

## Angela Davis goes east? White skin and black masks in the art of socialist Hungary\*

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The 1960s and 1970s witnessed a wave of black insurgencies in both the First and the Third Worlds and saw the emergence of several revolutionary iconic figures, such as Patrice Lumumba, Malcolm X, and Angela Davis. Their struggles were strongly supported by the Eastern European state-socialist regimes, and the iconic leaders of these movements also had a powerful presence in the popular imagination of Eastern European societies. In recent years, a new body of literature has been produced on the links between these regimes and the postwar anticolonial and Black Power movements<sup>1</sup> (Mark – Apor 2015, Slobodian 2015). However, the domain of the visual arts has largely gone unnoticed in this literature, although artworks are oftentimes the most pronounced bearers of cultural icons (Leypoldt – Engler 2010, 5). In order to describe the way black cultural icons fared in the state-socialist context, Günter Leypoldt and Bernd Engler's concept of floating signifiers may be successfully applied (25). These icons were both appropriated by the state-socialist regimes, as in the official reception of Angela Davis by Erich Honecker, and used to express dissident political positions, as when Erika Havemann, the East German dissident Robert Havemann's daughter-in-law, welcomed Angela Davis to East Berlin with a hug (Lorenz 2013, 55).<sup>2</sup> These multiple and competing expressions of solidarity towards black cultural icons, and the struggles to control the meaning of these floating signifiers, constitute another under-researched area in the literature. This article aims to address these gaps in scholarship by examining both the representation and the conflictual interpretations of "revolutionary black subjects" in Hungarian art of the 1960s and 1970s, giving particular attention to the figure of Angela Davis. Through the study of works by artists György Kemény, Béla Kondor, Anna Kárpáti, the Orfeo Group, and Tamás Szentjóbý, I will investigate the spectrum of constructions of the postcolonial, yet still oppressed, revolutionary black subject in state-socialist Hungary. In doing so, I will examine both the ideological frontiers between the different appropriations of black cultural icons and the common denominators that unite them.

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In the 1960s and 1970s, not only did Hungarian artistic production address the struggles of Africans and black Americans, it also focused on the tribulations of an entire range of Third World countries, including Cuba and Vietnam.<sup>3</sup> This article focuses on cases in which the objects of solidarity or self-identification were black individuals in order to propose that Hungarian artists found the kind of “otherness” associated with black subjects to be appropriate for both the visual representation of struggles of the Third World and oppressed groups in the First World. Solidarity with other freedom movements, such as with Cuba or Vietnam, was also strongly present in governmental propaganda, but these movements were much less thematized by artists, whereas in the case of black struggles, the dialectics of otherness and similarity were more direct.<sup>4</sup>

Decolonization and the expression of solidarity with its heroes played important roles in the politics of the Eastern Bloc in the 1960s and 1970s. The state apparatus hoped that the unceasing struggles of the Third World and its own solidarity actions with those struggles would encourage a commitment to socialism from younger generations who had never experienced the exploitative economic system of capitalism or the class conflict within it. The ideal socialist youth were to be neither hot-headed revolutionaries nor politically unaware consumers (Mark – Apor 2015, 861–868). In state-fabricated narratives, parallels were drawn between the *current* liberation of Third World countries and the Hungarian liberation movements of the *past*. However, any analogies between the present-time political subjugation found in both were to be avoided.

Solidarity with decolonizing countries and with the Black Power movement in the United States arose simultaneously in state-socialist countries and within the Western New Left (Ross 2004, 80–86). The Western New Left recognized that concerns present in the Third World’s struggles were similar to their own political agenda within the core countries of the world system. This agenda “seemed to suggest revolution everywhere in the Third World, while First World revolutionary movements promised an overthrow of the imperialist system from within ‘the belly of the beast’” (Shohat – Stam 1994, 260). While the Western New Left and the states of the Eastern Bloc were similar in their acts of solidarity, the meanings of these solidarities were rather different. State-socialist regimes had a contentious attitude towards the Western New Left. Some merits of the Western New Leftist movements were recognized, as shown, for instance, by the East German acknowledgement of the notion of a subjugated, left-leaning “other America” (Höhn – Klimke 2010, 4). Positive attitudes towards the Western New Left would appear in the solidarity campaigns with Angela Davis, and in the writing of the Hungarian art historian László Beke, who was balancing between the official and unofficial art scenes. Beke (1976) wrote an article on the challenge the North American counterculture leveled at the imperialist hegemony without mentioning the countercultures of the Eastern Bloc. However, his essay raised similar issues to those found in the American debates on the reconcilability of countercultural movements and the Communist Party (Brown 2010, 130). At the same time, the position of Herbert Marcuse constituted a breaking point between state-socialist and New Leftist vistas of solidarity. Marcuse – who was not only a key

theorist of the Western anti-systemic movements towards the Third World but also a mentor of Angela Davis – had been highly criticized in the Eastern Bloc since the release of his book *Soviet Marxism: A Critical Analysis* (Bence 1968). In his manifesto-like piece *An Essay on Liberation* (1969), he emphasized the emergence of the black minorities of the United States and the people of the Third World as revolutionary subjects. Moreover, the rising solidarity between the Third World and the First World's racial minorities developed in the foreground of the growing importance of a politics of recognition and was not necessarily in the context of the traditional leftist focus on material redistribution. Marcuse proposed an aesthetic revolution, a “new sensibility” that would be able to include new aesthetic principles such as “black is beautiful” (36). For the state-socialist regimes, however, Marcuse's approach was obnoxious because it questioned not only the position of the proletariat as revolutionary subject, but also the revolutionary nature of those very regimes.

My argument is that both the Eastern Bloc's government-led solidarity with black and Third Worldist movements and the Western New Left's view of these movements as revolutionary role models informed Hungarian underground artists who not only tried to gain autonomy from a centrally authorized artistic sphere but many times even tried to counter it. Both the New Left and the Eastern European governments relied on their respective Marxist idioms about decolonization and, at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s, Hungarian cultural dissidents also criticized their own regime from a Marxist viewpoint. I propose that the crucial difference between these approaches lay not in their philosophical variations of Marxist vocabulary, but in their goals. State-socialist regimes, similarly to Western countercultural movements, radically opposed the crimes of colonialism and in this way confronted Western capitalist regimes, the active oppressors in times of colonialism and neo-imperialism.

However, regimes of the Eastern Bloc used anticolonialist idioms to acquire the image of developed societies and to express solidarity in a calm way, just as a consolidated society would do. Therefore, state-socialist regimes estranged these struggles from the lived reality of their countries, displaying their own societies as *normal* ones. For the Western New Left, anticolonialism and the liberation of oppressed nations and racial minorities offered important vehicles to articulate and reinforce their own revolutionary activism and potential. Socialist dissidents interpreted these fights similarly to their Western comrades; however, from their angle, the heroes of the Third World and the First World's racial minorities articulated not only the critique of imperialism as a highest stage of capitalism, but also a critique of actually existing socialism.

Interpretations of blackness and black revolutionary icons in Hungarian underground art appeared in a context where these subjects were widely thematized but where done so in profoundly different accents. In their position taking, Hungarian underground artists were closer to the New Leftist approach and meant to confront local official discourses whose aim was to dim the relevance of black insurgencies and liberation struggles for the Hungarian public. At this point, I propose to introduce the term of *mimicry* for the understanding of these artistic attitudes. I use mimicry in accordance with Homi Bhabha (2004, 123), who argued it is at the same time *resemblance and menace* for dominant discourses. In the given examples, mimicry worked

to threaten dominant local discourses by turning the black cultural icons' anti-systemic and revolutionary meaning against the consolidated but oppressive realities of the state-socialist regime. By dissident artists using state-promoted cultural icons such as Angela Davis as floating signifiers, but reinterpreting them in subversive ways, it was not easy for the state power to determine whether underground expressions of solidarity were stabilizing or subverting the state's own desired narrative. At the same time, even when the official standpoint shaped particular visual products, as the cases of Béla Kondor and Anna Kárpáti will demonstrate below, it would not be correct to oversimplify these as direct reflections of a party line.

### **BÉLA KONDOR: AWAKENING AFRICA (1961)**

Béla Kondor's woodcut series was created in 1961 as illustrations for an anthology entitled *Ébredő Africa* (Awakening Africa; Belia ed. 1961). The anthology was published in a relatively small print run and included poems by Sub-Saharan African poets. The format of the anthology clearly echoes the *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française* that was edited by Léopold Sédar Senghor (1948) and prefaced by Jean-Paul Sartre with the essay *Orphée Noir* (Black Orpheus). The hardback volume contains nine woodcuts by Kondor. All illustrations are directly linked to individual poems, but not all of them communicate direct anticolonial messages. Endorsing the volume's aspirations, Kondor's illustrations were to give intellectual and political support for the African anti-imperialist struggle. Nevertheless, these woodcuts were by no means mere visualizations of the party line: Kondor's own insatiable interests in sacral and revolutionary subject matter are revealed in his illustrations depicting an encounter of black and white martyrs and an African Christmas march. In these pictorials, sacral content is interwoven with colonial vio-



Fig. 1: Béla Kondor: *Awakening Africa*, Table I. 1961. Courtesy of Petőfi Literary Museum

lence manifest for instance, in the forced Christianization of the indigenous people of Africa and other continents. There are many more direct manifestations of colonial violence in the woodcuts: One depicts the imprisonment of Jacques Rabemananjara after the Malagasy Uprising of 1947 using imagery fused with an existential distress (fig. 1). The violent nature of colonialism is represented even more clearly in the graphics portraying the exploitation of colonized people in the military industry and the hanging of a black man after a failed insurgency.

Even while Kondor's woodcuts express solidarity, they hardly offer white beholders a vantage point from which they can identify with the subjugated figures depicted. As the images invariably show white people as oppressors and offer no visual way to distinguish the capitalist exploiter from the compassionate socialist, the moment of self-identification is denied, which may also prevent identification with the oppressed colonial subject. In addition, Kondor turns to the most widespread official trope for the understanding of anticolonial movements; namely, he likens them through visual devices to the Hungarian and European past (Mark – Apor 2015, 863–864). The genre of woodcut had commonly been used to express political meanings as far back as early modern Europe, and with its revival in the twentieth century, it regained a political significance, oftentimes acquiring leftist connotations (Hung 1997). The most important predecessor of the *Awakening Africa* illustrations in Hungarian art history is Gyula Derkovits's woodcut series from the interwar years on György Dózsa, a peasant revolt leader from the sixteenth century (Mark – Apor 2015, 865). Kondor's series directly recalls Derkovits's style, although Kondor himself also created a series of etchings on the Dózsa Rebellion in 1956. By linking anticolonial struggles to a wider history of resistance to oppression, Kondor's *Awakening Africa* illustrations elevate the anticolonial movements as a progressive battle, though one that has only just begun. The series features only one individual hero (Jacques Rabemananjara) and there is no victorious revolutionary action: Black people are invariably portrayed as subjugated. However, since class conflict had already been eliminated in the socialist world, African revolutions are represented as deserving support but having little immediate relevance for the socialist present.

### **ANNA KÁRPÁTI: NEGRO BOY (1967)**

While I argued that Béla Kondor's woodcut series provides a solemn visual representation of the party rhetoric on colonial struggles, *Negro Boy* (*Néger fiú*), a sculpture by Anna Kárpáti – likewise state-commissioned – has a much more personal and tangible relation to the presence of blackness in 1960s Hungary (fig. 2). Kárpáti's husband, Gyula Kállai, was the prime minister of Hungary at the time the statue was created and erected. According to information given by family, Kárpáti adored African culture and people: She would spend time socializing with African students in Budapest and organized so-called *African séances*, in which her African friends made music and danced, and this is how she came to know a Guinean youth, Alfa, studying in Budapest during those years (Antal – Hatházi 2014).

Alfa became the model for this statue, and from their professional relationship, a love affair began between the sculptor and her model.<sup>5</sup> The relationship ended

when Alfa temporarily returned to Guinea where he planned to organize a movement against the then-president, Ahmed Sékou Touré. The movement was thwarted; Alfa fled to Ivory Coast, and it was, instead, his brother who travelled with his return ticket to Budapest. Alfa died shortly thereafter.<sup>6</sup> The statue was only erected in 1972, after Alfa's death, and consequently, for Anna Kárpáti this sculpture in a public space functioned as a private memorial. The artist did not sculpt the figure as a revolutionary or a martyr of the Guinean liberation struggle, but as a naked boy, whose name is not even given.



Fig. 2: Anna Kárpáti: *Negro Boy*, 1967.  
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The sculpture has two conspicuous characteristics. The first is the otherness of the body composition when compared to the sculptural tradition, and the second is the perfection of the body. As the sculpture was made of bronze which, despite its naturally dark shade, does not indicate any particular skin color, it is only the seemingly exotic and somewhat unfamiliar body composition (the long neck, the characteristically African lips and nose) that renders the figure's otherness recognizable. Therefore, when regarded as a statue in public space – and not as a personal monument for a lover – the statue *objectifies* blackness by the lack of contextualization and the emphasis placed on racial markers and nudity. The statue foregrounds the boy's aesthetic otherness and beauty but does not appear to reflect anything of his personality. Therefore, the statue perpetuates colonial practices of representation: It deprives the represented from his name and replaces it with his race and gender while offering him up for the beholder's gaze as a *noble savage*. At the same time, the sculpture inverts the customary gender duality between artist and model. In this case, the racial layer overwrites the gendered one, making the white artist dominant over the black model in a way that evokes Leni Riefenstahl's admiration of the bodies and

spirit of the Nuba people, a kind of fascination that Susan Sontag was harshly criticizing in exactly those years when Anna Kárpáti was creating and installing *Negro Boy* (Sontag 1975).<sup>7</sup>

There is no certitude about the relation of the statue to the party line on anti-colonial struggles; however, among the artworks examined in this essay, it is only the making of this statue which does not appear to be related to official discourses on anti-imperialism and decolonization, although it is easily possible that Alfa's death was not unrelated to his direct political engagement. Kárpáti's *Negro Boy* statue was motivated by private love and put up as a public demonstration of objectification and othering. This statue can be compared to another work of Kárpáti, her statue of Dominique Kembe, a Congolese youth who studied in Budapest. The statue of Kembe, which was made of wood and never exhibited, expresses Kárpáti's persistent interest in the composition of the black body, just as the statue of Alfa does. Thus, the above-analyzed statue fits much more to Kárpáti's statues on naked youths and "exotic curiosities" (such as her statues from the 1970s of elephants, giraffes, and penguins) than to her statues on socialist heroes (such as György Dózsa or Endre Ságvári). Notwithstanding the fact that the *Negro Boy* statue was commissioned and paid for by the Construction Company of the Ministry of Interior, there is no hint of any political motivation behind the commission in documentation about the work, which is preserved in the archives of the Fine and Applied Arts Lectorate. The Construction Company of the Ministry of Interior had ordered a figurative statue for the small park between its two new housing blocks. The commission was made only after Kárpáti created the maquette on Alfa, but throughout the bureaucratic process the statue was always referred to as "Sitting Man." The blackness of the figure was mentioned only once, when the representative of the Construction Company declared that it did not oppose the black nude, while the artist and art historian members of the jury had only stylistic remarks on it (Lectorate 1967). Although, as the jury chose the maquette of this statue from a number of potential works of Kárpáti, political motivations behind ordering a statue of a black figure over other options cannot be excluded, it is more feasible that the public version of the statue had only a coincidental link to socialist solidarity with the anticolonial movements of the Third World. The creation of Kárpáti's *Negro Boy* statue was neither interwoven with the official discourse (in contrast with the series of Kondor) nor critical of it (in contrast with the examples that follow).

#### ANGELA DAVIS AND THE ORFEO GROUP

The Orfeo Group was active from 1969 to 1972, idolized many prominent radical figures, and held African-American protest icons such as Angela Davis and George Jackson up as role models to be followed by the Hungarian youth (Szarvas 2016). Angela Davis became a public figure, after Ronald Reagan fired her from her university position in 1969 because of her membership in the Communist Party of the United States. She gained worldwide fame during her trial between 1970 and 1972 when, after a courthouse shooting in which the gunman used shotguns purchased by Davis, she was held in prison on kidnapping and murder charges before eventu-

ally being acquitted. To oppose her controversial imprisonment, several solidarity actions took place in the Eastern Bloc. These were organized by the local Communist parties, though popular solidarity was equally strong. These demonstrations widely displayed portraits of Davis, whose unique and striking looks greatly contributed to her quickly becoming an iconic image. Although Davis continuously struggled to keep her representation under her own control, these efforts remained unsuccessful (Brown 2010, 114); she had little agency over the use of her own image in the United States (Davis 1994, 39) and practically no control over how she was represented in the Eastern Bloc. The construction of a cultural icon is always a purpose-governed process (Leypoldt – Engler 2010, 10), and both Socialist and Western countries strategically exoticized and glamorized the figure of Angela Davis in order to diminish the threat of her revolutionary ideas (Hagen 2015, 159) and to direct attention away from her political agenda. In the Western world, this threat was her communist ideology, whereas state-socialist authorities feared her Marcusian “deviation” and race-focused analysis of capitalism (164–165; Leypoldt – Engler 2010, 18). Thus, despite Davis’s attempt to prevent the sexualization of her portrayal, her blackness and exotic beauty became central elements in her representation (Brown 2010, 113–120).

In the context of the Hungarian thaw of the late 1960s it was counter-hegemonic, and for the neo-avant-garde art scene it was counter-intuitive (Szarvas 2016, 42), that the Orfeo Group glorified the political prisoner Davis by foregrounding her critique instead of sexualizing her or emphasizing her womanhood. The group named their club after her, and they produced at least three artworks portraying Angela Davis. A linocut by Anna Komjáthy served as the poster of an assembly of the Hungarian Young Communist League (KISZ) and portrayed the handcuffed but determined Davis looking into the eyes of the viewer. Another poster, presumably also made for a protest, featured Angela Davis, George Jackson, and Martin Luther King as the victims of global reactionary terror. Finally, a statue, by its solid form, expressed the unwavering ideological position of Davis. These works emphasized much more the misery of the imprisoned Davis than her sexual attractiveness.

The Orfeo Group, indebted to the wave of the Western movements of 1968, propagated radical realism in art that was accompanied by theoretical radicalism. For the group, Angela Davis was a positive example of the combination of militant activism and theoretically grounded Marxism. Thus, they found Davis to be not only an exemplary icon in the struggle against Western capitalism, but also in the revolutionizing of bureaucratized Eastern Bloc socialism. The Orfeo Group castigated the estrangement of the local regime and its art, and they aimed to produce a much more directly socialist and critical art (Szarvas 2016).

The Orfeo Group saw Angela Davis’s blackness inseparable from her oppression and revolutionary response to it. However, it was Davis’s radical political praxis, and not her racial identity, which was more adaptable to local struggles for a more socialist socialism, and this was the aspect of Davis the group put greater emphasis on. Moreover, Third Worldist anti-imperialist ideologies were more than veils for the group, as besides their constant evoking of Che Guevara and Angela Davis, they were also inspired by Maoism and Hoxhaim (Szarvas 2016) and were trying to

adapt these revolutionary practices to their local context. The Orfeo Group's interest in leftist movements in the Third World and in the United States involved a kind of non-colonial exoticization in which Angela Davis's blackness indicated her isolation from the dominant political-cultural bloc. Her racial difference, militant activism, womanhood, incisive Marxism, and young age were all iconic traits that clearly set her apart from the (male) politicians in actually-existing socialist governments that the Orfeo Group disdained.

Although Angela Davis was generally considered acceptable by those in power in Hungary, for the Orfeo Group she symbolized a double-edged radical critique directed against both the capitalist system and a bureaucratic and authoritarian socialism. The figures of a handcuffed (fig. 3) and crying Davis in works produced by Orfeo members did not so much evoke events from a distant continent appropriated and actualized a particular cultural icon (Hagen 2015, 171) in an attempt to picture the shared fate of revolutionaries across the world.



Fig. 3: Anna Komjáthy: *Angela Davis*. 1972. ©Komjáthy Anna

### ANGELA DAVIS IN A BOX ROOM MURAL

The mural analyzed below was painted in the box room in Ferenc Kőszeg's apartment between 1970 and 1971 (fig. 4). Using a fresco secco technique, where paint is applied to dry plaster on a wall, pop artist György Kemény outlined all the walls and ceiling of the room, which were then painted collaboratively by a group of friends; even this iconographic program was a collective work, created by the current lodgers and their social circle. Not long after, this group became the core of Budapest-based dissident intellectuals and this secco painting represented their value system at a certain moment where two major elements intersected (Kőszeg 2014): the up-to-date

reception of international cultural tendencies on the one hand and, on the other, the thoughts of the Budapest School philosophers. Members of the Budapest School were former students of György Lukács, and their Marxist humanist position harshly criticized actually-existing socialism.

The mural has a complex and chaotic iconography featuring Marx, Duchamp, Buster Keaton, Monica Vitti, and Solzhenitsyn, among others. Angela Davis, too, has a strong presence, and the mural was produced during Davis's trial, which received great attention in Hungary. In it, Davis faces György Lukács, the Hungarian philosopher and key thinker of international Marxism, at a diagonal angle, with red lightning bolts clashing between their heads. Around Lukács's head is the caption *Klassenbewusstsein* (class consciousness) while around Davis's head the term *Rassenbewusstsein* (racial consciousness) is written (fig. 4). Apparently, Angela Davis's presence in this mural is defined by her relation to Lukács,<sup>8</sup> whose portrait is positioned right above the head of György Bence, one of the lodgers in the apartment and a Lukács disciple himself. While the word *Klassenbewusstsein* around Lukács's head



Fig. 4: György Kemény: *Secco mural* (detail). 1970–1971. Photograph by Krisztián Bódis  
©György Kemény, Ferenc Kőszeg

is a direct reference to the philosopher's early seminal work *History and Class Consciousness* (Lukács 1923), *Rassenbewusstsein* over Davis's head is not a reference to any written work of her own. It mirrors Lukács's term, and the German word of *Rassenbewusstsein* just overemphasizes the secondary nature of Davis being compared to the German-speaking Lukács and to the German philosophical tradition to which he belonged. Despite the fact that Davis studied in Germany and was connected to

the Frankfurt School by being a pupil of Marcuse and Adorno (Jeffries 2016), she was not as inherently a part of this heritage. Therefore the German captions highlight the hidden hierarchy of the mural's iconographic program beneath its seeming parity: the primacy of Lukács and the secondary nature of Davis. Nevertheless, "racial consciousness" is a fairly appropriate clue: Davis did use the term in commenting on her racial awakening, although not after Lukács but after Frantz Fanon (Davis 1998, 289). Also, as Davis related in an interview (translated into Hungarian in 1971), she shared the idea that communism was a valuable tool to defeat racial oppression (1971, 30).

According to Kőszeg, the owner of the apartment, Angela Davis earned a place in the mural also because of her womanhood and *despite* the government-sanctioned solidarity campaigns in her support (Kőszeg 2014, 3–4). The image of Angela Davis portrayed here, when compared to representations of her made by the Orfeo Group, is much more intellectual and ironic and does not share the group's militant optimism. Although Davis has a prestigious position in the mural, one from which she can confront György Lukács, she, as an attractive militant-philosopher, is ordered into a secondary place in relation to the philosopher-militant Lukács, who thus defines her place. As one of the participants recalls, the painting was almost finished but there was a lack of female intellectuals in the mural and all the women portrayed were mere sex symbols (Kőszeg 2014, 3–4). Davis's status as a cultural icon is clearly indicated by the fact that when the participants decided that they need a female intellectual figure in their painting, Angela Davis came to mind as the most appropriate candidate. "It was a *pro* argument," recalled Kőszeg, "that with her enormous afro and serious baby-girl face, she was exotically sexy" (4). Thus the original motivation to feature Davis was to supplement a group of sex symbols with a figure who had both intellectual and sexual allure. Davis was therefore captured at the intersection of pop culture and social theory, being the single figure connecting these domains. Davis was included to balance the gender proportions in the mural, but by confronting her with Lukács, her representation received additional meanings. The image of Lukács embodies orthodox and old-school Marxism in contrast to Davis, who is pictured as young, colored, sexually attractive, and American; all in all, as someone who is not only intellectually, but also physically interesting. Therefore the clashing thunderclouds might be seen as showing the philosophical distance between an old and a new Left while not disavowing a shared ideological universe, such as Communist Party membership or link to the Frankfurt School. In this iconographic program, Davis is only in a relational position to Lukács, although at first sight her figure seems to be more magnetic. Lukács's presence in the mural stems from his intellectual position while Davis was painted there not only due to her political position but also due to her racial exoticism and sexual charm, just as Davis's cultural icon was constructed more generally. Therefore, this mural partly reconstitutes the body-mind dualism, also delineated by Fanon, in which the black woman is much more determined by her body than the white man is by his (Fanon 2008, 82–108), revitalizing a colonial representational scheme (as described by Brown 2010, 113) while, at the same time, rejecting European ideals of beauty.

## TAMÁS SZENTJÓBY: THE HIGHEST STAGE OF SELF-IDENTIFICATION WITH BLACK SUBJECTIVITY

While the above-examined artists and collectives only made a few artworks related to the African anticolonial or American Black Power movements, Tamás Szentjóbý developed, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a complete iconography of African-American revolutionaries. Whereas the Orfeo Group embedded Angela Davis in the entirety of the Third World's struggles, and the spare room mural represented Davis first of all as a sexualized woman whose militancy and philosophy was only secondary, Szentjóbý focused on the outcast nature of blackness. His works feature a pantheon of black activists, from H. Rap Brown to Bobby Seale, George Jackson, and Angela Davis. I propose that these works of Szentjóbý not only express solidarity, but also are cases of self-identification<sup>9</sup> in which the artist identifies his own battles with those of his back heroes. This scheme of self-identification was present to a certain extent in the works of the Orfeo Group as well, though they looked to prominent revolutionaries firstly as comrades. Szentjóbý's related actions, by contrast, followed the rationale of mimicry, with its dominant rhetoric of *resemblance and menace* (Bhabha 2004, 123). Though Szentjóbý's actions resembled the governmental narratives of solidarity with the anticolonial and Black Power movements, I suggest he performed an appropriation and actualization of these struggles, as he entirely identified himself with their revolutionaries.

Szentjóbý's art had already begun to operate with blackness and self-identification in 1968, before party-organized solidarity campaigns began, and reached their peak from 1970 to 1972, during Angela Davis's trial. In 1968, Szentjóbý made the art object *Rap Brown's Letter to Jeanne d'Arc* and started an intense correspondence with the Novi Sad-based experimental poet Katalin Ladik (Kemp-Welch 2014, 114), whom he invited, in his introductory letter, to come to Hungary and "search for the white Negro" (Szentjóbý 2016). This quote clearly reveals Szentjóbý's thinking: his self-identification with the subjugated black person who is almost inevitably in opposition with the hierarchies of the society she or he inhabits. In this way the artist twisted the party propaganda and showed that a society's "others" are not only oppressed in the United States, but also in Hungary, even if local "others" are not visually identifiable because they are "white Negroes."

In the wake of the party-organized solidarity campaign for Angela Davis, Szentjóbý participated in and subverted a "Free Angela Davis" event at the Eötvös Klub in Budapest on 29 March 1971,<sup>10</sup> reading aloud the African-American writer James Baldwin's letter to Angela Davis (a letter which had been published in the daily newspaper *Magyar Nemzet* earlier that year). As Szentjóbý was reading, a girl repeatedly knocked the paper from his hands with a broom, stuffed his mouth with stockings, tickled his nose, and pressed against his crotch with cotton wool, tied up his bent knees, and poured cola on his head. While Szentjóbý was hopping on one leg, the girl knocked him over with the broom; she then put a table on top of the artist, who by that point was lying on the ground. All the while, Szentjóbý continued reading the letter until he finally could finish it (fig. 5) (Eörsi 2002, 8). The performance was described in detail in a secret service report that also commented on audience reac-

tions. According to agent Sárdi's report, at the beginning of the performance the audience interpreted it as an anti-American piece and appeared to be unsatisfied with it, while later, when they started to interpret it as a critique of actually-existing socialism, they became enthusiastic (8). Although the accuracy of this description cannot be assumed, it demonstrates that the agent's indirect interpretation understands Szentjóby's action as a political critique, and his failure to recognize that this critique was multi-layered, and was not only the critique of socialism or capitalism. I would argue that Szentjóby's action criticized both state socialism and the United States, eroding the common one-directional nature of political critique and displaying that the oppression of people is an integral element of both regimes. Through this action, he went beyond the popular strategy of doublespeak by masking the critique of socialism as that of capitalism or vice versa. This confused the audience of the performance by disturbing the common interpretative schemes of the Cold War in which socialist and capitalist regimes seemed to be antagonistic.



Fig. 5. Tamás Szentjóby: *Free Angela Davis*, 1971. ©IPUTNPU-Archives

Also in 1971, Szentjóby spontaneously recited his poem on George Jackson, Angela Davis's partner, using verse inspired by Buddhist poetry; Jackson had just been shot dead by a prison guard.<sup>11</sup> Then, a year later, Szentjóby performed the action *Sit Out*<sup>12</sup> in a public space by evoking and reenacting elements from the trial of the Black Panther Party co-founder Bobby Seale, in which Seale was bound and gagged after his numerous courtroom outbursts. During the action, the bound and gagged Szentjóby sat in the street for twenty minutes while his friend documented the scene from a nearby flat. Although the action aimed to provoke the regime, the police arrived after the twenty minutes had passed, when Szentjóby had already left, and the

action was not followed by any later police retaliation. The fact that a brutal American trial was reenacted, and that the action took place in front of the Intercontinental, the most prestigious hotel in Budapest, confirms that from Szentjóby's viewpoint, critiques of socialism and the imperialist West were interlaced and thus inseparable from each other.

Szentjóby stands out among Hungarian artists by his conscious use of self-identification as a creative strategy. His self-identification with black struggles was deepened by the genre of performance, where both the presence and personal risk-taking of the performer allow ample space for self-positioning. In these works, Szentjóby had not depicted the revolutionary black subjects visually, but reenacted them, therefore activating the character of cultural icons that Leypoldt and Engler define as embodying rather than representational (Kürti 2010, 112). By this device, Szentjóby positioned himself as a local embodiment of Bobby Seale or Angela Davis, avoiding the possible traps of sexualization and exoticization. Szentjóby's actions transposed the resistance efforts of the Black Power movement onto the local scene while in turn internationalizing his own struggles against Hungary's aesthetically conservative and politically censored art scene by merging them with the struggles of African-American revolutionaries. These actions are consistent with the claim argued by Emese Kürti when analyzing other works of Szentjóby from the same period: His "opposition is an extended, practically global opposition, which cannot be limited to the period and scope of the 'three Ps' (Permit, Promote, Prohibit)" (2010).<sup>13</sup> Hence, Szentjóby interpreted oppression not as an individual phenomenon but as a systemic one, an interpretation consistent with the ideas of Jackson and Davis, as outlined by Dylan Rodríguez (2005, 113–144).

## CONCLUSIONS

This article analyzed the interpretations of the cultural icons of the anticolonial and Black Power movements in the visual arts, but solidarity appeared also in popular culture, and the appropriation of these icons have a wider history in the Eastern Bloc (Tomaselli – Scott 2009, 20). Besides the strategy of adapting these icons into the local context, at least once, in the case of the Chapel Exhibitions at Balatonboglár, the name of Angela Davis was used by artists to prove their loyalty to state socialism (Klaniczay – Sasvári 2003, 239). The solidarity with and mimicry of black cultural icons appeared in popular culture too, from public protests, such as the siege of the Belgian embassy in Belgrade by enraged protestors after Patrice Lumumba's murder, to the football pitches where, in the 1960s, the right-wing ultras of the Hungarian Ferencváros Football Club associated their repressed status<sup>14</sup> with the situation of the black people of the United States and among themselves used the greeting "Hello negro – How do you do black man?" (Takács 2014, 140)

Through the analysis of the artistic products of Béla Kondor, Anna Kárpáti, the Orfeo Group, György Kemény, and Tamás Szentjóby, I argued that the appearance of blackness, black social movements, and black cultural icons in the Hungarian art of the 1960s and 1970s was strongly determined by the party line on decolonization and on the racial question. As the reception of cultural icons is typically dynamic, chang-

ing according to context (Tomaselli – Scott 2009, 18), the cultural icons of black revolutionaries appeared in a wide variety of distinct artistic narratives, although these always had to relate to the party line in some way.

However, even in the reinterpretations of these cultural icons within the progressive art scene, a colonialist representational model of gender and race occasionally survived. In the case of Anna Kárpáti's statue, the commission, rather than the artist, was directly connected to the party line, while Béla Kondor's woodcut series reformulated the governmental position by embedding colonial battles into the visual language of the class struggle, and the Orfeo Group criticized the bureaucratization of state-socialist societies by stretching official discourses and symbols into a radical, militant standpoint. In the fresco secco painting of György Kemény, Angela Davis was visualized among the challengers of the current system, but first of all as a sexualized militant and only secondarily as a critical philosopher. Thus in a highly ironic and intellectualized way, the mural slightly re-positioned Davis from her status in the party line and placed her at the intersection of pop culture and critical theory. In the actions of Tamás Szentjóby, his self-identification with Davis and Seale, rather than representation of them, held primacy, and their politics were merged with his own; in this way his actions showed solidarity with the militant American activists while their aura also legitimated Szentjóby's radical, anti-systemic critique and juxtaposed the oppressive traits of both the capitalist and socialist regimes. The mural outlined by György Kemény, as well as the works by the Orfeo Group and Szentjóby, reflect the rapid process through which Angela Davis became a cultural icon in the Eastern Bloc in the early 1970s. These artworks were not fundamental factors that led to Davis's becoming a cultural icon, and the artistic depictions of her tell us more about the value systems of their artists and the local cultural meanings of her as an icon than about Davis herself because, as she so clearly realized, her image became used to fuel countless social activities that were far from her own goals (Davis 1998, 292).

Angela Davis's icon holds multiple subject positions (Brown 2010, 127), and the works analyzed here focused on different aspects of this icon, decontextualizing and detaching it from Angela Davis's lived reality, in part because of the distance between the Hungarian artists and the American battleground of Davis's primary conflicts (Reed 1999, 201). Davis expressed her concern several times about the ahistorical and apolitical reinterpretations of her figure (1994, 38). Nonetheless, while Hungarian artistic interpretations of her and the Black Power and anticolonial movements were often ahistorical, they were consistently political, even as they, as is often seen in the politics of cultural icons (Tomaselli – Scott 2009, 23), frequently used the morally and sexually seductive qualities of her icon.

To conclude, it can be argued that the state-directed solidarity campaigns supporting Angela Davis were among the reasons why she, and not any other comrade of color, became the idol of some Hungarian artists of the early 1970s. Governmental agitation made her a widely celebrated cultural icon in state-socialist regimes, while at the same time she was a role model for uniting militant activism and intellectual radicalism. Davis was an internal enemy in the United States, just as many underground artists in Hungary were or felt themselves to be in their own country; they

were thus faced with common conditions, in the sense that they all tried to make revolution from within, from “the belly of the beast.” But aside from such political and ideological reasons, it is unquestionable that Davis’s blackness, her racial and visual difference, was central in her becoming a transcultural icon. This otherness was ideal for Hungarian underground artists, who appropriated Davis in their subversive projects against the local regime and used both her political and racial otherness for their distinction making that allowed for their own critique of state socialism.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> In the state-socialist countries of Eastern Europe, the African-American Civil Rights Movement was far less present than the Black Power movement, possibly as a consequence of Martin Luther King’s religious beliefs at the core of his philosophy.
- <sup>2</sup> I thank Beáta Hock for drawing my attention to the work of Sophie Lorenz.
- <sup>3</sup> Third Worldism was a liberationist and insurrectionary ideology that flourished between the 1940s and 1970s and focused on the self-determination of Third World countries. It proposed a global political approach, focusing on the relations produced by capitalist imperialism between the core and the periphery of the global economy. In this sense, Third Worldism aimed to go beyond the First/Second World rupture of the Cold War (Lazarus 2013).
- <sup>4</sup> However, there were also those who had artistic interests in non-African anticolonial and anti-imperialist struggles, including some of the artists in this article, such as Tamás Szentjóby, who created an action in 1972 entitled *Educational Movie in the Memory of “The Battle of Algiers,”* or the Orfeo Group, which also gave attention to Cuba and Vietnam.
- <sup>5</sup> Kembe, Dominique and Irene Kembe. Interview by Balázs Antal, László Hatházi and the author, Budapest, 13 September, 2016.
- <sup>6</sup> Kembe, Dominique and Irene Kembe. 2016. Interview by Balázs Antal, László Hatházi and the author, 13 September, Budapest.
- <sup>7</sup> A practice of racial characterization of the racial characterization is still present: The author of a recent article identified Kárpáti’s *Negro Boy* as being of the Nuba people by comparing his traits to the photos of George Rodger and Leni. Riefenstahl. <http://cink.hu/budapest-egyik-legszebb-szobratitokban-egy-egesz-terke-1678528781>.
- <sup>8</sup> In June of 1971, just before his death, even Lukács (1971) himself formulated a petition in the defense of Angela Davis.
- <sup>9</sup> Self-identification with subjugated black people and the recognition of them as revolutionary subjects were not the innovation of the 1970s. In his essay *The White Negro* (1957), Norman Mailer analyzed the adaptation of black culture by a white youth as a counter-movement of conformist culture.
- <sup>10</sup> Eötvös Klub was the cultural club of the Eötvös Loránd University that gave space for numerous semi-official cultural events in the 1970s.
- <sup>11</sup> Szentjóby, Tamás. 2016. Interview by the author, 22 January, Budapest.
- <sup>12</sup> The title is a pun on the protest form called “sit-in” that was widely used by the Civil Rights movement in the United States.
- <sup>13</sup> The three Ps, or in Hungarian, the three Ts, was a logic of censorship introduced by communist cultural politician György Aczél.
- <sup>14</sup> In state socialism, the Ferencváros Football Club and their supporters were marginalized and were labeled as fascists or Nazis (Hadas 2000, 52).

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## Angela Davis goes east? White skin and black masks in the art of socialist Hungary

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Blackness in visual culture. State socialist dissident culture. Anti-colonial movements.  
Angela Davis.

This essay examines the meanings of blackness in the Hungarian art of the 1960s and 1970s, primarily through the trajectory of Angela Davis. In this period the artistic representation of blackness was widespread in socialist Hungary due to state-initiated solidarity campaigns with the subjugated subjects of the First and the Third World. Through the analysis of works by Béla Kondor, Anna Kárpáti, György Kemény, Tamás Szentjóbý and the Orfeo Group the article argues that these artists held different attitudes towards the black liberation struggles, but they were not isolated from the party-line on these insurgencies. Moreover, in certain cases the representation of the subjugated black cultural icons undermined the politics of the state-solidarity, and served as the expression of the artists' own struggles.

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