Paper Title: Why must Roma minorities always be seen on the stage and never in the audience? Children’s opinions of reality Roma TV

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Abstract

Roma minorities are often described as the most deprived and marginalized people in Europe today. However, they are also avid participants in the growing media industry in Europe, and recent popular TV shows have highlighted their presence as performers, although knowledge of how Roma audiences themselves view such shows is still under-researched. This chapter looks at how children’s reactions to a popular show in Hungary might inform future research on popular culture, reality TV and Roma minorities. The importance of television viewing in current European contexts is highlighted along with the significance of recognizing Roma people as both producers and consumers of popular culture.

The Roma media star

The rise of the Roma media star across Europe is said to be a ‘love to hate’ phenomenon, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe where the traditional Roma musical entertainer has been transformed into an “admired, albeit ambiguous, celebrity” (Imre 2011, p.2). The Eurovision Song Contest (broadcast across Europe and beyond), along with local versions of Pop Idol and Big Brother, have turned Roma musicians into nationwide celebrities. Furthermore, shows such as Hungary’s Győzike (2005-2010, RTL Klub) and Romania’s Aventurile familiei Vijelie (The Adventures of the Vijelie Family, 2005–, Prima TV) have linked ‘Gypsy’ with ‘reality’ formats to grab large audience shares in some of the most successful shows for these channels in recent times. Whilst this trend is publicly debated and beginning to analyzed and theorized, there is still one gaping hole in the discourses: who is actually watching these shows? What do the Roma audiences think of such ‘reality’ stars? Whereas we are prepared to discuss and critique the Roma-as-performer, there has been a dearth of literature on Roma as media consumers.

Researching Roma people as consumers may seem inherently wrong at a time when they are also amongst the poorest people in Europe. The rise of the Roma media star has stood in stark contrast to the abject poverty and discrimination suffered by the overwhelming majority of the estimated 12 million people that fall under this umbrella term. On the one hand immensely popular shows such

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1 I am grateful to Anikó Imre for earlier collaborations which helped contextualise my ethnographic research in the broader political and cultural sphere. Thanks also to the editors who gave helpful suggestions for this chapter.

2 I take the view that self-identification of ethnic grouping is important. Nevertheless, in order to talk about wider discourses of people and practices associated with Gypsies, travellers, Roma, Romanies and other groups, I will use the term “Roma” in recognition of its predominant (if at times contested) use as an umbrella term in public forums.

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as Hungary’s Győzike revel in the image of ‘the Gypsy’ as a larger than life cultural icon that is fun to watch as it wastes money and dispenses with morality in jaw-dropping examples of hyper-materialism. On the other hand the seemingly blithe, mischievous, eternal Gypsy survivor is counteracted by reports from European institutions and human rights organisations that give a sobering picture of poverty and discrimination. Extreme poverty affects Roma minorities more than any other group, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe (Eurostat report 2010), and endemic discrimination has recently grown to sinister proportions with state-sponsored forced evictions of new Roma migrants in Italy and France (Tremlett 2011) and recent violent racist attacks in the Czech Republic and in Hungary (Amnesty report 2010).

So what can we do with such incongruous information? Why are Roma both celebrated and despised in such dramatic fashions? These types of questions are beginning to be explored by theorists such as Imre who argues that the question of Roma people’s appearances on reality and other popular formats belies deep radical shifts in the class structures of postsocialist societies and growing inequality that often sees Roma positioned as the underclass (Imre 2006, 2011). Imre’s work has led the way for others to take Roma minorities’ presence in popular culture seriously, but there is still one glaring omission: what do Roma people themselves think of these shifts? What do they consume, when and how, and what has it got to do with their lives? Why must Roma minorities be always seen on the stage and never in the audience?

The lack of data on ethnic minority TV viewing patterns is lamented elsewhere (Buckingham 2002, Ross 2000). This chapter doesn’t attempt to fill the huge gaps in knowledge on Roma minorities’ viewing habits, but does base its discussion on some data that was produced during ethnographic research with Roma and non-Roma children in Hungary 2004-5, at the height of the aforementioned Roma reality TV show Győzike. The majority of the children in the research, both Roma and non-Roma, loved the show and it formed part of everyday conversations at school and home. This chapter looks at how the children’s reactions to the show might inform future media research on such communities. The importance of empirical studies on television viewing that includes marginal ethnic groups is highlighted, along with the significance of recognizing Roma people as both producers and consumers of popular culture. Not only has this the potential to transform entrenched views of Roma people as traditional and marginalized but also to speak to television studies in order to encourage an analytic approach that can help decipher the current cultural and political shifts in an expanding Europe.

The muted admirers of Roma Reality TV
In February 2005 on a frosty Tuesday afternoon in Central Hungary, I was sitting in a primary school classroom on the suburb of a town as a part of a 15 month ethnographic study. A lot was always going on – as I had noted the day before, “there are so many tiny interactions that take place” I wrote, “I just cannot ever know the whole story” (Tremlett fieldnotes 07.02.05). Nevertheless, despite never being able to know the ‘whole story’, that Tuesday afternoon I witnessed some more ‘tiny interactions’ that, thanks to fieldnotes, over time took on more significance to become a telling point about the status of television viewing in Hungarian society.

It was the form tutor’s lesson. After some items concerning the forthcoming Farsang festival (spring carnival), and a stern telling off for ‘whoever’ had vandalised the boys’ toilets, the teacher turned to the previous night’s TV. A new show had just been broadcast on the Hungarian commercial channel RTL Klub, the first in a series that, similar to The Osbournes show in the US, would follow a celebrity family around in their everyday lives. RTL Klub had chosen the family of a Hungarian Roma pop star called ‘Győzike’, who had found fame through fronting the three-person pop group Romantic from 1999-2006. The teacher introduced the topic by saying there was this new show that had come from America, and on it you can see when a person wakes up and when they go to pee. She then asked the class who ‘in the world’ would be interested in such a thing, and a couple of boys called out that they thought the show was stupid, and didn’t like the pop tunes produced by the star’s band Romantic in any case.

The teacher then asked the class to say who actually liked the show. Three girls put up their hands, quite bravely, I thought, as I had noted in my fieldnotes that the teacher “sounded quite threatening” (Tremlett fieldnotes 08.02.05). But their answers were muted: one girl said nothing; another muttered about wanting to see the lives of the characters, but then shrugged her shoulders and fell silent; the third girl just blushed and laughed and said she didn’t know why she liked it. The form tutor then said she would give her own opinion: when she watches television, she wants to see something cultural, or something informative and interesting. She said watching people wake up, pee, argue, fight and spending money on clothes did not count as informative or interesting. That’s not what she wanted to watch on television. That’s not culture. There ended the class.

That early classroom interaction about the show became telling in three ways. First, the teacher framed the show within her own values of what constitutes ‘good’ television. Her appraisal of what ‘good’ means was grounded in a certain idea of ‘high’ culture and interest, which clearly was not reality formats from America. This belied a snobbery of popular culture that, whilst not an uncommon trait amongst conservative figures worldwide, is taking on a particular form and significance in postsocialist countries (Imre and Tremlett 2011).
Second, she did not allow the children any space to actually express their views on the show, embarrassing those who had differing views into silence. The teacher as the all-authoritative voice is not unusual, particularly in Prussian-inspired classroom environments that the pre-1989 Communist party endorsed and still are typical in Hungary today (Kende & Neményi 2006). Furthermore, refusing the girls’ opinions directly mirrored wider society – in the months that followed Győzike’s rising popularity, I found it really hard to access the opinions of ‘real’ fans. Even those who I knew who watched and enjoyed it to some degree, would end up belittling the show as ‘compulsive crap’ - an awareness noted by other researchers of “the cultural attitude of derision towards ‘reality’ television, and indeed television per se, as a bad object” (Skeggs et al 2008, p.9). Therefore accessing the children’s opinions on the show made the data all the more significant, perhaps enabled by the age of the children which made them less concerned of formulated adult responses (10-11 years), but also by the facts that the interviews were carried out early on in the popularity of the program and embedded in an ethnographic context with myself as a non-authoritative figure, being both foreign and taking a passive position in their school lives (Tremlett 2009a).

Third, the teacher so clearly abhorred the show, along with many other prominent public voices, so its subsequent runaway success, above and beyond other reality formats in Hungary, was a mystery. Why this show in particular proved so enduring popular, and why teacher-types found it so utterly appalling whilst children gleefully devoured each show, were questions that began to hang around my fieldwork.

At the time I wrote the fieldnotes on that cold Tuesday in February, I had no idea how popular Győzike was or would become. The weekly 90 minute reality show (aired on Monday nights from 9pm) promised a series that would contain 8 episodes following the family’s everyday lives. The show ended up continuing for a further six years and a total of 97 episodes, and has proved to be one of the most popular programs of recent times in Hungary, with figures from the RTL group’s Annual Report 2005 showing that the Győzike show featured nine times in the top 20 most popular programs in Hungary in 2005, with an audience share average of 46.1% amongst adults 18-49 years of age. This popularity did not decline – in 2009, the average share was up to 50.2%. At the same time, whilst viewing figures were overwhelming, Győzike’s popularity did not equal a positive reception in public discourses in the media or online. Just as the teacher’s opinion in the above vignette, cultural critics tended to de-value the reality format itself as tasteless and the show’s protagonists as not worthy of prime-time viewing, calling the show an example of “shameful

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stupidity” (György 2005); “exotic trash” (Horváth 2008); “a Gypsy circus” (Kürti 2008); and moreover, to “bring severe disadvantage to the Hungarian Roma” (Daróczi 2006, quoted in Kürti 2008). More extreme views produced by so-called ‘fans’ used the show to vent violently racist feelings towards Gypsy people, with web forums, even from the show’s own website, overflowed with comments that whilst not receiving much resistance from fellow bloggers - would be outrageous to western middle-class sensibility and sensitivity towards articulated intolerance (Imre & Tremlett 2011).

So did people watch the show in order just to hate it? Whilst strong discourses always appear more potent and prevalent, those girls who admitted they liked the show went on to watch every episode over the next year, and it was clear that they didn’t share the disgust for the show shown either by their teachers, the critics or other so-called ‘fans’ . The show became a part of everyday conversation, and far from hating it, there was a lot of banter and laughter around antics on the show, and a following of the fashion paraded by the family members and in their home, from the wife Bea’s sporty-sexy outfits to the zebra stripes that adorned rugs, bed-linen and even Győzike’s pajamas. The possibility of a fan-base not motivated by hatred is also supported by the positions of Győzike and his wife Bea as celebrity endorsers of the channel RTL Klub; Győzike’s appearance in the 2010 Top List of Influential People in Hungary; and also in various polls. Győzike and his wife Bea, for example, were voted favorite TV personalities in popular gossip magazine Hot’s poll in 2008. Whilst this magazine presumes an adult readership (as does the show’s later viewing time of 9pm), it appears that, along with the children in my research project, there was a wider children’s fan base as well. A survey amongst 1,500 primary school students in Southern Hungary in 2007 showed that when asked whom the children considered as their role model, a third of them answered Győzike.

So what kind of space is left for such viewers to admit, discuss, or even justify their devotion to the show in the face of the increasing racist exclusion of the Roma underclass and the elitist pressure to resist the temptations of commercial television? There is virtually no visible public arena that could

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6 As would be obvious for any viewers of RTL Klub, Győzike and his family are not just confined to their own reality programme, but are ubiquitous across the channel’s programming. Győzike and his wife Bea are regulars on RTL Klub’s talk shows, quiz shows, and other reality programmes, from dancing on the Hungarian version of Strictly Come Dancing to sharing their culinary expertise on Come Dine With Me. They are thus deployed as the ‘celebrity endorsers’ of RTL Klub itself, the most popular TV channel in Hungary. As celebrity endorsers, their status depends on them being credible, attractive, congruent with the product and engaging in activities that can enhance it (Seno and Lukas 2005).

7 Győzike’s appeared in the 2010 Top List of Influential People in Hungary [Topista Emberek, Arcok, published by Figyelő and United Publisher] in which he is amongst the nine most influential people in the media industry. Accessed March 28 2011, http://www.rtlgroup.com/www/hr/hr/home_news.aspx/?ID=CFE45CBB470453F9277F36359FDFD700.3

8 “Hot Top 100 Sztár: A száz legfontosabb magyar híresség” (“Top Hot 100 Stars: The 100 most important Hungarian celebrities”), (2008/1), Budapest: Euromedia BT.

explain Győzike’s popularity, and no in-depth exploratory ethnographic research available to answer this question. There is a dearth of studies on reality television audiences even in contexts where television ethnography does enjoy some legitimacy, perhaps, as McElroy and Williams suggest, because it redefines traditional notions of the audience, “participatory fan audiences blur the boundaries between television production and consumption” (McElroy and Williams 2011, p. 191).

In the case of such reality shows as Győzike, audience studies are fundamental both to understanding broad cultural shifts occurring in postsocialist landscapes and to recognizing other ‘ordinary’ viewers, such as children, women, lower class groups and/or Roma minorities as avid participants in Hungary’s growing media industry, who often remain under-valued and under-researched.

Listening to the fans

Indeed, in ethnographic interviews conducted with children, a rather different picture emerges from “fan” and “critical” responses outlined above. Rather than the disgust of previous reactions to the show, the children, from both Roma and non-Roma backgrounds, appeared to embrace the personality of Győzike and his family as fun characters without positioning them as an ethnic “other.” The interviews were carried out in 2005 as part of a larger research project. This chapter focuses on those interviews with 19 children aged 10-11 years, from a mixture of ethnic backgrounds. The study was conducted in a small school of about 120 pupils on the outskirts of a city of about 100,000 people in the ‘Southern Great Plain’ (Dél-Alföld) region of Hungary. The children were from similar local low socio-economic backgrounds, with the school records showing that the majority of children (nearly 60%) came from families who were in need of some government assistance, with roughly a third living below the ‘normal’ standards of living.

Approximately 20% of the school’s pupils were from a ‘Hungarian Gypsy’ (Magyar cigány) background, and whilst a few of these families were amongst the poorest attending the school, not

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10 Hungary has one of Central Europe’s most highly developed and quickly evolving TV markets (see Television Across Europe, an EUMAP study 2005: 247).
11 The research project included 15 months of ethnographic research. Only a small part of that research is represented in this chapter. For results and discussion of the whole project see Tremlett 2008.
12 In accordance with ethical guidelines, all names of places and people have been changed. All data was collected in Hungarian without the use of interpreters. The translations here are my own. Although there is not enough space to discuss it in more detail here, the issue of researching in a second language (and a second culture) is considered very important in any claims of understanding the fieldwork context (see Borchgrevink 2003, Tremlett 2009a).
13 Data taken from school records. Overall, 32% of the pupils (39/123) from the primary school were considered poor, whilst 57% (70/123) were receiving government funded school meals, and 51% (63/123) of families received upbringing benefits.
14 Even though the collection of ethnic data is banned in Hungary under the Data Protection Act 1993, the school did record ethnic data in relation to poverty.
15 There are said to be three main Roma groups in Hungary who are mainly identified by the languages they speak, although there are no reliable statistics: Hungarian Gypsies who speak Hungarian only (magyar cigányok or Romungro) approximately 65-75% of the Roma population; Vlach Roma who speak a Romani language, Lovari, that is rooted in Sanskrit (oláh cigányok), 20-30%; and Beás or Romanian Roma (beások or román cigányok), 5-10%, who speak a Romani language, Beás, that derives from an archaic form of Romanian (from
all Hungarian Gypsy families were in this category, and there were some non-Gypsy families who were also deemed extremely poor. Out of the 19 children in the fourth grade, six children could be said to be from a Hungarian Gypsy background and 13 from a non-Gypsy background. Such a small sample is not meant to be representative and, indeed, imposing very broad labels such as ‘Roma’, ‘Hungarian Gypsy’ or ‘non-Gypsy’ onto the children does not do justice to their myriad of identifications. However, here I use the terms with the acknowledgement that wider discourses often refer to a Roma/non-Roma divide in social and cultural practices. Whatever particular ‘sub-group’ is being discussed, this divide is described as distinct and enduring (called the ‘Gypsy-way’, and further explored later). I therefore use these terms to explore whether, in viewing terms, there may be some indications that such a difference is apparent in the way children from Roma minority backgrounds may be viewing TV shows.

In the interviews, the children were asked whether they would liken their families to Győzike’s. As Table 1. below shows, in response, the majority of them did, whilst there appears to be no obvious Roma/non-Roma divide in this response (11 out of a total of 16 children—3 Roma; 8 non-Roma). However, there is an evident gender divide, as all girls likened their families to Győzike’s (7/7), compared to only four out of nine boys. Out of the five who did not, only two boys said it was because of their difference in ethnic backgrounds. Thus despite all the hype and scorn surrounding Győzike as a Roma media star, in these interviews, ethnic identity was only voiced by 2 out of 16 children, one Roma and one non-Roma. This suggests that children were not verbalizing “Roma” or “Gypsy” as the most obvious element of the Győzike show. Considering that Győzike’s ethnic background appears so prominent in the promotion of and responses to the show, these results prove surprising.

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16 The pupils who attended József Attila primary school during my fieldwork were from similar low socio-economic backgrounds, and from my everyday experience at the school and from visiting children’s homes I did not feel that material inequality was huge between children, although the Roma families did seem over-represented in the poorest families. The school kept records on each child to determine the level of disadvantage of the child’s background. Figures from these school records (created by child welfare expert) showed that overall, 32% of the pupils (39/123) from the primary school were considered poor, whilst 57% (70/123) were receiving government funded school meals, and 51% (63/123) of families received ‘child rearing’ benefits. Whilst there was not individual statistics on each child, there was not a consistent parallel between the number of Roma children and those deemed poor in the various categories – for example in the fourth grade, (6/19) of the children were from a Roma background, whilst 45% were considered materially poor, 75% were on funded school meals; and 60% received child-rearing benefits.

17 Throughout these interviews, no direct questions were asked about the children’s ethnic or national identities, as the methodology aimed at seeing if, when, where and how these identities came up in talk about everyday lives, rather than forcing a specific response. However, in the semi-structured questionnaire, some questions were pre-prepared on television programs known to be popular amongst the children, including Megascztár (a version of the UK’s Pop Idol), Barátok közt (Between Friends, a daily Hungarian soap opera) and Győzike.

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Table 1. Children’s reactions to the TV show Győzike

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Children who claimed to watch the show</th>
<th>Children who reported finding the show ‘funny’</th>
<th>Children who likened their family to Győzike’s family</th>
<th>Children who didn’t liken their family to Győzike’s because…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total no. of children (out of 19, 6 Roma, 13 non-Roma)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roma (out of 6)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Roma (out of 13)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls (out of 8)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys (out of 11)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For the children, the main attraction of the program was its ability to make them laugh. As the table above shows, all the children who watched the show reported finding it “funny,” as also clearly seen in the extracts below:

**Extracts 1.i-iii**
1. i “We just giggle at it” (Balázs, Roma boy);
1. ii “You can have a good laugh at it!” (Sára, non-Roma girl);
1. iii “There are some really funny things in it.” (Kevin, non-Roma boy)

The children cited many examples of humorous antics, which seemed mostly to centre on the anti-authority narratives: they found Győzike’s younger daughter, Virág, especially amusing because of her mischievous behavior. It seems that Virág provided a source of comic, slapstick type of behavior,

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1. Interviews were carried out in Hungarian, the researcher’s second language, without the use of translators. The transcription of the interviews was carried out by the researcher alongside paid Hungarian speakers (non-linguists) who transcribed the interviews *verbatim*. The transcription chosen is focused on accessibility and readability.
with a strong sense of waywardness that the children found very appealing, as the following extracts show:

**Extract 2 Ferenc (Roma boy)**

Ferenc: I often really laugh at the little girl, at Virág. [...] Well, because last time there was this part, when... when the little girl was playing with some drink, and she held the drink like this... ((Ferenc mimics holding a drink)) and then, and it didn’t move, she just fell over backwards! I really like it.

**Extract 3 Sophia (non-Roma girl)**

Sophia: Virág is always on it really a lot... that little girl always does naughty things in it! (laugh) She always tips something over, or really shouts, or cries, there is always a problem with her, or she covers the sofa with something!

The focus in extracts 2-3 is the delight in Virág’s “naughty” behavior. Her mischief – the way she spills drinks, falls over, shouts, messes up the pristine family home. As other researchers of child TV viewers have noted, children enjoy watching programs that break with notions of ‘good’ behaviour. These reactions may also explain the teachers’ abhorrence of the show, as Seitler points out, “No wonder many teachers hate popular children’s TV, when it is associated with bedlam, rule-breaking, forbidden activities” (Seiter 1999, p.5).

However, the glee in deviant behaviour the children display is also symptomatic of a shared culture, in other words the children are displaying a shared knowledge of what is “normal” in terms of behavioral expectations (whether it is what they actually do at home or not) (Seiter 1995, p.8). In the case of wider representations of Roma minorities this proves an interesting point. Whilst discourses, both from Romani studies and more broadly, reiterate the marked differences between Roma and non-Roma family life (often referred to as “the Gypsy way” see Gay y Blasco 1999: 174; Liégeois 1986: 85; Okely 1983: 77; Stewart 1997: 17-94), here Roma and non-Roma children appear to unite in their understanding (and enjoyment) of public transgressions from an understood universal family “norm”, along with a shared (child-like) humor in transgressing “acceptable” behavior.

The idea that the children were engaged in some shared understanding of familial identity can be further explored as the children were asked more specific questions about how they related their family to Győzike’s. This had the potential to bring up expressions of ethnic difference or affiliation.
We may have assumed that Roma children would display a stronger affiliation (or perhaps disassociation) to a celebrity Roma family. However, both Roma and non-Roma children reported both similarities and differences between their own families and Győzike’s. Where a divide became more apparent was not, in fact, between ethnic groups, but between gender groups. Girls appeared keen to liken their families to Győzike’s, whilst boys tended to emphasize difference (see also Table 1. above).

The desire to connect their own families with Győzike’s was also apparent in all seven of the girls’ interviews who watched the show (both Roma and non-Roma). Two girls saw Győzike’s family as a ‘type’ (e.g. funny, argumentative) similar to their own families

**Extract 4: Anna (Hungarian Gypsy girl)**

Anna: My family is also this kind of humorous type. Sometimes we believe in everything, sometimes nothing at all. Sometimes we are angry, sometimes we are in a good mood.

**Extract 5: Sophia (non-Gypsy girl)**

Sophia: Well, we can say yes, because Győző’s family also fall out a lot. My mum and co, they really row a lot. Well maybe not so much, but from time to time.

Whilst the above two extracts are quite vague (“this kind...”, “sometimes...”, “well maybe not so much...”), other girls saw direct similarities between characters on the show and members of their families. For example, Csilla, a Roma girl, likened her brother to Győzike’s younger daughter Virág (“Tomika is just as naughty as little Virág...”) whilst her dad’s busy work life and telephone habits were likened to Győzike’s, which prompted her to say “my dad is the same as Győzike”. Similar to Csilla, Márta, a non-Gypsy girl, also went through each member of her family to compare and contrast them, for better or worse. She said her father had the same big belly as the lead character Győzike’s, and that his hair was a similar colour. She said her mum shouts just as much as Győzike’s wife Bea, whilst her older brother was as fat and swore as much as the eldest girl in Győzike’s family, Evelin. She also said she was as naughty and clumsy as the youngest child Virág. This final similarity was interesting to me, as Márta was one of the best behaved girls in the fourth grade, and I had never seen her fall over, be clumsy or heard her swear:

**Extract 6: Márta (non-Roma girl)**

[...]because I also often use bad language, and she also uses bad language, and I also often fall over, Virág also often falls over, well she also is often naughty, and I am
often naughty, she uses bad language, I also use bad language. So there are a lot of
...a lot of similarities between us. Really a lot.

The desire to be connected to the family, (emphasised by Márta’s last sentence „Really a lot”) even if those connections could be tenuous, vague or not really based in reality, points to the importance the girls placed on affiliation to their TV heroes, something Greenwood and Long have noted derives from the need to belong through „imagined intimacies” (2011, p.282). Significantly here, none of the girls used any ethnic or national labels in these expressions of solidarity.

The girls’ responses confirm that Győzike’s family could very well represent the national family – a possibility the adult responses, both overtly racist and intellectual-liberal, simply could not contemplate and must disavow. The girls may well articulate here the attraction to the show that adults, including their parents, cannot speak aloud, assuming, based on the interviews, that Győzike is watched in the context of family viewing.

On the other hand, some of the boys were keener to express the differences between Győzike’s family and their own. This is where a gender divide became apparent. One non-Roma boy, lamenting on Győzike’s failure to discipline his puppy dog, stated that his own family were not “cigány” (Gypsy) and therefore would never let their own dogs into their home. This was the only negative expression from the children that directly ethnicized Győzike.

However, the other boys were not so focused on differentiating Győzike through a definite Roma/non-Roma divide but found other, more class-based strategies of distancing their family’s life from their own. Kevin, for example said his family was not like Győzike’s because they behave differently:

**Extract 7. Kevin (non-Roma boy)**

Kevin: We aren’t naughty. Well they shout and everything. We normally play cards, watch TV, play on the computer, or we go out cycling.

For Kevin, the difference was expressed in behavior and activities. Kevin’s “us” is not specifically ethnicized, but implies the sense of something better-behaved, quieter and more placid, as opposed to the “them” of Győzike’s family, who are naughty and loud.

Balázs (Roma boy) also brought up behavioral differences when he pointed out that his mother was stricter in controlling her children. Győzike’s family is here described as more lenient than Balázs’—something he disapproves of:

**Extract 8. Balázs (Roma boy)**
Balázs: For example Győzike’s little girl is very obstinate, and I don’t know what...she runs wild, and my sister would never do things like that. Never!
AT: And it wouldn’t be allowed by....?
Balázs: And my mum would never allow it in any case.

The children, whilst delighting in the entertainment afforded by chaotic family scenes, potentially show a gender divide in the degree of difference in their readiness to identify with on-screen characters. The boys could be more concerned with affiliating themselves to this ‘other’ of Győzike, although direct formulations of what this ‘other’ is are not (yet) clearly labelled.

Here it is important to step away from romanticizing children’s responses by rendering their imaginations unfettered by politics. As we know from David Buckingham, interpreting children’s talk in the course of ethnographic research presents its own special caveats. The influence of the researcher, of the group setting, and the inconsistencies of individual responses create so many contingencies that any meaningful generalization may seem untenable (Buckingham 1991, 1993). But even as we take extreme care not to assume that children’s words are windows into their minds, taken collectively, the difference from the “public” responses to the show is striking: the children watch the show primarily as a TV show. The anxieties about shifting national identities, class and racial mixing set off by Győzike are so overwhelming that the public responses simply ignore the show’s status as a television text that hovers ambiguously between fiction and reality. The children, however, pick up and comment on the most immediate quality and effect of the program: its performative, playful dimension and only indirectly register and even more vaguely articulate ethnic and class comparisons.

One could legitimately speculate that these pre-teen children’s memories are not overdetermined by a small nation’s social, economic and political transition from state socialism to capitalist neoliberalism. At the same time, of course, the children are not immune to nationalism’s racial and gendered reliance on the proper, normative family, as is indicated by the boys’ keener awareness of the ethnic or “other” features of Győzike’s family. However, in stark contrast to the public discourses on Győzike, all the children reveled in the anti-authority narrative whilst, at least for the girls, the notion of the national family is not threatened but rather confirmed. Shouting, ‘bad’ behavior and pot-bellied dads who are always on the phone are recognized rather than disavowed. The middle-class Roma family thus emerges into tangible existence both on and off the television screens. Whilst the children are eager to enjoy the show for its comic plotlines and amusing moments, particularly along a strong identification with Győzike’s own daughter, the gender divide emerging between the boys’ and girls’ responses is an indication of the children’s budding sense of the distinct hierarchies
and spaces assigned to men and women, and the existence of “others” within and outside the nation. The girls showed a strong investment in the domestic arena in which the show is anchored, subordinating other social institutions and organizational structures to the family. The boys showed more awareness of their own roles as future citizens who get to set the standards and determine the lines of legitimate difference within the public national arena.

Conclusion

In the 1990s, there were concerns from both politicians and academics that ‘globalization’ would mean a loss of local cultures of media broadcasting. In fact, these concerns were unfounded. The failure of attempts at pan-European television and the localization strategies of international broadcasters such as MTV actually highlight the audience’s preference for local programming and domestic content (Esser 2009, p.24). In a similar fashion, whilst global formats of shows have been reproduced in many different countries, the striking element is the way such formats are localized to suit a national context. Aslama and Pantti conclude in their analysis of Finnish reality TV that the media have two essential functions: firstly to construct and maintain a nationally bounded audience; and secondly to make a profit (2007, pp.63-64). Their main argument is that national values and inter-textual references sell on the domestic front. Reality programmes, with their inclusion of local participants and celebrity presenters or judges, are primed for such an environment.

In the case of Hungary’s Győzike show, this argument becomes more complex. How can a representative from the most despised and deprived minority front one of the most popular programmes of all time? Imre (2011) argues that Győzike represents a new type of ‘racialized celebrity’ in postsocialist countries that relates to specific political and cultural shifts in the region:

> These factors include the primacy of national belonging over neoliberal ideas of individual self-making and responsibilization, and the threatened class status of intellectuals, who continue to perform a central normative function in national cultures (Imre 2011, p.22)

Such factors have produced deep anxieties about nationhood and nationalism, with celebrities such as Győzike representing an emerging, racially mixed economic middle-class that “has long been a missing element in Soviet-controlled, allegedly egalitarian societies” (Imre 2011, pp.22-23). The possibility that a Gypsy family can represent the Hungarian national family provokes a crisis in identity that points to the “unreconstructed state of whiteness” that postsocialist countries are now struggling to come to terms with (Böröcz 2001, quoted in Imre 2011, p.23).
The danger is that we can too easily explain away the high viewing figures for Győzike as down to the audience taking macabre delight in watching something they despise. Of course, the possibility that many viewers watch the show to reinforce their own sense of ‘good’ moral values would explain the Hungarian teacher’s hostile views in the opening anecdote, and chimes with other studies of reality TV audiences (Ang 1985, Seiter 1999, Skeggs et al 2008). Yet the children I spent day after day with didn’t seem to despise the show, but loved it. Children from differing ethnic backgrounds loved the flamboyance, the materialistic extravagance, the way the family interacted in a loud, jubilant manner. As the interviews showed, this was not about them judging a Roma family for their ethnic peculiarities, but an embracing of a sense of transgressive family behaviour that was refreshingly put on public display without the usual reprimands of not living up to the ideal national family.

Listening to ‘ordinary’ audience opinions of reality TV has not been a priority of academics and critics of these shows, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe. Whilst particular care should always be taken in “the process of extrapolation from ethnographic examples” (Morley 2006, p.108), this chapter has shown that ethnographic research has the potential to illuminate important differences between current public deficit discourses on recent reality formats, and local practices of those who potentially enjoy such formats. The political landscape is shown as ever present in reactions to such formats. Just as Skeggs et al see the making of class through “moral extension” on UK reality TV (2007), so here we have seen how ideas of Roma ethnic identities can be debated and renegotiated through the production and consumption of a reality show in Hungary.

Győzike is an example of one show amongst an emerging trend of Roma ‘celebrities’ who are often portrayed as excessive, moneyed and larger than life (Imre 2006, 2009, 2011). Take a moment, then, to try to reconcile these images with a rather more sobering description of Roma from the EU Commission\(^\text{19}\):

> Particular attention is to be paid to the most vulnerable groups, those suffering from multiple discrimination and those at high risk of exclusion. Among these are ethnic minorities and clearly identifiable as some of the most marginalized groups are many Romani communities (EU Commission Report, 2010: 13)

How can we reconcile the flash happy free figures of prime time TV with terms such as ‘multiple discrimination’, ‘exclusion’, ‘marginalized’? In one medium the Gypsy is a dynamic, consumer-

enthralled social player, in the other they are poor victims suffering from imposed exclusion. This chapter calls for a recognition of the incongruence of such representations, and aims to entice other academics into researching and thinking across and not within such frameworks.

References


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