

HUNGARIAN UNIVERSITY OF FINE ARTS
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The Relationship of Playing and the Arts in the works of Ernie Kovacs

Abstract

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My doctoral dissertation offers an investigation of the interconnection of play, humour and the arts in the works of Ernie Kovacs.

My primary interest lay in whether playing, and its most important component, humour, can in its own right and with the help of its own tools create an environment conducive for self-inspection and acquisition of knowledge of ourselves, of something we did not previously know or want to know. Does it possess a strength for self-activation?¹ If so, through which tools can this manifest itself? What is the common denominator in the interaction of playing, humour and the arts? How is all this potential present in Ernie Kovacs' works? – someone who, from the 1920s in America immersed himself not in one but in two emerging mediums, first in radio and then in television, becoming groundbreaking in both.

My personal involvement in his works is purely grounded on the fact that he caught my attention and ever since that fateful moment they have been a constant presence in my mind. Not 'only' because Kovacs succeeded in building up his career in the period lasting from the 1920s until the 1950s first in the emerging medium of the radio, then in television, but was also part of the multitude of genre ideas circulating in the air necessary for the birth of the new media. Over and above all this, I became engrossed in Kovacs' work because the degree of his curiosity and zeal matched that of a child. The driving force behind his disposition and working habits was based on personal engagement and motivation rooted in playing, aimed at the person, not the masses, something that helped him achieve through surprising situations all those aspects which form, in all their interconnections, the subject of the doctoral dissertation.

The focus of the dissertation, as well as its primary question, centres around the exploration of the existential importance of playing. It discloses the contexts of the manifold aspects of the questions on the phenomena, facts and hypotheses that arose

¹ Green Sara E., Shawn Bingham, Shawn Chandler, Seriously Funny : Disability and the Paradoxical Power of Humor, Lynne Rienner Publishers , 2016. Access: Universitt. Bielefeld <https://katalogplus.ub.uni-bielefeld.de/title/HT021363488> Last accessed: 2023.04.20.

Sara E. Green and Chandler Shawn study the American comedian Josh Blue's work and arrive at the conclusion that Blue engages in a double activity through humour. On the one hand, he amuses his audiences to laughter and on the other challenges the listener to confront their own prejudices with the help of humour. As Blue bases his acts on personal encounters, his stories that could otherwise hardly be looked upon as comical are freely exploited by the comedian given the fact that he recounts personal experiences. He holds up the proverbial mirror to us, using it to entice the listener to laughter and through this simultaneously channel us towards thinking and feeling uneasy. Placing social life under a magnifying glass is a well-known and time-honoured means of reflection used in comedy and humour. Humour encourages us to observe life and our own experiences from a different aspect, encounters we may never have experienced ourselves.

during research, as well as my well-grounded supposition that playing is unique, and its importance in human existence cannot be substituted with anything else. One of the most important conclusions of the dissertation is that playing must be factored in the development of the individual as something bearing a non-reducible existential importance. It exercises a significant importance on the quality of the fabric of the society and as such must be granted a position in its own right in the development of the society. The dissertation therefore, on the one hand, gives a factual presentation of the phenomena and processes associated with the subject itself, and, on the other, present my personal findings on the subject I came across during the process.

The cultural importance of the research and the dissertation becomes apparent in my opinion in the fact that the dissertation within its own context opens up a new perspective on Ernie Kovacs' works and directs our attention not only to his groundbreaking work, but also to the book *Ernie in Kovacsland* published by Fantagraphics in 2023² and also to *Ediad Productions*, a collection of documents on Ernie Kovacs by Joshua Mills. By writing the dissertation my objection was to find a place for Ernie Kovacs' personality and work in the domestic discourse on the arts. I also intend to incorporate the knowledge and personal experience I have gained during research into my personal work.

Due to the widespread nature of the topic, I defined the methodology of research and its structure as follows: I regard as optimal an approach that focuses on the subject from independent, seemingly disparate points of view, centred around different aspects. It follows from this methodology that the links between the researched topic and the chosen points of view form a web of intersections in places and materialise as islands, so to speak, on the map of conceptions of the dissertation. I regard this method more adequate, intriguing, more conducive to a debate and therefore more realistic than the adoption of a linear approach would have made possible. In what follows I present the structure of the dissertation and make an attempt at proving the benefits of the approach I have decided to take in my presentation.

In the second chapter, entitled *The connection between humour and the arts in the works of Ernie Kovacs*, I present my conclusions based on my research and experiences. The subsections each deal with the particular aspects of the conclusions.

II.1 The need for doubt, insecurity, surprise and alertness

² Compiled and Edited by Josh Mills, Ben Model, Pat Thomas: *Ernie in Kovacsland*, Fantagraphics, Seattle, 2023

I embark on the dissertation with two childhood stories which, contrary to appearances, do bear a connection to the topic. I need the two stories because they signal a need for doubt, insecurity and alertness, whose visual imprint, codes and means of expression that I am searching for in the arts. Why? Because it is my conviction that a medley of these forms a free human spirit. The free human spirit who wants to think for themselves, make mistakes, then try again, and play with all this to incessantly grow ever closer to a person who is more defined and impossible to confuse with another person. To their own self. In other words, to become someone who can be told apart from the masses, someone who has grown into an independent person in full possession of their responsibility.

II.2 The importance of playing in personal development

Without going into details on the psychology of the subject, I embark on the importance of playing in the development of the self. I need this for two reasons: on the one hand, playing is a fundamentally defining activity of childhood. Its importance is pivotal in building a personality, exchange of experiences of the world, the world and 'me' and developing an understanding of social relationships. In other words: the cultural importance of playing is overbearing. The time spent playing progressively shortens as we approach the adult age. It would not necessarily have to be like this, but the reality remains. What forms and possibilities of expression of playing remain for all it means to us? One means is humour, something that develops parallelly with playing, but in a much slower tempo. This is the territory to which playing retreats in adulthood, this is what can open up a means for self-inspection. I will also analyse playing in a later chapter when I discuss Ernie Kovacs' oeuvre.

II.3 The authoritarian presence

At this point, my discussion averts to a different territory: the territory of authoritarian presence. This chapter discusses the importance of authoritarian presence in the process of growing up, its role of restraint, its means of collectivisation. Collectivisation is the key term here, something I will discuss in connection with the two mediums present in Ernie Kovacs's works, the radio and the television, both of which are capable of collectivising the interests of mass consumption despite the democratic overtones that characterise them. The role Ernie Kovacs played in these mediums is interesting because he hacks into this collectivisation and puts its distortions into the limelight. In this chapter, I discuss the context of the game and art in connection with the activities of Révész-Böröcz and the art group called Vákuum Tv.

II.4 Excursion into the philosophy of seeing

Before I tackle the question of the TV/radio, I attempt a short excursion into the philosophy of seeing. This is our faculty we most rely on when we form an understanding of the reality around us. Our attention to our vision has experienced major changes in our age and is still forming even nowadays. 'Seeing is believing', says the proverb, and with the advent of the screen this becomes even more accentuated. The intentions of the projected vision are obvious: shaping our desires and thoughts. A criticism of the weakness of the medium, as well as the poor quality of its content, or the need of addressing its work ethic, or just the importance of the existence of a 'be aware' mode is of utmost importance from the point of view of the recipient.

The pictures projected by the media are omnipresent in our lives as a kind of authoritarian presence. What means of resistance can we develop in response to this authoritarianism? This is where I am going to expand on where and how I first encountered Ernie Kovacs' works. How it caught my attention and how exactly this unfolded. On the first encounter, the seen picture stayed with me, but failed to particularly kindle my interest. I am also going to describe the second and the third encounter with him, and starting from here I will embark on an analysis of Ernie Kovacs' works.

II.5 My encounters with Ernie Kovacs' works

First encounter – Friends, an image of the room, the presence of the TV in an intimate territory, the waking up of an obsessed character with a resolution in mind in the middle of the night – this will form the feedback to the first story I tell.

Second encounter – surrealism, black humour, the relationship of noise and silence in TV productions/arts in flux – feedback to playing.

Third encounter – his method of work/relations with people, both collegial and relating to the viewers – feedback.

II.6 Mapping of Ernie Kovacs' oeuvre

This subchapter looks at the parental background, the years spent in education, his habits, working methods, the characteristics of the inspiring moments of togetherness with his colleagues and audiences, as well as the impact of the force he exercised on the artistic transformation of the age through his modes expression. The chapter discusses the groundbreaking and genre-forming role Ernie Kovacs had in the establishment of the mediums of the radio and the television. I will also discuss which aspect of humour I managed to unravel with the help of analysis of Ernie Kovacs' works.

II.7 Researching the nature of humour

The next part in my dissertation is devoted to the analysis of humour, the capture of its extraordinarily complicated nature, its limits. Giving to it an exact recipe is impossible.

What I will attempt is give methods for approaching it, and a brief attempt at describing its psychological trajectory. My intentions are to show how humour can be extended to the territory of freedom, or, in its absence, the reflex of self-defence, and, in extreme cases, also aggression.

II.8 Summary

In this part of the dissertation my intentions are to show the possibilities of reclaiming playing, as well as the common denominator of the arts and humour, which can best be captured as a confrontation with the unknown based on the element of surprise.

Chapter III contains the references and the materials used. Chapter IV offers a summary of my MA thesis.

Chapter III. serves to present the final artwork of my Doctoral Studies, chapter IV. contains a list of the literature and images used, the first subsection of Chapter V. are the Appendices section that provides the script of the final artwork, and the second section provides an extract from the material of the Ernie Kovacs Archive.