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World Trade Center Jokes and Their Hungarian Reception

AT THE END OF September 2001, just a few weeks after the terrorist attack against the World Trade Center, Bill Ellis reminded his colleagues in an on-line paper in *New Directions in Folklore* that, though no jokes were yet circulating about the catastrophe, their appearance was only a question of days away (2001). For the present, he wrote, only political speeches and official memorials dominate the public sphere, but based on earlier comparable situations, it was easy to predict that people's repressed spontaneous reactions would emerge in the form of jokes as well. Ellis provided the following prognosis about the foreseeable World Trade Center jokes.

After a period of latency, there would be several waves of jokes. Since it took seventeen days for the first jokes to appear after the Challenger disaster and in the case of less shocking events even less time, it was expected that the first wave of World Trade Center jokes would appear in early October and that a second, much cruder, wave would follow a week later. The number of jokes would peak approximately one month after the catastrophe, by around the middle of October, after which there would be a rapid decline. By six weeks after the tragedy—that is, by the end of October—they would entirely disappear.

Ellis assumed that one or more of the jokes would be directly related to the visual image of the tragedy. The general characteristic of jokes is to give expression to the darkest threat posed by an experience, but in the act of transforming it into humor, jokes also take away its power. In the case of the Kennedy assassination, this

recurring, threatening visual image was the penetration of the bullets into the body of the president; in the case of the Challenger catastrophe, it was the glowing ball of fire against the blue Florida skies. The majority of the jokes about these events was also organized around these central visual images. In the case of the World Trade Center, the crash of the airplanes into the towers and the collapse of the structures were the most frequently repeated images, in both the national and the international media, and therefore it was predictable that a significant part of the jokes would use these images as raw material.

Ellis's second assumption was that the World Trade Center jokes would imitate the patterns of other catastrophe jokes. According to the predictable formulae of the genre, the jokes would evoke in shocking and provocative detail the most terrible images of death, in which only the earlier actors and contexts have changed but the story remained the same. Ethnic stereotypes about Arabs were also expected to appear in a significant number of jokes.

A further prediction was that the dominant form in which the World Trade Center jokes would be transmitted would be the e-mail message. In the aftermath of Princess Diana's death, observers noted for the first time that jokes tended to be spread, not through direct verbal communication or on the telephone, but by e-mail. It was to be expected that the World Trade Center jokes would also use this mode. Generally, there would be three to eight jokes in an e-mail transmission, to which the sender would attach few or no words of commentary. Ellis also imagined that the Internet would have other ways of affecting the production and form of the content of the jokes.

Finally, Ellis raised the point that the World Trade Center jokes would run into strong opposition on the part of moral spokesmen, especially teachers and journalists, who would react to them with "disgust and outrage" in front of the public. The editorials and commentaries in the media, for their part, would characterize the jokes as "pathological inventions of sick minds."

What came true of these prognoses? To what extent did the World Trade Center catastrophe differ from other catastrophes, and to what extent was this mirrored in the jokes about the event? In a monograph-length study, completed in June 2002, Ellis returned to these questions and emphasized that his prognosis proved correct in the vast majority of cases. Ellis's analysis is especially instructive in that he

focused not only on American jokes but also on British, Canadian, and Australian examples. Extending his earlier inquiry to the central role of the Internet in globalization, he now asked whether the tragedy could be regarded as a uniquely American event or as a global phenomenon. He wanted to know what played a more important role in the different interpretations of the terrorist attack against the United States: the cultural-linguistic similarities between English-speaking nations or the social-political differences among these states? The most important conclusion of his comparative study of the World Trade Center jokes was that their various manifestations were determined by local readings rather than a global one. Ellis's preliminary assumptions had been that the jokes would be global in nature and would reflect the humor of the international community, independent of national boundaries. This expectation, as he self-critically admitted, was not borne out by the facts. His study came to the conclusion that electronically mediated catastrophe jokes could express the experiences of people living far from the disaster and that these reactions could range from a sense of threat, sympathy, or solidarity, all the way to a sense of differentiation, criticism, or even superiority provided by distance. In the case of distant reception, it became more apparent that reactions to catastrophes did not involve so much a reconstruction of the original events as they did the transformation of images seen on television in order to thematize people's own lives and identities in the new situation. The following discussion seeks to extend Ellis's problematic by asking the question: how did people in a non-English speaking country like Hungary, whose cultural traditions and social characteristics differ radically from those of the U. S., interpret the World Trade Center jokes?[1]

Hungarian E-mails and World Trade Center Jokes

Because of the six-hour time difference, news of the September 11 disaster reached Hungary in the early afternoon, shortly before three o'clock. Radio and television stations interrupted their programs and, almost immediately, there developed on the Internet, too, different forums and message boards that transformed the existing home pages and forums into discussion spaces of the World Trade Center events. This preoccupation with the WTC disaster soon appeared on the largest Hungarian joke home pages as well.[2]

Two preliminary observations need to be made about the Hungarian jokes that appeared on the Internet. The first is that these cannot be neatly separated from serious face-to-face conversations nor from the various deliberative discourses that took place on television and the Internet, since they all presupposed each other. On the one hand, the jokes reflected and reacted to things heard in the media; on the other, the different discussion forums often used jokes to illustrate the positions of the speakers. In other words, the jokes assumed an organic function within the public discourse about the meaning of the World Trade Center tragedy, constituting an integral part of it. As John Dorst has remarked: "That joke cycles should move quite freely between computer bulletin boards and face-to-face exchanges is quite to be expected, and we have no basis on which to assign one setting priority or legitimacy" (1990:184).

The second observation that needs to be made is that jokes not only transmitted the feelings and opinions of Hungarian society but also became part of a global discourse.[3] In fact, a significant part of the jokes that we have examined was borrowed by the Hungarian home pages without alteration from English-language, and to a much lesser extent German-language, home pages.[4] The "minority" status of Hungarian jokes is clearly reflected in the numbers. On July 2, 2002, a Google search under the heading "Bin Laden jokes" located 82,000 English-language jokes and only 245 Hungarian ones. The same proportion can be observed in World Trade Center jokes, which brought up 72,200 English and 101 Hungarian jokes. Understandably, the great majority of jokes on Hungarian home pages were also American, with or without Hungarian captions. Most of these jokes were visual in nature and therefore were comprehensible with a minimum of English knowledge or without any.

One of the most important predictions that Ellis made concerning the World Trade Center jokes was that they would find their most general mode of distribution through e-mails (2001). As he later reflected, this expectation was perfectly realized, and yet, inexplicably, he focused his analysis not on the e-mails people sent each other but on the home pages and the public "board postings" of the Internet (2002). His methodology was based on the examination of the occurrence of representative jokes; in particular, he looked at what jokes occurred most frequently within a given period of time on the public forums of the Internet and how these were interpreted by the com-

ments of observers. Unfortunately, this approach did not make it possible for him to analyze the different discursive spaces within the Internet or to explore the relationship between the public web pages and the e-mails sent among people. Since in my opinion this relationship has a special importance from the perspective of interpretation and appropriation, I have based my own analysis of the Hungarian World Trade Center jokes primarily on personal e-mails. Within that communicative frame, I have focused on two questions: which particular jokes did members of a given group select from those available on the Internet? and with whom did they choose to share them?

In order to present the Hungarian reception of World Trade Center jokes, I have examined all the e-mails that a young associate of an international firm in Budapest received from his colleagues during the period between September 13 and November 7, 200l. The e-mails containing exclusively jokes were put at my disposal by an acquaintance who was himself a member of the "forward-circle."[5] A "forward-circle" constitutes a characteristically virtual grouping, which includes not just those who are on one individual's personal list, but also those to whom the individuals on the list forwarded the letters—that is, the acquaintances of the acquaintances of the acquaintances. (In the letters it is often, but not always, possible to trace the layers of acquaintances from whom the jokes have arrived.) The addressees of the forwarded letters thus represented a loose community, whose members often knew each other only by sight or name, or not even by these, and whose only connection with each other was through the jokes.

Nancy K. Baym has devoted an entire study to the role of computer-mediated communication in the creation of new forms of virtual communities. She found that humor plays a key role in the establishment of solidarity among strangers and in the creation of virtual communities. "Perhaps one of the most important ways in which humor can enhance solidarity in the Computer Mediated Communication context is by creating a friendly social context despite the impersonal elements of the medium" (1995:21). This phenomenon is not contradicted by the fact that these letters, according to my young friend, did not create any sort of personal connections between the members on the list. As he explained, members of the forward-circle did not necessarily become personal acquaintances as a result of the e-mail exchanges, for a virtual community developed through the encounter between the jokes and the individual reader. In other words,

participation in the group did not require either the sharing of a physical space or a personal meeting, as Baym also noted (1993).

I do not consider the jokes in these letters to be a complete or entirely representative corpus. The jokes circulating in Hungary and encountered on the Internet were significantly more extensive and varied than the selection I found in these letters. The most frequently heard joke in Hungary, for example, did not appear in the sample I collected. That joke first appeared on a joke page on September 12:

> Did you hear that the terrorists made a bet with Peter Besenyi, the Hungarian world champion flyer, that they can fly between the two towers of the World Trade Center?
> *They lost.* [According to another version, *They tried it twice.*][6]

The e-mail list cannot be considered representative for the further reason that the tastes and opinions of young, liberal, cosmopolitan Budapest intellectuals do not correspond in all respects to the opinions and tastes of other Hungarian groups. The Besenyi joke probably did not get into the letters because of its general currency. Why circulate a joke that everyone is familiar with? Only rare or witty jokes enhance the sender's status and help to differentiate and elevate the identity of his group. (For example, jokes that were of German origins or written in German were over-represented in the e-mails in comparison with the Hungarian home pages, where English-language jokes dominated.) This distinction created a special space for these e-mail jokes within the general public sphere. They played a mediating and selecting function between the generally shared views and conclusions of the public at large and the particular points of view and opinions of smaller groups. The jokes sent in e-mails were thus more specific and individualized than those found on the home pages, but they were more general and impersonal than those that were told in face-to-face encounters. As mentioned earlier, the members of the forward-circle did not constitute a group in the traditional sense of the word. Even if they were acquainted with each other and habitually met in some context, they did not refer to the jokes they had been sending each other. The jokes were a part of the background knowledge of the virtual group which, like other kinds of information or "memos," could be sent on without any particular kind of personal involvement or identification.

Within the forward-circle, individuals used different methods to determine whether to forward the received letters or not. According to an e-mail interview with two members of the circle, one sent the jokes to only a few people: "I sent them to one of my friends and to my sister. I sent them to those whom I would have told in person as well" (B. J. A., personal e-mail, July 23 2002). This is the type who listens to other people's jokes but does not necessarily share them with others. The second respondent, on the other hand, belonged to the type who likes to tell jokes. Everything he heard was forwarded to everyone he knew who was on his correspondence list and would be interested in them: "Every acquaintance who likes these kinds of things got e-mails" (F. E., personal e-mail, July 23, 2002).

A few words are in order about these electronic letters. There were twenty-seven letters containing sixty-six jokes in all. Among these, twenty-five were verbal and forty-one were visual in JPG format. (I include in this list a letter that was not sent to my friend but one that he sent to me at my request on October 25 in which he collected those jokes that he heard or read about, but which were not circulated in the e-mail letters.) In the majority of cases—altogether in eighteen letters—there was only one joke; in four letters there were two jokes; in two letters there were three jokes; and in three letters there were more than three jokes.[7] The proportion of visual to textual jokes was approximately two to one, and among the former there were animations, caricatures, photographs, and films. The most important innovation of the Internet was that it was able to utilize the techniques of all the media at the same time. One was equally likely to find MP3s, musical videos, caricatures, animations, video games, films, questions and answers, poems, photographs, and montages. What is more, the majority of jokes appeared in the form of pictures rather than words; even in e-mails, people most often sent each other pictures without commentary. Frequently, the images were not static but moving and interactive, making it possible for the viewer to become a collaborator in an image before sending it off to other people. It was easy to understand the pictures without a knowledge of foreign languages and it was possible not only to contemplate them or send them on but also, according to one member of the forward-circle, to transform them into stories.

There were a few jokes among the sixty-six examples that were not about the World Trade Center but that were included with them and were emotionally and organically related to them; for this reason, I have included them in my analysis. I will return to this later. With case by case variation, the average list on each mailing consisted of twenty to twenty-five people—but sometimes there was only one, at other times fifty—who sent each other the newest World Trade Center jokes from time to time. The letters were sent to 969 persons, but it is possible that the number is larger than this, because in the case of two jokes it was impossible to determine the number of the addressees. (My source sent me those two pictures alone without including the names of those persons in the forward-circle who received them.) With one exception, there was no accompanying text in the primarily visual jokes, just as there was no personal addressee in the letters, although the list of recipients to whom the letter was forwarded was always visible. Besides the Budapest recipients, the list contained a few Hungarians working in the German branch of the firm. What is more, there were three German names on the list, something that explains the notable presence of German jokes in the letters. Ameri-

can home pages were the source of the majority of the jokes, and, as mentioned earlier, the sample of sixty-six naturally constituted only a fraction of the many hundreds of jokes that could be found there. There were, however, ten Hungarian and five German jokes as well, which obviously got on the list of the group from Hungarian and German home pages.[8] (I call Hungarian or German those jokes that contain in their texts unmistakable linguistic or cultural references.) The numbers in themselves are revealing. In the e-mails, just as on the Internet, the jokes containing American references were unquestionably dominant. At the same time however, the minority of Hungarian and German jokes, although numerically outnumbered, did show the specific geographic context in which the letters circulated and the distinctive cultural perspective from which the attack against the World Trade Center was interpreted. For this reason, I analyze the selection of the jokes sent in these letters by first comparing them with the jokes found on Hungarian, German or American home pages, and then by interpreting them within a particular Hungarian political and cultural context. My approach follows the example set by Christie Davies, who found that in the analysis of jokes sent by e-mail, "To compare and to compare and to compare is the only true method" (1999:257).

A Theoretical Model for Catastrophe Jokes

It has frequently been observed that catastrophes are accompanied by collective psychological reactions that have a distinctive character. The unexpected proximity of annihilation causes shock among the survivors, who initially experience emotional paralysis, then a sense of solidarity with the entire group, whose members they attempt to aid. Following the shock there emerge reactions of anger, disillusionment, and mourning. It is postulated that a great deal of time is needed for the physical losses caused by the disaster to be set right and for the psychological traumas to be worked through. The whole process has been called "media catastrophe syndrome" (Wolfenstein 1966).

One of the most important, though by no means the only, means for coming to terms with the distant and shocking things conveyed by the media, is humor. Humor helps in the interpretation and acceptance of contradictions, lacunae, and ambiguities and thus is able to diminish the uncertainties and tension created by the news (Baym

1995). Generally speaking, in the days and weeks immediately following a disaster, public reaction is characterized by shock and solidarity associated with the catastrophe syndrome, and nothing is further from it than the impulse of humor. It is generally known that the first jokes about the disaster are born among members of rescue teams, who keep these in the greatest secrecy and share them only with each other or at most with their families (Ellis 2001). The therapeutic function of humor in cases where people are under psychological pressure has already been described in Erving Goffman's analysis of surgeons' joking in the operating room (1961).

As a generalized social phenomenon, however, the production and recounting of jokes emerge only when the immediate danger is gone, and the processes of repairing the physical damage and searching for its causes and perpetrators have begun. It is characteristic of these early jokes that they attempt to strike a balance between the need to relieve tension on the one hand, and the imperative to respect people's sensitivities on the other.[9] But there is another wave of catastrophe jokes, frequently characterized as morbid, which lacks all respect for sensitivities. Far from wanting to protect or sacralize that which was lost, these catastrophe jokes intentionally exaggerate and satirize the weaknesses and contradictions of the previous state in order to help people finally leave it behind and accept the new post-catastrophe situation as an unchangeable fact of life.

Dorst was the first to suggest that in the case of catastrophe jokes, scholarly examination should put the emphasis not on individual jokes but on the series—that is, on their cyclical appearance and their unexpected disappearance. "To approach this phenomenon is to consider the apposite genre not joke but cycle. From this perspective the diagnostic feature of the genre is seriality itself, the potentially infinite process of sequential displacement of one unit by its equivalent. And this is a property not only operative within a given cycle but between cycles as well" (Dorst 1990:184). Dorst adds that the cycles fundamentally transform the old rules pertaining to the telling and reception of catastrophe jokes. "For example, if the genre is the cycle rather then the unit joke, what constitutes the context of its performance? How can we localize its performers and audiences?" (184). Dorst reaches the conclusion that in the study of catastrophe jokes, the idea of an identifiable story teller and a stable audience no longer holds, especially when the jokes are spread by way of the Internet.

The elements that had previously constituted the inseparable features of storytelling—the narrator, the story, and the audience—exist today in spatially and temporally separate realms.

Despite these new features, however, the narration and reception of catastrophe jokes still need to be regarded as collective, rather than individual, acts and have to be examined not in themselves but within the social contexts where they appear and according to the functions they fulfill. Consequently, I will use the widely accepted linguistic and psychological model for explaining catastrophe jokes as only an element of a more general performative model that stresses the inversive ritualistic aspect of jokes. As James Carey has pointed out in his work, ritual communication refers to the cultural construction of a community's temporal existence and identity as opposed to the communicative or instrumental model's focus on the spatial communication of information (1989). It is self-evident that catastrophe jokes do not convey direct information about disasters. All the greater is their role in reconciling the news with the community's values. According to the ritual communication model, the public is not just a passive observer but also an active participant in the state of anxiety created by the disaster, and it progresses in unison from one stage to another, passing from the comprehension of the tragedy toward its evaluation and emotional acceptance. One could thus argue that joke series follow a cyclical pattern, because they follow the ritual stages of the collective appropriation of the disaster. The characteristics of particular joke series clearly reflect why at a given time certain interpretations of the catastrophe enjoy priority, and why other forms are forced into the background or suppressed. The category of ritual communication also makes apparent why, in contrast to other kinds of jokes, catastrophe jokes are interpreted collectively and why individual readings have a smaller role to play.

Catastrophe jokes can be regarded as forms of ritual communication not only because of the cyclical nature of their dissemination and the formalized nature of their reception but also because of their characteristic contents. They do not simply reflect events, but rather they consciously offend against norms and symbolically reverse those rules that under normal circumstances determine how one is to speak of the catastrophe. As René Girard has written: "The rituals obviously reenact the mimetic escalation the prohibitions try to prevent. That is why the conjunction of the two has always eluded rational interpre-

tation. All difficulty disappears if we assume that, in the rituals, the escalation is mimicked only for the sake of the immolation it is supposed to trigger" (1978:202).

In the wake of the Challenger disaster, a particularly large number of jokes emerged, which folklorists examined more intensively than previous instances of catastrophe jokes (Ellis 1991; Goodwin 2001; Morrow 1997; Oring 1987; Simmons 1986; Smyth 1986). These writings provide deep insight into the morphology of catastrophe jokes, and therefore, before turning to the World Trade Center jokes themselves, it is useful to recall briefly the phenomenon of the Challenger jokes. Glancing over the analysis at the time, we find that folklorists provided three essentially overlapping theoretical frames for explaining catastrophe jokes; I call these a "social critical," a "therapeutic," and a "media critical" interpretation. Social-critical explanations use humor to thematize disappointment with social expectations (Simmons 1986). Therapeutic approaches regard jokes as a comment on people's emotional states (Morrow 1997). Finally, media-critical interpretations see in jokes a form of media-targeted cultural subversion (Oring 1987; Smyth 1986). Characteristic of all three explanations is the fact that they conceptualize the working-through of catastrophes through ritual communication, which uses the phases of shock, loss, and mourning to lead people from chaos to order, from the unexpected to the predictable, from the unknown to the known, from danger to security, from a sense of vulnerability to one of control.

Using the informal, or second, public sphere, catastrophe jokes moved into the void left unfilled by the official, or first, public sphere. In many cases, however, what was involved was not simply a supplementary function, where oral folklore could speak about things that were perhaps not especially interesting to the media public sphere. Rather, the outcome was the confrontation between the two different public spheres. In these cases, the jokes made public, through direct verbal interaction and in a spirit of mockery, attitudes that the media would have liked to keep silent about but that people wanted to discuss. In other words, the media conceived of its public role after the catastrophe in terms of the priest celebrating a rite of mourning, while the jokes rendered the role of the media and the discourse of mourning equally ridiculous and assumed the function of the carnivalesque fool. As Elliott Oring has written: "Folklore and creative celebration

may serve as forms of folk resistance against the power of public institutions to define the norm and the normative in a civil society" (1995:167). The media was aware of the provocation inherent in jokes, and media reporters of catastrophes made rare references to jokes only to attack them publicly and to distance themselves from them as inappropriate, frivolous, and sacrilegious phenomena.

Perhaps the most important difference between the Challenger jokes and the World Trade Center jokes was the central role of the Internet. E-mail messages, different on-line forums, and home pages functioned as spaces for public discussion, thus becoming repositories of first-hand information about the events, available to the general public as well as to researchers. To this day search engines have preserved hundreds of jokes as well as debates, conversations, and comments contained in former e-mails. From these it is already possible to reconstruct people's reactions to the events, which often diverged from that of the official media. The most striking difference between the two kinds of public spheres was the presence or absence of humor. Answering the question, how did the World Trade Center jokes differ from newspaper reports, one of the members of the forward-circle replied: "Greatly. About the former, one could laugh, about the latter one could only feel sad" (F. E., personal e-mail, July 23, 2002).

The Internet provided a public space that was distinguished not only from the media but also from the dominant mode of direct verbal communication that had previously characterized the transmission of jokes. Though more impersonal, it was also more direct and public; that is, it was open to a much wider circle of participants. The Internet also transformed the adversarial, mutually exclusive relationship that existed between the official reactions of mourning in the media and the carnivalesque humor of the catastrophe jokes. In its capacity as a new medium, the Internet gave expression to the elevated discourse of mourning when it transmitted news about the catastrophe, but at the same time, it also assumed the role of direct verbal communications when it provided space for the humorous commentary of jokes. In this way it unified previously fragmented aspects of public morality, which had been separated into a formal-public discourse and an informal-private discourse.

In the rest of the discussion, I will analyze these e-mail postings by imposing the formulae of catastrophe jokes discussed earlier and asking which metanarrative was most characteristic of these letters: the

"social critical," the "therapeutic," or the "media critical" discourse. I will explore the extent to which Hungarian jokes about the World Trade Center conformed to, and differed from, the existing American jokes. Moreover, I will ask how the members of the group linked by electronic mail attributed specific meanings to the jokes, and how they used them to construct and give cultural expression to visions, fears, and desires originating from the specifically Hungarian situation.

Cycles and Frames in the Hungarian Jokes

The reception of the jokes in the Hungarian media had similarities with the official condemnation of catastrophe jokes throughout the world. According to search engines, Hungarian-language newspaper articles attacking catastrophe jokes appeared on the Internet as early as September 16:

> Thanks to modern technology, the spread of idiocy is even more apparent than any time before. They are already spreading the first World Trade Center jokes and "clever" photomontages. (Mosques and minarets in the middle of New York, two "mistakes" in the middle of the picture, and other comparable things.) One does not need to have a crystal ball to foresee that within a few days and beyond we will be getting heaps of newer and newer ones, perhaps even separate pages will be dedicated to the theme. Couldn't we wait a few days? Let's say until they have buried the dead and rescued the injured? (Almasi Janos, "Nem lehetne nem meghulyulni?" *Index*, September 16, 2001)[10]

It was common practice to condemn the jokes not only in the official media but also in on-line forums. In spite of this, one could find examples of such unusually self-reflexive articles as "Terror Humor: Therapeutic Murderous Poems," published in an on-line newspaper in early October. "Jokes that help to create distance from the experienced trauma," the article cited an authority, "provide a useful function." Generally such arguments did not enjoy wide acceptance, and it was more common to condemn the jokes. "I personally enjoy them," wrote back one e-mail respondent to the article, "but how would you feel if you had been one of the victims?"[11]

Despite such reservations, from the first moment a huge number of World Trade Center jokes nevertheless appeared on the Internet, and soon these emerged in the e-mails as well. Looking back over the

preserved material, we can conclude that jokes began to make their appearance in e-mails by the second half of September, reached their greatest numbers in the middle of October, and disappeared by the end of the month. Of the different types of metanarratives, "therapeutic" jokes represented the fewest examples among the e-mails, something that was true of the Hungarian home pages as well as the American home pages. This can probably be explained by the fact that in the case of the World Trade Center jokes, the characteristic formulae of catastrophe jokes and war jokes were inseparably intertwined, a point that I will return to later on. For this very reason, therapeutic type jokes were far fewer in number than one would expect given the magnitude of the disaster.

The Hungarian e-mails contained the characteristic catastrophe jokes found on the American home pages, but there were a few significant differences. The wit and wry humor of the first wave of the American catastrophe jokes, which found popular expression in word plays and double meanings, did not appear on the Hungarian home pages or in the e-mails. For example, absent in these forums were such American jokes as these:

> Who are the fastest readers in the world?
> *New Yorkers. Some of them go through 110 stories in 5 seconds.*

> What was the quickest escape time from the World Trade Center?
> *Ten seconds flat.* (Ellis 2002)

This absence can probably be explained by the fact that these jokes were too closely tied to the English language, and even those Hungarians who knew English could not fully appreciate the puns and word play involved in the jokes. In their place, however, one found jokes that used similar word plays in Hungarian, with the important substantive difference, however, that these were mostly about the attackers rather than the victims. The following are examples of such jokes:

> How did Osama bin Laden become famous?
> *He exploded into public view.*

> How do Arabs travel to America?
> *They followed the direction of the tower.*

> Osama Bin Laden has been seen in public!
> *On a commemorative stamp.*

> Allah addresses bin Laden: "I didn't tell you to hijack the plane; I told
> you to convert the people." [In Hungarian the words "hijack" and "con-
> vert," as well as "plane" and "people," rhyme with each other.] (For-
> warded e-mail, October 11, 2001)

The early appearance of the Osama bin Laden jokes indicates that in
the immediate aftermath of the attack, Hungarians were most preoc-
cupied with the perpetrators and with their possible motivations rather
than with the direct human and material destruction connected to
the catastrophe.

    This type of joke can be called therapeutic because it uses word
plays that humorously reformulated the World Trade Center tragedy
and helped to decrease the initial anxiety and uncertainty associated
with the event. The best known Hungarian World Trade Center joke
belongs to this early cycle of jokes, which first appeared on September
18 on one the Hungarian joke pages.[12] The joke hinges on a playful
Hungarian nursery rhyme about a rabbit associated with the nonsense
epithets of both *"ingyom-bingyom"* and *"talib."* The joke goes like this:

> According to the most recent news, FBI agents have concluded that the
> little rabbit was Arab. What they do not yet know is whether it is *ingyom-
> bingyom* or *talib.* (forwarded e-mail, October 25, 2001)

The joke gives telling expression to the ambiguities of the post-Sep-
tember 11 situation, when even the bunnies of nursery tales were
suspect and could turn out to be Taliban. At the same time, the play
on words equated Afghan extremists with household pets and thus
neutralized the danger they posed.

    In contrast to the first wave of jokes, the second wave thematized
possibly the greatest taboo of any catastrophe: the accurate representa-
tion of the victims' deaths through images of the disfigured corpses. In
the case of the World Trade Center jokes, the bodies jumping and
falling like dolls from the burning towers were the object of such jokes.
The shocking pictures captured by television cameras were later inten-
tionally repressed and the fate of the people trapped in the towers left
to the imagination of the viewers. (The media and politicians praised
television stations for respecting people's sensitivities.) When they
thematized the shocking images avoided by television, these particular
jokes, which first appeared on the American home pages, infringed on
precisely this silence taboo. In one of the images we see bodies falling
from one of the flaming towers, while Geri Halliwell is depicted in the

foreground singing one of the pop hits of 2001, "It's Raining Men." Another version has the inscription, "Free Fall Championship 2001—NY."[13] Yet another image pictures the moment before the airplane crashed into the building, captioned with the well-known DHL Worldwide Express logo: "We fly things straight to your office." According to another version, "Bin Laden Airlines, Directly to your office."[14]

These jokes appeared in mid-October in the e-mails that are the focus of my study, the same time they appeared on the American home pages from where they were taken (forwarded e-mail, October 19, 2001). It is noteworthy that the difference between the Hungarian e-mails and the catastrophe jokes on American home pages was not the presence or absence of morbid jokes, but rather what I would call an element of surplus meaning in the Hungarian jokes, which evokes seemingly unrelated anxieties. Let me give you a few examples. Roughly simultaneously with the letters containing the above-mentioned morbid

images on the American home pages, there emerged in the Hungarian case a letter with sadistic and cannibal jokes:

> Two children are talking. The first says: "I have a new bi-bi-bicycle." The second replies: *Bi, Bi, Bim, you may have a new bicycle, but I don't have cancer like you.*

> What song do the children of Hiroshima sing? *There came a cloud and it descended on us.*

> Two cannibals on a road come upon a coffin. One remarks to the other: "Damn, this is the third day in a row that we have eaten preserved food." (Forwarded e-mail, October 11, 2001)

The connection between these and the World Trade Center jokes obviously does not lie in thematic similarities but rather in the fact that they shared the same time frame and the same morbid outlook. In the absence of sufficient information, I leave open the question of whether these images fulfilled a therapeutic function by ironically exaggerating the horror and thus increasing the emotional distance from the tragedy or whether, on the contrary, the cannibal and vampire jokes that were taken from the Hungarian home pages expressed an already existing emotional distance from the tragedy.[15]

The disappearance of the jokes by the end of October points to the fact that the emotional resolution of the tragedy of the World Trade Center was completed within the time frame suggested by Ellis. At this point, one of the circulated letters attached a visual joke with the subtitle "Szekszard" (Forwarded e-mail, October 29, 2001). It was the image of a sleepy and peaceful small Hungarian town, with a church steeple in the town square, being approached by a low-flying double-decker fertilizer plane. The text under the image reads: "Another breach of security." There is an element of self-irony in the picture, which implied that in Hungary there were no large metropolitan centers comparable to New York, no skyscrapers comparable to the World Trade Center, nor Boeing airplanes. The message of the joke, however, was not a critique of Hungarian provincialism, something often found in comparable jokes, but rather the perception that New York was far away and that Hungary could not experience a comparable tragedy. The worst possible accident that could happen was the collision caused by an antiquated plane that had flown off-course. The picture suggested that everything could return to normal after the tragedy, what happened was in the past and would not

Szekszard: another breach of security.

be repeated, at least not in Hungary. We are protected; the fertilizer plane does not present a safety risk. In early November another image appeared in an e-mail, presenting the head of a young man as an airplane with AA-11 painted on it crashes in through one ear and a ball of fire exits from the other ear. The subtitle in Hungarian and German reads: "America gets on my nerves" (forwarded e-mail, November 7, 2001). This joke gave direct expression to what would have been unimaginable a little while earlier: that people were fed up with

America gets on my nerves.

news about the disaster. The appearance of this image marked the end of the period of mourning, the conclusion of the emotional working-through of the tragedy. It goes in one ear and comes out the other. Life can return to its normal routine.

Social Critical Frames of the Hungarian World Trade Center Jokes

Among the formulae of the catastrophe-jokes, jokes using a political or social critical metanarrative appeared in significantly larger numbers than those using a therapeutic narrative. This observation applies equally to the American and the Hungarian home pages as well as to the letters. During the first week or two after the tragic events, the dominant emotion in the Hungarian e-mails was shock at the terrorist attacks. Here, too, there appeared the fear-inspiring jokes depicting the Statue of Liberty with a veil, George Bush in a turban, and New York peppered with minarets, all images which were, of course, copied from the American home pages (forwarded e-mails, September 17, 2001; September 17, 2001; September 28, 2001). Side by side with these, however, were new images for representing shock, such as the visual joke with a German caption, which showed the attack against the World Trade Center being carried out, not by an airplane, but by a primitive Trabant automobile. The rear wheels and body of the car stick out from the building, and the car has Arabic-looking inscriptions on it (forwarded e-mail, September 13, 2001). The German caption reads: "*Auch heute ein Flugzeug*" (Today, it's also an airplane). Literally the image means that an outdated car, originally produced in East Germany, can function as an airplane, or even as a rocket. Its broader symbolic implication is an unprecedented experience; the technologically backward Trabant (the Arab world) could, in spite of its backwardness, cause unimaginable harm to the technologically advanced towers (the Western world). What is remarkable about the joke is the fact that it interpreted the meaning of the tragedy through a specifically and notoriously Central-East European symbol of underdevelopment: the Trabant automobile. The picture suggests that with terrorism, the backward and violent political past has returned.

Most World Trade Center jokes were of a political nature and were borrowed from the American home pages mentioned earlier. Most had to do with the exposure of the military and the moral weaknesses

(Right) Afghanistan wins the war.

(Below) Today, it's also an airplane.

of the perpetrators. One image showed bin Laden escaping from the pursuing F-16 airplanes on a magic carpet from the Arabian Nights (forwarded e-mail, October 19, 2001); another depicted F-16 planes shooting at Arab fighters, not with rockets, but with hogs, which are known to be unclean animals for Muslims (forwarded e-mail, October 19, 2001). There also appeared on American home pages two

jokes about maps, which hinged on the question of what was to be-
come of Afghanistan after the war. According to one image, the map
of Afghanistan showed an enormous lake; according to the other, it
was covered by tiny emblems of McDonald's. In one of the undated e-
mail messages I examined, only the latter joke was included, indicating
that Hungarians envisioned the outcome of the war not in terms of bru-
tal revenge, but in terms of the increasing economic and ideological
influence of America. This joke is interesting from the standpoint of
showing how the dominant counter-discourse changed during the
course of the war. At the beginning, the theme of the jokes was: what
will happen if the Taliban win? The later jokes, focusing on the victo-
rious American military, asked the alternative question: what will hap-
pen if the Americans win the war?

Characteristically, some of the political jokes circulating in the e-
mails resembled the therapeutic jokes in that they also added a Hun-
garian twist to the American texts. We could cite as an example an
American image of September 26, which depicted a gallery of celebri-
ties and politicians whose names and photographs had been "Arabized."
Madonna, thus, became a turbaned Madonna bin Laden, President
Lincoln was transformed into a turbaned Lincoln bin Laden, and so
on.[16] As the dates of the images show, these were the products of the
initial reaction of shock and surprise and can be categorized among

the "What if the Taliban win" jokes. The Hungarian mutations of these jokes, which were circulated the same day as the American images, showed two well-known Hungarian public figures with turbans and Arabized names. One referred to Victor Orban, the Prime Minister at the time, as "Orban bin Laden," and the other depicted the recently deceased pop star Jimmy Zambo as "Zambo Jim Laden" (forwarded e-mail, September 26, 2001). The mutations implied not simply an adaptation of the jokes to the Hungarian context, but a significant transformation in their meanings, which is betrayed by the caption under the pictures: "New suspicious elements in connection with terrorism." In contrast with the American joke, which suggested that in the case of a Taliban victory, the gallery of American celebrities would become "Arabized," the Hungarian joke implied that the two Hungarian celebrities were already regarded as "terrorist suspects." These two jokes are noteworthy because they differ from later forms of "Arabization" that became popular on Hungarian home pages. While the later jokes simply represented playful word games, the earlier images poked fun at politics and popular culture. Significantly, these images did not alter the names of oppositional or minority political leaders, because the jokes were not about actual party politics, but about politics and power in general. Comparable to formulaic political jokes revolving around the stock figures of Kennedy, Stalin, Kadar, or the Pope, these have to be regarded as part of a counter-cultural opposition to all political power.[17] The same dynamic operates in the case of the stylized figure of "Zambo Jim Laden," who was the embodiment of the power of subversive popular culture for intellectuals.

Ellis found only one joke, the "Bin Workin" joke, which had variations in the different English-speaking countries. This is how he reproduced the English version of the joke: "The Merseyside regional police chief stated that the terrorists, Bin Sleepin, Bin Drinkin and Bin Fightin, have been arrested on immigration issues. The police advise further that they can find no one fitting the description of the fourth cell member, Bin Workin, in the area" (2002: chapter 6, page 11). According to Ellis, the jokes represented the normalization of the World Trade Center tragedy as well as the substitution of Arabs with ethnic outsiders to be found in the different countries—in Australia with the Aborigines, in the U.S. with blacks, and in England with immigrants.

The "Bin Workin" jokes that appeared in the English-speaking countries did not have parallel versions on the Hungarian language joke pages or in our sample of e-mail messages. It is true that the phonetic similarities of the "bin" in bin Laden's name did elicit verbal puns in Hungarian jokes as well, but with responses in German, rather than in English. The Hungarian equivalent of the "Bin Workin" jokes sounded like this:

> What do they call the German terrorist?
> *Ich bin Laden* (forwarded e-mail, October 25, 2001).

The distinguishing feature of this joke is that it cannot be regarded as an ethnic joke, and therefore its meaning is fundamentally different from the "Bin Workin" jokes. On the linguistic level the joke unexpectedly links one of the most common and ordinary forms of introductions, "Ich bin," with the sensational name, "Laden." The juxtaposition creates shock, and on a more abstract level it has a destabilizing effect as the clear boundaries between the self and the other are erased. With this comparison I am not trying to argue that there are no Hungarian-language jokes against other nationalities or ethnicities, such as Arabs. I simply want to suggest the marked absence of "Bin Workin" type jokes directed against Hungary's own ethnic minorities. In searching for specifically ethnic jokes in connection with the World Trade Center, I discovered only one incidence of an anti-gypsy joke on a Hungarian joke page.

> Who are the Hungarian terrorists?
> *Two gypsies crashing into the county administrative building on stolen bicycles.*[18]

Significantly, this joke remained completely marginal in the Hungarian context, not only among members of the liberal forward-circle that I examined but also in the other Hungarian-language joke home pages.

The Media Critical Frame of Hungarian World Trade Center Jokes

Turning to the third metanarrative type of World Trade Center jokes, those based on media criticism, we find that the numbers were parallel to the political type of jokes. This applies equally to the home pages and the letters. Surprisingly, the jokes were directed not only against the media but also against popular culture in general, some-

thing that found primary expression in the humorous paraphrasing of the advertisements of well-known films. Before turning to this, however, let us first look at the media criticism expressed in the catastrophe jokes. One of the jokes circulating in the e-mail messages that directly implicated the media represented Satan's face emerging from the smoke of the World Trade Center towers. The title of the image was "Hoax" (forwarded e-mail, September 17, 2001). The picture was framed as if it were on a television screen, with the logo of CNN visible in the right corner. The CNN picture, however, was placed within a computer Windows program. In other words, the original picture was framed twice over, once as a television image and once as a computer program. On the picture itself, the satanic face created by the smoke was circled by a red marker, which was also used to indicate the path of the projection from the burning towers. Above the enlarged face was the following text: "What the fuck is that?" The inscription, the Windows commands, and the title of the picture were all in English, clearly indicating the original source of the Hungarian e-mail images. The picture functions precisely in the way Oring described this type of catastrophe joke: it parodically exaggerates the efforts of the media and warns that neither the pseudo-scientific computer enlargement nor the CNN logo can guarantee the authenticity or reliability of the picture.

Among the e-mails there was another picture, which was probably the best-known example of jokes criticizing the media. The title of the picture is "Witness," and given the fact that it appears in both English and German in the letters, one can conclude that the American image got to Hungary through German mediation (forwarded e-mail, October 10, 2001). It is a series made up of eight pictures in which a young man in a ski cap, also referred to as "The WTC Guy," poses as a tourist in front of various tragic backgrounds.[19] In the first one, he is standing on top of the World Trade Center just as a huge airplane approaches the tower from behind. In another picture, the background is the Concord tragedy in Paris two years earlier; in still another, it is the explosion of the Hindenburg in 1937. In a fourth, the WTC guy is sitting beside the chauffeur of the car in which President Kennedy and his entourage were traveling at the moment of the assassination. Perhaps the most absurd picture in the series represents our hero as the "witness" of the sinking of the Titanic. The image shows the icy water where the Titanic has disappeared and the

tourist surveying the scene from a piece of ice. Because of its ability to play with time and place, the "Tourist" represents an even more powerful critique of the sensationalism and potential manipulation of the media than the previous image of the "Hoax."

As mentioned earlier, insofar as popular culture also penetrated the news about the catastrophe and the war, it became the object of the same wave of hostile or satirical jokes as the media. The appearance of celebrities in turbans and with Arabized names was read in the e-mails as the sign of commodification (Forwarded e-mail, October 17, 2001). This interpretation was naturally present in the American home pages as well, where the gallery of turban-wearing stars—including Santa Claus as "Osanta bin Laden"—were introduced with the ironic title, "The usual suspects."[20] In the Hungarian letters, how-ever, the ironic title of the original joke was reinforced by even more explicit commentary. Even though the original ironic title in En-glish remained above the pictures, a Hungarian observer wrote in the space for the subject of the e-mail: "This has more than one use. . . ."

The critique of popular culture found expression on American home pages through parodic reformulation of the advertisements for three hit films familiar to all: *Star Wars, Home Alone* and *Escape from New York*.[21] According to the credits of *Home Alone 2: Lost in New York,* the director was Osama bin Laden and the distributor the Taliban Film company (forwarded e-mail, October 2, 2001). The poster for the film depicts Bush in the foreground, reading a tabloid about the New York tragedy, with bin Laden and one of his associates peeking at him from behind a skyscraper. The title of the other poster is *No Escape from New York,* and it depicts bin Laden dressed as Rambo, posing in the middle of a New York street, with a rocket launcher on his shoulders and the severed head of the shattered Statue of Liberty behind him. In the letters, both images bore the date of October 2 and had English sub-titles, and both referred to the New York attack. The third poster, how-ever, appeared significantly later in the letters, and it pointed to the ongoing war in Afghanistan.[22] Lukas's *Star Wars* was renamed the *Tali Wars,* with a helmeted bin Laden playing the King of Darkness and opposed by President Bush, his wife, the vice president, and the secre-tary of state (forwarded e-mail, October 25, 2001). It also had an En-glish subtitle.
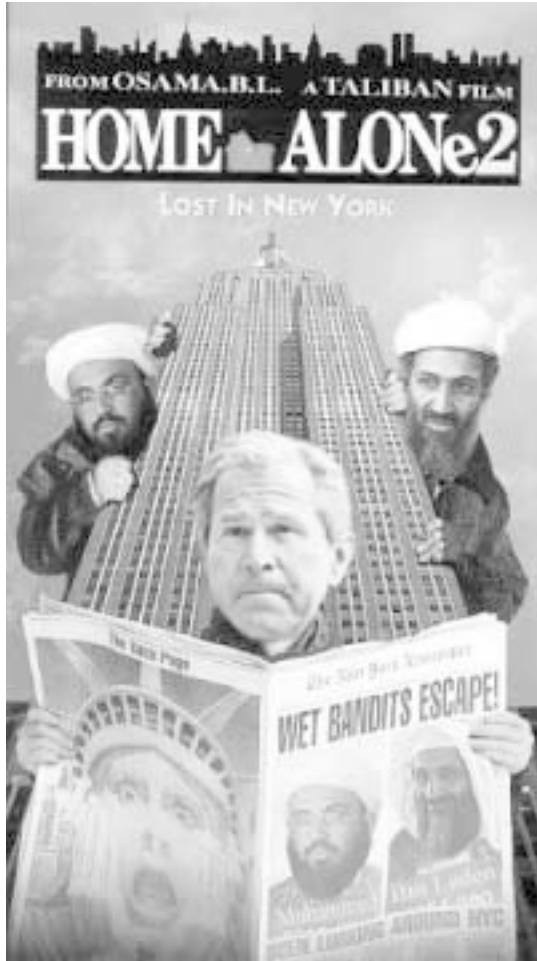
In one of the letters, there was an extensive script synopsis, in Hungarian and with Hungarian references, about a projected film about the war. In this case, too, a Hungarian transmitter appended to the texts a sarcastic commentary that reinforced the mocking repudiation of popular culture. The film, discloses the letter, could easily be "pasted together from existing footage"; furthermore, there are "rumors that Andy Vajna and Spielberg are competing for the right to the film." The imagined script is based on all the stereotypes of Hollywood films and ends with the following lines: "Osama bin Laden will beg for his life, the hero almost shoots him, but his female colleague shouts, 'Don't, John, you will become like them,' at which point the hero says, 'Take away this filth.' Possibly we will show Sharon Stone's breasts, (just for the hell of it)" (forwarded e-mail, October 25, 2001).

In accordance with prior predictions, the supply of the hundreds of jokes dried up from one day to the next toward the end of October. While there were still Afghan and bin Laden jokes because of the war, they did not have the extensive or epidemic nature that was characteristic of catastrophe jokes. These were war jokes.

Victims, Perpetrators and Witnesses

Already in the first weeks after the tragedy, Joseph Goodwin raised the question of whether one can find in World Trade Center jokes the inevitable victims or scapegoats that are considered an essential part of catastrophe jokes. More generally, can one consider the World Trade Center jokes catastrophe jokes? He had the following answer: "The humor growing out of the attacks on America focuses not on the victims, but on the attackers and their supporters. The shift from victim status yields a feeling of power and regained sense of control over one's life" (2001:4). Undoubtedly it is easier to place the majority of the World Trade Center jokes within the uncertain category of political jokes against terrorism than in that of catastrophe jokes. At the same time, however, the answer to this question is far from simple, especially in the case of the jokes of the early period. In the stories about the collapse of the towers and the deaths of thousands of people, which circulated in the first weeks, there were three different, inseparably intertwined discourses about catastrophe, terrorism, and war. From this standpoint, it is completely irrelevant whether the events were told in the form of entertaining melodrama, official ceremonial discourse, or informal jokes.

Who was the victim and who was the perpetrator? The victims are easily identifiable in the later, so-called morbid, wave of jokes, which peaked in the middle of October. The victims were obviously the people jumping out of buildings. In the narrow sense, the victims were the New Yorkers working in the building, but in the broader sense, it was the city itself, since the World Trade Center was the symbol of New York. At the same time, however, New York also symbolized America in the same way that the Statue of Liberty was the emblem of the whole country. New York was thus an over-determined metaphor that served to link symbolically the people killed in the towers, the shocked inhabitants of New York, the state under attack, and, ultimately, all those throughout the world who condemned the suicidal act. In this sense even Bush, who represented the American people, was a victim, and one of the visual jokes graphically depicted precisely this fact. The picture presents a naked Bush on all fours, with a terror-stricken face looking backward, as bin Laden is raping him.[23]

To what extent did Hungarians get emotionally involved with the World Trade Center tragedy, what degree of identification did they

experience with the victims, and how much aggression did they feel toward the perpetrators? The early jokes, following immediately in the wake of the event, tended to express spontaneous fear, pain, and rage, or a desire to deny the reality of what had happened. Among the jokes of this early period, one could cite the series of images entitled, "What will happen if the Taliban win?" (forwarded e-mail, September 17, 2001). They depict an Arabic-language Windows Program in which the "Shut Down" screen features a veiled Statue of Liberty and Bush in a turban.[24] In another picture attached to an e-mail message, an imaginary landscape of New York in 2005 is depicted with minarets (forwarded e-mail, September 17, 2001). At the same time, people's hopes and desires found expression in an allusion to the well-known film in which a gigantic King Kong stands on top of the two towers of the World Trade Center and squashes the approaching airplanes with his bare hands (forwarded e-mail, September 19, 2001). The subtext of the image is: "Where were you King Kong when we needed you?"[25] The same sense of disappointment is expressed through a mobile image where the two towers of the World Trade Center themselves prevent the tragedy by moving apart to evade the approaching airplanes (forwarded e-mail, October 1, 2001). The inscription of the cartoon reads: "In a perfect world."[26] Finally, an image appeared in the letters which depicted the plans for the rebuilding of the World Trade Center, taken from the American home pages. President Bush is posing with the Mexican architect, Benjamin Felix, in front of a model of the rebuilt twin towers in which each has big holes on top. The title is: "New Towers." As the image makes explicit: "The most controversial attribute of the new towers are the 'big holes,' located on top of each tower, to allow air traffic and prevent future catastrophes that could take place as a result of another terrorist attack of this nature" (forwarded e-mail, September 24, 2001). The fact that these early American jokes were borrowed without alteration in the Hungarian e-mails indicates that the unambiguous identification with the victims of the disaster was characteristic not only of the official Hungarian media but of informal Hungarian public opinion as well.

In the case of the World Trade Center jokes, however, it is difficult to speak of victims and the standard formulae of catastrophe jokes because at the center of this tragedy was not an accident but an intentional and well-planned attack where the responsible persons and agents were known to the world from the beginning: bin Laden and

New Towers

the terrorists of Al Qaeda. For this reason, there was never any need for a victim/scapegoat who could temporarily become the object of the survivors' frustration, fear, and despair. On the contrary, this task was fulfilled by the program of revenge and the punishment of the perpetrators, making it possible for Americans to see themselves not as victims, but rather as the ones who were in control of events and who would eventually defeat the attackers and bring the guilty to justice. We can already find the expression of this mood in one of the first visual jokes produced in the days immediately after the tragedy. The bin Laden jokes were the personification of perpetrator jokes, which always presented the retribution of justice in some kind of humorous context. The first such joke was of the English comic, Mr. Bean, who was pictured with turban and beard with the caption, "Bean Laden" (forwarded e-mail, September 26, 2001). The image associated bin Laden with a laughable clown, whom the observers could precisely place within the world of the Mr. Bean films and toward whom they could feel superior.[27] In the e-mail samples I examined, I found remarkably few jokes that could be identified as war jokes. Indeed, there were only two such examples: the earlier mentioned

"Chase," in which bin Laden is making his escape from an F-16 on a magic carpet (forwarded e-mail, October 19, 2001), and the "F-18 Firing AJR (Anti-Jihad Rocket) Over Kabul," where pigs were being used as missiles in an airplane (forwarded e-mail, October 19, 2001). In other words, the Hungarian letters tended to emphasize the humorous, rather than the aggressive, side of the war.

The American home pages, however, contained yet another type of image of bin Laden and the war. Perhaps the most popular form of these images was the picture of the Statue of Liberty holding bin Laden's head in place of the torch with the inscription: "We're Coming, Motherfuckers."[28] This image expresses neither wit nor humor, but anger and rage. These were genuine war jokes, where humor is used for military purposes. On the one hand, they were meant to threaten and to belittle the enemy; on the other, to demonstrate strength and superiority (Obrdlik 1942).[29] Another example of the war joke used the simplest possible tabloid formula to demonize the enemy: bin Laden is depicted with two horns.[30] But the same message was contained in the image showing a huge American eagle in which the national symbol holds bin Laden's severed head between its beaks ("The Eagle's pissed off").[31] The sole purpose of these jokes was to discredit the enemy and to legitimate those aggressive feelings that the population felt toward them. Significantly, these types of jokes were absent from the e-mails I examined and even from the Hungarian-language Internet for the most part. This demonstrates that after the tragedy, Hungarian public opinion identified with the American victims and condemned the terrorists and bin Laden. But from the first, the Hungarian public regarded with suspicion the American rhetoric of war, in which it saw the political mask of the super power.

In the final analysis, how did the Hungarian audience of the World Trade Center jokes imagine itself and its own situation in the world? The answer is contained in a humorous account that appeared in one of the largest Hungarian on-line newspapers, the *Index*, only a few days after the end of the joke cycles ("The Adventures of a Tourist in Cyberspace," by R. C., November 12, 2001).[32] The article details the previously analyzed humorous story of the "Witness" under the title of "The Last Tourist of the World Trade Center." (A young man is standing on top of the skyscraper with the city skyline behind him and an approaching passenger plane.) According to the page, the caricature was an "original forgery" made with Photoshop, apparently

depicting a forty-one year old Brazilian man named Jose Roberto Penteado. The man, wrote R. C., can prove with photographs that he is indeed the person in the picture, which was probably made by his friends as a joke. The punch line of the joke is not the "unmasking," but the postscript attached to the article with the title "Public opinion." "Dear readers!" writes the journalist, "Nine people have already signaled that the above article is based on a lie, since its subject, who has since become a celebrity, is so far from being a Brazilian that he is downright a Hungarian."

The appropriation of the figure of the tourist raises a number of questions. Why did the "Tourist" become a figure of Internet folklore in whom the different nationalities equally recognize themselves and with whom they all identify? Why are there still 20,000 daily visitors to its independent web site?[33] The answer probably lies in the fact that Hungarians, together with the population of Brazil and other countries, experienced themselves as the uncomprehending but fully initiated witnesses to an unexpected and absurd world event. It is the image of the tourist that gives best expression to this particular form of identification with the victim. One could say that the fictional tourist could become a universal joke icon because its media-created presence-absence gave ironic expression to most of the collective experiences of the tragedy. The irony encoded in the figure of the tourist simultaneously creates distance from the irrationality of the terror attack and from the distortions of the media, but also from their own earlier identification with a pre-9/11 world that no longer exists.

Conclusion

The catastrophe jokes that circulated in the Hungarian letters of the forward-circle betray not only a selective use of the Hungarian and American Internet home pages but also their creative reformulation. They took from them those elements that contributed to a better understanding of, or to a more complete psychological and emotional control over, the events occurring in a distant land. They also excluded from them those features they felt to be alien, unrealistic, or beyond their influence. This logic underlies the Hungarian substitution of the Trabant automobile for the Boeing airplane, of the small Hungarian town Szekszard for New York, of the little bunnies for the Taliban. What is more, the forward-circle also transformed the mean-

ing of the original story of the attack against the World Trade Center. America's war of self-defense became a narrative about capitalism, the media, and popular culture, where it was the Hollywood film industry and multi-national corporations—like McDonald's and Microsoft—that had attacked the whole world. The Hungarianized World Trade Center jokes positioned their readers toward the external reality of the U. S. and toward the internal reality of their own society. They reinforced the inherent suspicion of civil society toward all political power, and they gave voice to intellectual distaste for popular culture. The intense cultural activity that characterized the "Hungarianization" of jokes bears out David Morley's observation that globalization implies not only destabilization but also "reterritorialization" (2001). Moreover, the transformation of these jokes according to the symbolic patterns of Hungarian public life ultimately helped the members of the forward-circle redefine and strengthen their identities.

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Notes

1. This article is a revised English version of a chapter of my book, published in Hungarian, *Media Rituals* (Budapest: Osiris, 2002).

2. Available: http://www.vicclap.hu/vicc; http://www.irjadnyomjad.hu; htpp://hix.hu/cgi-bin/archive_forum.cgi?ujsag=MOKA; http://uno.hu/fun.

3. Although I did not separately examine the method and speed of the circulation of the information, I did find that the jokes on the American home pages appeared in the Hungarian home pages and electronic letters within days.

4. The jokes published on the Hungarian web pages that have English-language origins of associations are to be found without exception at http://www.politicalhumor.about.com/cs/terrorism; http://www.mycen.com; http://www.madwacker.com/jokes/pictures/terrorist; http://www.mindspring.com; http://okra.cchem.berkeley.edu/nomames; http://www.rotten.com; http://www-itp.physik.uni-karlsruhe.de/~hahn/humor. One of the largest and most interesting English-language collections of WTC jokes is found on a Danish web site at http://www.zapster.dk/download.php.

5. I would like to express my appreciation to Jozsef Andras Bayer for his help and personal comments about the jokes. I would also like to thank Endre Fary, one of the members of the forward-circle, for his e-mail responses to my questions.

6. Available:http://hix.hu/cgi-bin/archive_forum.cgi?ujsag=MOKA& page=1900 ("morbid-flame magamba" 2001-09-12-16:53); http://www.hix.com/hix/cgi-bin/archive.cgi?id=2631&ujsag=MOKA&szam=2991&lev=200 ("netfantom" 2001-09-14 15:23).

7. E-mails received between September 13 and November 7, 2001:

Date	Number of e-mails	Number of jokes/pictures	E-mail recipients
13 Sept.	1	1	24
17 Sept.	4	1-3-1-1	38-40-37-31
First week Sept. 11–18	5	7	170
19 Sept.	1	1	36
24 Sept.	1	1	24
Second week Sept. 19–25	2	2	60
26 Sept.	2	2-1	27-35
28 Sept.	1	2	46
1 Oct.	1	1	64
2 Oct.	1	2	31
Third week Sept. 26–Oct 2	5	8	203
3 Oct.	1	1	26
Fourth week Oct. 3–9	1	1	26
10 Oct.	1	8	21
11 Oct.	1	13	18
Fifth week Oct. 10–16	2	21	39
17 Oct.	2	2-1	28-38
19 Oct.	4	1-1-3-1	90-37-37-28
Sixth week Oct. 17–23	6	9	258
25 Oct.	2	12	20
26 Oct.	1	1	50
29 Oct.	1	1	59
Seventh week Oct. 24–30	4	14	129
31 Oct.	1	1	57
7 Nov.	1	1	37
Eighth week Oct. 31–	2	2	94
Unknown date	na	2	na
Total	27	66 (41 pictures/25 texts)	969

The e-mails contained no commentaries about the jokes nor qualifying remarks about their quality. Only one has a wry, personal remark about a joke: "This is a shit" (forwarded e-mail, October 17, 2001).

8. The origins of the German jokes mentioned in the e-mails are available: http://www-itp.physik.uni-karlsruhe.de/~hahn/humor.

9. Perhaps the greatest puzzle surrounding the collective cultural reactions to disasters is that the circumstances give rise to jokes in the case of some tragedies and not in others. Jokes do not emerge in the wake of every catastrophe, even in instances where theoretically every condition for such a reaction is given.

10. Available: http://www.index.hu/velemeny/jegyzet/almasi.

11. Available: http://korridor.hu/cikk.php?cikk=100000016102&hozzaszol=1.

12. Available: htpp://hix.hu/cgi-bin/archive_forum.cgi?ujsag=MOKA&page= 1750 (nyuszi, 2001-09-18 22:23).

13. Available: http://okra.cchem.berkeley.edu/nomames.

14. Available: http://okra.cchem.berkeley.edu/nomames.

15. Available: http://www.vicclap.hu/vicc/morbid.

16. Available: http://www.dailyprobe.com/arcs/fbi_suspects/fbi_suspects.shtml.

17. This interpretation is strengthened by the fact that one can find on the Internet depictions comparable to the turban-wearing American president and Hungarian prime minister, for example of the Italian prime minister, Berlusconi, and the former Mexican president. Available: http://okra.cchem.berkeley.edu/nomames.

18. Available: http://hix.hu/cgi-bin/archive_forum.cgi?ujsag=MOKA&page=1650 (hirdetes+vicc, 2001-10-09 07:03).

19. Available: http://www.touristofdeath.com.

20. Available: http://www.dailyprobe.com/arcs/fbi_suspects/fbi_suspects.shtml.

21. Available: http://www.mycen.com.my/inbox/index.html.

22. Available: http://www.politicalhumor.about.com/library/images.

23. Available: http://www.mycen.com.my/inbox/georgeosama.html.

24. Available: http://www.asianjoke.com/pix/what_happen_if_the_taliban_wins.htm.

25. Available: http://politicalhumor.about.com/library/images/blkingkong.htm.

26. Available: http://www.asianjoke.com/short/join_asian_jokes.htm.

27. Available: http://www.irjadnyomjad.hu.

28. Available: http://www.madwacker.com/jokes/pictures/terrorist/ladyliberty.jpg.

29. A similar difference is observable in the self-ironic jokes characteristic of the period preceding the first Palestinian Intifada and the offensive-sarcastic war jokes created during the Intifada (Kanaana 1990).

30. Available: http://www.irjadnyomjad.hu/i.php?offset=15&kat_id=34&search=.

31. Available: http://64.225.152.215/vivmp/index.asp?v=vivmp&bid=form_whitney.

32. Available: www.index.hu/tech/net/touristguy/.

33. Available: www.touristofdeath.com.

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