falling asleep and snoring] and I’m fully narcotised, you know? It’s like opium, isn’t it?’]

In contrast to the capitalist world, in his country (and in the socialist bloc in general) “opium is made not from poppies but from spiel”, he exaggerates metaphorically. Recall that the patient from the madhouse also raised the issue that public discourse, like political journalism, could shock people. The stupidity of propaganda speeches, again, is held up to ridicule in a humorous stuttering fashion by employing the figures of *geminatio*, *simulatio*, irony and hyperbole, accompanied by the contribution of intonation, facial expressions and gestures.

Interestingly, the “narrator” drops several metacommunicative hints about the dangers of bringing up taboo topics (like oppression and imprisonment). This is hardly a tactic used to evade censorship but one intended to encourage the audience to look for political implicatures actively. In effect, the role of the narrator and that of the character in Hofi’s narrative do not diverge sharply. The character introduces himself as follows:

- (14) *Én a magyar szocializmus vagyok. Nyugodtan nevezd csak Cucinak. Hogy közelebb kerüljünk egymáshoz...*
[‘I am Hungarian Socialism. Just call me Cuci... this way we’ll get closer to each other...’]

“Cuci” was the nickname of both a cousin of Hofi’s who died young and of Hofi himself in his childhood (Ambrus 2006, 2012), but in (14) it is a pun based on the form *szoci* ‘socialist’, derived through back-formation from the word *szocializmus* ‘socialism’. As “Cuci” states, despite the fact that there is nothing wrong with him, he has been subjected to a series of operations since the time he was born. The “doctors” remove something from him every now and then, but later they change their mind and put it back, and so on, and this has been going on for more than thirty years. Finding a way to turn this metaphor in a more practical direction, he goes as far as he can to predict the future collapse of socialism:

- (15) *Te, azon gondolkodtam, hogy akkor mire cserélnének, hogyha egyszer totálkáros lennék. Képzeld el...*
[‘You know, I was wondering what I would be replaced with if I were to become totaled at some point. Just imagine...’]

By the early 1980s, the Stalinist Mátyás Rákosi’s hard-line dictatorship (1947–1956) had almost completely lost its invulnerable status. Given this background, Hofi devotes the bulk of his show to the excesses and absurdities of the Rákosi era. He spices his performance with jokes delivered in a very memorable way. The most famous of these is an animal joke translated into English in (16):

- (16) “Hey, man,” says the young wolf to the young fox, “let’s beat up the rabbit!”
“Okay, tomorrow,” says the young fox.
“No, let’s beat him now,” the young wolf insists.
“Good idea, but why?” the young fox asks.
“If he wears a hat, we’ll beat him up for that, and if he doesn’t, for that.”
So they go to the rabbit and beat the living daylights out of him.
“Let’s beat the rabbit up again!” proposes the young wolf the next day.
“We beat him up fine yesterday,” says the young fox.
“But let’s beat him up again today!”
“All right, but why?”
“Listen, we’re gonna ask him to give us a cigarette. If he gives us one with a filter, we’ll beat him for that, and if he gives us one without a filter, then for that.”
So they go to the rabbit and say, “Hey, buddy, give us a cigarette!”
“How do you want it, with or without a filter?” the rabbit asks.
“Look,” the young wolf says to the young fox, “he has no hat on again!”

The more “Cuci” affirms with a roguish smile that there is nothing political in this joke, the more the audience suspects the contrary. Consider his final remark added to clarify the implicit message of the story:

- (17) *Azér’ nekem mesélték, volt egy olyan időszak, amikor sok emberen nem volt füstszűrős sapka...*
[‘Nevertheless, I was told that there was a time when many people didn’t wear a hat with a filter...’]

The implicatum is that many innocent people were persecuted and tortured by the communist authorities in the 1950s.

Another joke dealing with meat shortages is about a man who goes into a meat shop to buy something to eat, but every kind of meat he asks for is out of stock. The punch line is that the boss shouts from behind the door to his assistant: “Who is this picky customer?”. Yet another joke goes back to the Rákosi era. In this, a man’s sow had ten piglets, but because the plan was fourteen, the Party’s functionaries report one more at every level of the administration. In the end, the plan seems to be fulfilled on paper, and Rákosi announces that ten piglets will be exported, while “the remaining four” will be sent to the domestic market. These jokes and some other stories concerning Rákosi’s rule carry a hidden layer of interpretation: the past can be seen as the allegory of the present. To cue the audience to discover the allegory, the Cuci character conveys in (18) that the only difference is the decade:

- (18) *Ennivaló nincs, illetve nem vót... 50-es évek eleje, nem összekeverni! Hála Istennek, 80-at írunk. Na, szóval... harminccal több!*
[‘There is no, or rather there was no food... the early 50s, don’t mix it up! Thank God, we are in the 1980s. So... it’s thirty more!’]

The smile in the corner of his mouth and the subtle movements of his eyes and eyebrows are expressive clues as to what is implicated by utterances such as this. Sometimes he applies the “blank face” technique, inserts an impressive pause, or repeats the point, putting into action his rich repertoire of facial signals. Irony is indicated by lower pitch when the Cuci character says that socialism was dreamt up by Marx, Engels and Lenin. The melancholic song he sings about Lenin, “the big dreamer”, is fraught with irony. Although he uses some props (e.g. a water polo cap and an accordion; see Figure 6) and three “doctors” come on stage to force him into the surgery room, the best-developed component of the show is his non-verbal communication. The “operation”, for that matter, proves successful; as the Cuci character informs the members of the audience, he will recover, but they will not live to see it.



Figure 6. “Cuci” and some of his props. (See on DVD: *Hofi tükre* No. 5. Hungaroton, 2006)

Reticentia and *correctio* emerge both independently and as a complex figure of thought. For instance, folk expressions that contain the word *Isten* ‘God’ are, as in the 1975 show, humorously interrupted and “politically corrected”, except, notably, the one in (18) above. In addition, after crossing himself, he suggests in a brief quasi-dialogue with the public that the crucifix is “less dangerous than the person sitting in the next seat over” in the theatre. Thus, Catholicism and its symbols, at least at the level of implicatures, are not condemned at all.

As far as foreign affairs are concerned, the Cuci character dwells on the problem that he “somehow dislikes sandy geographic regions”, even though he is trying to get used to them, hinting metonymically at the Arab states in North Africa and the Middle East. He resorts to a pun to bring up the taboo of the Stalin Monument torn down on 23 October 1956, the first day of the Hungarian anti-Soviet and anti-communist revolution, which until 1989 was labelled by the Party a “counter-revolution”. All in all, through the personification of socialism and, specifically, Hungarian socialism, Hofi found a new and ingenious way to get his humorous political messages across.

4. Conclusion

On the basis of a discussion of three theatrical stand-up comedy shows from behind the “Iron Curtain”, I have characterised Géza Hofi as an innovative and extremely talented comedian, worth considering in any discussion of the history of various genres of humour and in the analysis of humorous discourses. I have pointed out that most of his implicatures are conveyed by a group of figures of speech (irony, metaphor, metonymy, hyperbole, allusion, allegory, emphasis, *simulatio*, *sermocinatio*, *reticentia*, *correctio*, *geminatio*, *polysyndeton* and *antisthecon*), and that they are clued by intonational and non-verbal markers (e.g. higher and lower pitch, “blank face” and meaningful silence, smile, eye and eyebrow movements, hand gestures); furthermore, some of them are multimodal in nature, involving the visual and the sonic modes. As I have also emphasised, one of the key features of his performance comedies is the continuous maintenance of a quasi-dialogue by heckling the audience (cf. the classical rhetorical figure of *apostrophe*) and using first-name informality coupled with familiar forms of address, often in the singular.

The metaphorical statement I quote in the title of this paper is drawn not from the three performances investigated above, but from the 1976 cabaret in which Hofi plays an alcoholic newsagent. There he says he heard in a TV program that “The big red giant will explode and turn into a small white dwarf”, taking an apple in his hand as if he meant to throw it at the TV screen. Fortunately, he adds, it turned out that the program was about astronomy, not about politics, which calmed him down. Obviously, this metaphor is borrowed from astronomy to toy with the idea of a possible disintegration of the Soviet Union. As we now know, six years later “Cuci”, that is, Hungarian socialism, speculates about his own collapse in (15). These implicatures and many others are far too obvious and, therefore, not suitable for fooling the censors. It is much more likely that Hofi played a dual role in the public sphere of the Kádár regime: he was the mouthpiece of the people, standing behind the shield of humour to tell the truth, and, at the same time, he was “created” to help blow off some political steam. I do not think, however, that his performances helped to preserve the system in any way. They are too honest for this purpose. Perhaps Komlós and his associates had reckoned in the 1970s that the Soviet Union might lose its superpower status, and, thus, the East-Central European countries might experience a political and economic changeover. But it is more likely that preserving the Western image of Hungary seemed to be almost as important to the Party as easing the tensions within. Hofi’s sister Katalin Hoffmann related that one day Hofi took home an American newspaper and showed her what was written about him, translating the text into Hungarian. The journalist argued something like this: “In Hungary, under Kádár’s leadership, an actor by the name of Hofi is brave enough to express his opinion about the system. We

would like to see when it will be possible to speak about such things in Czechoslovakia” (Ambrus 2006: 85, 91; 2012: 103–104, 109). According to Katalin Hoffmann, her brother was initially proud of the appreciation he received. Hence, it is safe to say that the Hofi-phenomenon contributed to the stereotyped picture of Hungary as the happiest barracks in the socialist camp.

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