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Alain Robbe-Grillet in Slovakia

Transnational Encounters and the Art of the Co-Production

French writer and filmmaker Alain Robbe-Grillet's first cinematic depiction of East Central Europe is the celebrated script he wrote for Last Year at Marienbad (L'Année dernière à Marienbad, Alain Resnais, 1961). The film is named after a West Bohemian spa town, yet by Robbe-Grillet's own admission his script refers more to the 'mythological' and 'magical' Marienbad evoked by Goethe than to the real and contemporary Mariánské Lázně.[1)] Six years later, however, the French experimentalist would be shooting a film in the real Czechoslovakia. Written and directed by Robbe-Grillet, The Man Who Lies (L'Homme qui ment/ Muž, ktorý luže, 1968) is one of two French-Czechoslovak co-productions Robbe-Grillet would make, along with 1970's Eden and After (L'Eden et après/ Eden a potom). These two films were financed by French company Como Films and state organization Československý film, with some assistance from Tunisian company SATPEC for Eden and After; the films were shot wholly or in part in Slovakia and utilized the facilities of Bratislava's Koliba studios. It is as co-productions, as transnational encounters between a French artist and the cultural world of 1960s Slovakia, that I wish here to examine both these films, paying particular attention to The Man Who Lies, the more apposite and artistically richer of the two. Where do we situate these films in the oft-maligned history of the co-production, and how do they inscribe, reflect on or defend their own co-produced status? Can we legitimately consider these Robbe-Grillet co-productions as "Slovak" films, as somehow participating in the development of Slovak cinema?[2] And, knowingly or not on the director's part, might they even address certain peculiarities of Slovak cultural history?

1) Alain Robbe-Grillet and Václav Richter, 'Alain Robbe-Grillet, un artiste entre literature et cinema,' Radio Praha, 19 February 2008. Online: 'http://www.radio.cz/fr/rubrique/faits/alain-robbe-grillet-un-artiste-entre-litterature-et-cinema', [accessed 12 August 2013].

2) It is, of course, somewhat artificial to separate Slovak from Czech cinema while covering a period when the Czechoslovak film industry, like Czechoslovakia itself, was basically a unified entity. Among my reasons for thus 'isolating' Slovakia, two are particularly important. Firstly, the fact that these Robbe-Grillet films drew their talents and locations, apparently exclusively, from the Slovak side has at times been confused in cover-

The Man Who Lies and Eden and After belong to a number of late-1960s co-productions between Czechoslovakia and West European countries. These ventures were often the initiative of the Slovak production group ("*tvorivá skupina*") run by Albert Marenčin and Karol Bakoš (the Czechoslovak film industry being at this time organized into relatively independent "creative groups"). Co-production agreements were signed with France and Italy in March 1968, apparently as a consequence of The Man Who Lies itself.[3] On the Czech side, co-production yielded classics like Miloš Forman's The Firemen's Ball (Hoří má panenko, 1967), co-financed by legendary Italian producer Carlo Ponti, as well as obscurities like the Paris-to-Prague hopping student drama A Matter of Days (À quelques jours près/ Těch několik dnů, Yves Ciampi, 1969). In Slovak quarters, Italian and French funding helped realize most of Juraj Jakubisko's early (and best) work, including The Deserter and the Nomads (Zbehovia a pútnici, 1968) and Birds, Orphans and Fools (Vtáčkovia, siroty a blázni, 1969). Erstwhile Slovak émigré Leopold Lahola directed the West German co-production The Sweet Time of Kalimagdora (Sladký čas Kalimagdory/ Die süsse Zeit mit Kalimagdora, 1968), while François Leterrier's The Royal Chase (La Chasse royale/ Kráľovská poľovačka, 1969) was, like the Robbe-Grillet films and Birds, Orphans and Fools, a collaboration between Marenčin's group and Como Films, was a less memorable French-helmed effort. The swell of such arrangements around this time is doubtless related to the newfound cultural liberalism and openness of Czechoslovakia's "Prague Spring" era. One French-Czechoslovak co-production, Twisting Currents (V proudech/ La Liberté surveillée, Vladimir Vlček), had appeared in 1957, though prior to the mid-1960s co-production with other Eastern Bloc countries was the norm, relatively speaking. Nonetheless, as film scholar Pavel Skopal argues, the Czechoslovak film industry's co-operation with the West was most crucially motivated not by any earnest cosmopolitan spirit but by pragmatic considerations, such as access to superior technical equipment and to distribution in Western markets.[4]

According to Albert Marenčin's own account, The Man Who Lies arose in an offhand manner, with both the transnational production arrangement and the film project itself initiated by an agreeable meeting between Marenčin and Robbe-Grillet. To make sense of this meeting and the subsequent development of this film, it helps to offer some further detail about Marenčin himself. In addition to his work in cinema, Marenčin was (and is) a writer and artist with Surrealist sympathies. Not only would he become a prominent

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age of the films (with Albert Marenčin, for instance, referred to as Czech), hence the need for precision and emphasis. See William F. Van Wert, *The Film Career of Alain Robbe-Grillet* (Pleasantville: Redgrave Publishing, 1977), p. 120. Secondly, I follow Peter Hames in arguing that, while the Czechoslovak New Wave was essentially a single surge, there are distinctive qualities to Slovak 1960s cinema at its boldest: Peter Hames, *Czech and Slovak Cinema: Theme and Tradition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 206. These include, I would suggest, a combinatory approach, a mingling of 'cosmopolitan' and folk elements, and an interest in the outsider — qualities specifically apposite, moreover, to a discussion of co-production and transnational fusion.

3) Alain Robbe-Grillet and Václav Richter, 'Alain Robbe-Grillet, un artiste entre literature et cinema.'

4) Pavel Skopal, 'Co-Productions — the Clumsy Way to Ideological Control, International Competitiveness and Technological Improvement: The Czech Film Studio Barrandov and Co-Productions in the Socialist Countries, 1954–1960,' in Lars Karl and Pavel Skopal (eds.), *Sovietisation and Planning in the Film Industries of Soviet Bloc Countries: A Comparative Perspective on East Germany and Czechoslovakia, 1945–1960* (forthcoming).

member in the Czechoslovak Surrealist Group,[5] close to the movement's Prague affiliates, but in 1965 he was also inducted into the College of "Pataphysics," awarded the title "Regent of Ubudoxology for Slovakia and its Environs." In a fairly traditional narrative of artistic formation, Marenčin spent the immediate postwar years in Paris, where, besides working as a radio correspondent and journal editor, he found time to soak up the city's avant-garde milieu, translate texts by the likes of Buñuel and Jean Epstein, and attend classes at the French film school IDHEC.[6] Marenčin initially worked in cinema as a screenwriter, and after years of unrealized scripts, the beginning of the 1960s saw several films produced from his writings, notably the child-centered partisan drama Song of the Grey Pigeon (Pieseň o sivom holubovi, Stanislav Barabáš, 1961), a native milestone in Slovak cinematic sophistication.[7] Around the same time Marenčin was also appointed the head of Creative Group 1 ("*1. tvorivá skupina*"), the flagship of the Slovak film industry. Marenčin's avant-garde sensibilities are visible in his film work, though perhaps less so in his script contributions than in his role as chief dramaturg. A role without a precise equivalent in Western or capitalist film industries, dramaturgy encompassed a range of supervisory responsibilities: dramaturgs "oversaw script development, the selection of cast and crews, in some cases the actual shooting as well as post-production, and occasionally even distribution. They acted as cultural intermediaries, or interfaces of the production culture".[8] Though this role had originally been conceived by officialdom as an efficient means of ideological control, Marenčin fostered an artistically adventurous and international approach within his group, favoring fresh FAMU graduates over well-established directors and engaging foreign talents.[9] Marenčin would lose his position in 1972 for political reasons, but during the 1960s his unit — co-managed with Bakoš or Pavol Bauma after 1962 — blessed Slovak film with a streak of accomplishments, New Wave entries that rival their more celebrated Czech counterparts for formal daring.

It was the cosmopolitan Marenčin's fluency in French that gave him the chance to host Robbe-Grillet during the latter's 1965 visit to Czechoslovakia. (That Marenčin had previously translated some of Robbe-Grillet's work, including the screenplay of L'Immortelle [1963], surely also didn't harm his suitability as a companion.) For Robbe-Grillet, the Bratislava settings evoked 'film décor', and he recalled 'his old dream of filming some bizarre story amidst such décor'.[10] Marenčin proposed making that film in Slovakia, though Robbe-Grillet was initially skeptical, fearful of official interference and hardly

5) This was the revived 'Surrealistická skupina v Československu' established by Vratislav Effenberger in 1969, although Surrealism has been a significant artistic presence in both Czech and Slovak regions since the 1930s.

6) Albert Marenčin, *Nezabúdanie: Moje malé dejiny* (Bratislava: F. R. & G, 2004), p. 83–86.

7) Marenčin's other script credits, generally as co-writer, include Nobleman's Honour (Zemianska česť, Vladimír Bahna, 1957), the Czechoslovak-Georgian co-production Broken Melody (Prerušená pieseň, Nikolaj Sanišvili, 1960), and the again resistance-themed Midnight Mass (Polnočná omša, Jiří Krejčík, 1962).

8) Petr Szczepanik, '"Veterans" and "Dilettantes": Film Production Culture vis-à-vis Top-down Political Changes, 1945-1962,' in Lars Karl and Pavel Skopal (eds.), *Sovietisation and Planning in the Film Industries of Soviet Bloc Countries: A Comparative Perspective on East Germany and Czechoslovakia, 1945–1960* (forthcoming).

9) Albert Marenčin, *Nezabúdanie: Moje malé dejiny*, p. 122.

10) Albert Marenčin, *Ako som sa stretol s niektorými pozoruhodnými ľuďmi* (Bratislava: Smena, 1993), s. 86.

even aware that this small nation possessed a film industry.[11] Marenčin assured the French artist of his creative independence, with one condition — that Robbe-Grillet not criticize the government.

Robbe-Grillet's initial condescending incredulity aside, the presence of such a figure in the Slovak cinema of the 1960s is hardly incongruous given the developments mentioned above. The Man Who Lies can be considered a logical continuation of the experiments with non-linear narration or the interpenetration of different realities evident in films like The Miraculous Virgin (Panna zázračnica, Štefan Uher, 1966) — a film which Robbe-Grillet professed to admire — and Dragon's Return (Drak sa vracia, Eduard Grečner, 1967.) Robbe-Grillet's specific influence is detectable in some of this cinema, even if we exclude the generalized impact of the Resnais-directed Last Year at Marienbad as an instigator of art-film time-twisting. Slovak director Stanislav Barabáš likened the aims of 1960s Czechoslovak cinema to those of the *nouveau roman* movement, of which Robbe-Grillet was the chief exponent and theorist. Turning to particular titles, Ján Kadár and Elmar Klos's Adrift (Touha zvaná Anada, 1969) evokes Marienbad and, even more so, Robbe-Grillet's directorial debut L'Immortelle in its temporal distortion, oneiric vagary and preternatural, obsession-kindling female figure.[12] Robbe-Grillet had influenced the direction of Slovak cinema, and he would now be directly absorbed into a native project of artistic advancement, even if the very decision to engage this doyen of modernism bespeaks a high degree of cultural and personal confidence on Marenčin's part.

Marenčin insisted that Robbe-Grillet's film involve substantial participation from the Slovak side, an approach indeed desirable in providing Slovak film talent with 'valuable creative experiences' (a strategy which was also, as Marenčin recalls, the sole means of making the project acceptable to the film industry chiefs).[13] As instances of true creative collaboration across national borders, both The Man Who Lies and Eden and After stand in stark, wistful contrast to the contemporary, cost-cutting utilization of Czech or Romanian studios and technicians for Hollywood and West European behemoths, even when these latter films are actual co-productions with their host countries.[14] Robbe-Grillet carried over several of his previous collaborators, including editor Bob Wade, composer and sound designer Michel Fano, his actress wife Catherine Robbe-Grillet and his star Jean-Louis Trintignant, who played the lead in Robbe-Grillet's previous film Trans-Europ-Express (1967) and does so again in The Man Who Lies. Slovakia contributed actors — Ivan Mistrík, Zuzana Kocuriková and Sylvia Turbová have key roles in The Man Who Lies — as well as important crew members like art director Anton Krajčović and cinematographer Igor Luther.

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11) Ibid.

12) Barabáš in Antonín J. Liehm, *Closely Watched Films: The Czechoslovak Experience* (New York: International Arts and Sciences Press, 1974), p. 185.

13) Albert Marenčin and Katarína Mišíková, 'Pohľad do spätného zrkadla,' *Film.Sk* , no. 7 (2002), online: 'http://filmsk.sk/show_article.php?id=29&movie=&archive=1', [accessed 14 August 2013]; Albert Marenčin, *Nezabúdanie: Moje malé dejiny*, p. 123.

14) Peter Hames, 'The Czech and Slovak Republics: The Velvet Revolution and After,' in Catherine Portuges and Peter Hames (eds.), *Cinemas in Transition in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013), p. 45.

Luther's contribution to both films is particularly important given that, by Robbe-Grillet's own account, he was allotted an unusual, even determining, share of artistic freedom: "I would say to Igor Luther […]: what are the camera movements you would like to make in this ensemble of rooms? And I sometimes organized my scene in accordance with the camera movements he wanted to make."[15] Finally, Marenčin himself, in the *eminence grise* capacity of the dramaturg, seems to have been a constant presence during the production of both films, attending the shoots and, in the case of The Man Who Lies at least, even helping develop the basic scenario. He particularly helped adapt the story to local realities, thereby reinforcing the film's "Slovak" identity. Although "the film was originally conceived for a Parisian setting" and an early treatment suggests a story dealing with the PMU (France's state betting organisation), the final film is set in Slovakia, as Marenčin had insisted, and concerns entangled heroism and treachery in the wartime Slovak National Uprising.[16] Robbe-Grillet even organized the first draft of his script around three settings he had discovered in the High Tatras, "the immense forest" around the resort of Starý Smokovec, the old village of Spišská Sobota, and the then "half-ruined" castle, or chateau, Kaštieľ Strážky.[17]

Beyond the film's literal engagement with Slovakia's historical and geographical realities, certain domestic responses to the film have revealed how it can be read as a commentary on the vicissitudes of communist rule in Czechoslovakia. Writing in 1992, Slovak critic Jozef Macko relates the ever-shifting moral status of the film's characters both to the post-1968 "normalization" process that crushed Prague Spring reformism and to the overthrow of communist dictatorship in the 1989 Velvet Revolution: "The Man Who Lies is more topical for us twenty years later than at the time of its creation. Since then, in our history or in the history of the Warsaw Pact states, we have experienced two great upheavals — many heroes transformed into traitors at the beginning of the seventies and today we are experiencing and will experience their transformation back into heroes, when traitors are being made of many former heroes and greats."[18] An earlier nugget of the film's reception history has Czechoslovak citizens asserting such political relevance in a more direct way: the film's Bratislava premiere coincided with the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia, and as a gesture of protest citizens augmented posters for the film with the name Brezhnev, making the title read "Brezhnev: The Man Who Lies".[19] Of course, all this may amount to various acts of critical or spectatorial appropriation, a matter of (mis)reading Robbe-Grillet's essentially apolitical and non-localized concerns in topical and historically informed ways. Yet The Man Who Lies did lay down a sly political gauntlet by showing a member of the occupying Nazi army reading the Soviet newspaper *Pravda* in Slovak

15) Robbe-Grillet in Roy Armes, *The Films of Alain Robbe-Grillet* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1981), pp. 91–92.
16) R. Armes, *The Films of Alain Robbe-Grillet*, p. 91. Alain Robbe-Grillet, 'L'Homme qui ment: Premier projet, Début de la continuité dialogue, Projet sonore finale (première bobine)', in François Jost (ed.), 'Robbe-Grillet,' *Obliques*, No. 16–17 (1978), pp. 175–182. (1978).
17) R. Armes, *The Films of Alain Robbe-Grillet*, p. 91.
18) Jozef Macko, 'Slovák na Barrandove, Francúz na Kolibe,' in Václav Macek, *Slovenský hraný film 1946–1969* (Bratislava: Slovenský filmový ústav – Národné kinematografické centrum, 1992), p. 129.
19) William F. Van Wert, *The Film Career of Alain Robbe-Grillet*, pp. 32–33; Alain Robbe-Grillet and Anthony N. Fragola and Roch C. Smith, *The Erotic Dream Machine: Interviews with Alain Robbe-Grillet on His Films* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992), p. 48.

translation — a historically impossible yet eerily prescient detail. Robbe-Grillet himself reminds us that there were German soldiers in Wehrmacht uniforms among the 1968 occupation forces too, now "officers of the German Democratic Republic who could well be reading *Pravda*".[20]

But if The Man Who Lies and, to a lesser extent, Eden and After can be considered "Slovak" films in the ways I have discussed, these films also work to establish a protean, hybrid space within their diegesis that eludes assignations of single or fixed nationality. What makes it so worthwhile to examine these films as co-productions, I would argue, is that they seem to inscribe a sense of their own co-produced, intercultural identity, to render concretely and positively the disparate and disparaged "location" of the co-production. Scholarship on European cinema has only recently started to acknowledge the important presence of co-production: as Tim Bergfelder argues, discourses on European film "have traditionally focused less on the inclusive or cross-cultural aspects the term 'European' might imply, but on notions of national specificities, cultural authenticity and indigenous production contexts".[21] Yet Mark Betz, examining the specific cases of France and Italy, notes that "coproduction has been a consistent feature" of both cinemas since World War II. During the 1960s "co-productions at times equaled and, in the case of France most definitely, surpassed national productions."[22] Following the lead of the Franco-Italian agreement signed in 1949, there is a "proliferation of bi- and trilateral coproduction agreements since the late 1950s among the film-producing nations of Europe, along with several from North Africa and South America."[23]

Betz's focus here on the 1950s and 1960s gives the lie to the notion that "[t]he globalization of media industries" is a "marker of fairly recent, 'postmodern' developments', as defined against a 'largely mythical' past of self-contained national film cultures."[24] This period is, moreover, the "heyday" of European art cinema, and Betz's analysis is especially valuable in revealing that "a high proportion of French and Italian art films from the late 1950s through the early 1960s were transnational — European — coproductions."[25] That proportion includes many of the most canonical titles, including Antonioni's L'Avventura (1960), Truffaut's Jules and Jim (Jules et Jim, 1961), most of Jean-Luc Godard's 1960s films, and Marienbad itself. Robbe-Grillet's own first two films had been French-Italian and French-Belgian co-productions respectively. Betz's findings problematise the traditional, and derogatory, critical association between co-production and European popular cinema, with "popular" made to designate "a commercial betrayal of national traditions".[26]

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20) Alain Robbe-Grillet and Anthony N. Fragola and Roch C. Smith, *The Erotic Dream Machine: Interviews with Alain Robbe-Grillet on His Films*, p. 48.

21) Tim Bergfelder, 'The Nation Vanishes: European Co-Productions and Popular Genre Formula in the 1950s and 1960s,' in Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie (eds.), *Cinema and Nation* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 139.

22) Mark Betz, *Beyond the Subtitle: Remapping European Art Cinema* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), p. 75.

23) Ibid., p. 77.

24) Tim Bergfelder, 'The Nation Vanishes: European Co-Productions and Popular Genre Formula in the 1950s and 1960s,' p. 139.

25) Mark Betz, *Beyond the Subtitle: Remapping European Art Cinema*, p. 78.

26) Ibid., p. 66.

Conversely, art cinema traditions like the European 1960s new waves have tended to "escape the taint of coproduction and internationalization", considered rather as upholding "specific national artistic cultures" and enthusiastically engaging "in the construction and reconstruction of particular national identities".[27)]

A problem typically faced by co-productions is the use of multinational casts, which means actors speaking different languages or at least in different accents. One approach to this problem has been "to acknowledge at the level of narrative the co-presence of multiple nationalities […] by casting actors as characters of their own nationalities."[28)] (The French-Czechoslovak A Matter of Days takes this approach, the French lead playing a French student sojourning in Prague.) But a much more common approach, at least in the period when The Man Who Lies and Eden and After were made, was to simply make everyone on screen speak the same language via the use of dubbing. Co-production thus secures an illusory unity of languages, accents and nationalities, even as its multinational reality leaves a telltale trace in the disjuncture between mouth movements and post-synchronized voices.[29)] The Man Who Lies and Eden and After abide by the same practice: while the Slovak performers in The Man Who Lies seem generally to be mouthing their dialogue in French, and while the two films certainly lack the more flagrant mismatches of voice and body that notoriously characterize the work of Fellini, it is clear that both films have post-synched soundtracks and that the Slovak actors have been dubbed by French-accented voices. As was also the case with co-productions from this period, both films were released in different language versions representing the two co-producing partners: conversely, then, the Slovak versions feature Trintignant et al dubbed by Slovak actors.

If film is by its nature a mendacious art, we can see how co-production adds supplementary layers of imposture and dissembling, with performers feigning different nationalities or having their real voices masked by those of others. The co-production's bi-lateral or tri-lateral basis infects the resulting film with multiplicity, from the splitting of performance between on-screen actor and voice actor to the doubling or tripling of the "original" release into separate language versions. Just as Trintignant's Boris Varissa, in The Man Who Lies, has his double in Jean Robin, the resistance fighter played by Ivan Mistrík, so did Robbe-Grillet have his Slovak double in director Martin Hollý, who directed the film's Slovak-language soundtrack. In other words (and ironically given the critical separation between co-production and a supposedly nationally rooted, culturally homogenous art cinema), the awkward by-products of co-production strike a strange chord with the modernist (or nascent postmodernist) practices of Robbe-Grillet. Part of Robbe-Grillet's revolutionary creed as proponent of the nouveau roman — so often tied to the contemporaneous nouvelle vague — was the rejection of unified character and three-dimensional psychology, and the personages who haunt his fictions are increasingly little more than fractured surfaces, ciphers who recombine in new assemblages or recur in multiple avatars. Robbe-Grillet seemed interested in compromising not only the unity of character,

27) Ibid., p. 67.
28) Ibid., p. 85.
29) Ibid., p. 86.

but also the unique status of the artwork itself, as is attested by the release of his works in altered versions or in different media (for instance through the *ciné-romans* he published to accompany his films). If the two dubs for The Man Who Lies and Eden and After already made the existence of an original, privileged version of either film impossible, Robbe-Grillet willfully intensified his battle against the singularity of the work by producing an alternative version of Eden and After for French television, assembled from the original outtakes and re-named N. a pris les dés, and by reportedly releasing The Man Who Lies in nine different versions, nine "final copies", each featuring subtle differences in image, editing and soundtrack. (Unfortunately I have not been able to verify this Robbe-Grillet anecdote, tempting as it is to imagine a film that, as Robbe-Grillet puts it, "lies doubly", that is "a lie about a lie to the power of nine"![30]) Whether really enacted or not, such tactics typify the way these two films, The Man Who Lies especially, extend and foreground the principles of doubleness and duplicity inherent in the co-production.

With Robbe-Grillet's art a byword for self-reflexivity, it is not so farfetched to read The Man Who Lies as an exploration of the transnational arrangements that gave rise to the film itself. Several films by Robbe-Grillet's 1960s companion in self-reflexivity, Jean-Luc Godard, have been seen similarly to inscribe, allegorize and explore their own co-produced status — for instance, Susan Hayward reads the vacuous cocktail party of Pierrot le fou (1965), to which the protagonist is invited by his Italian wife, as a commentary on the co-productions France was "obliged" to make with Italy in order to compete against Hollywood.[31] Godard's meditations on co-production are essentially negative, exemplifying the critique of co-production as an inorganic, aesthetically detrimental practice driven by commercial imperatives. By contrast, Robbe-Grillet's own reflection on co-production and transnationality in The Man Who Lies proves guardedly sympathetic. As noted, the film revolves around the Slovak National Uprising, and the narrative background of clandestine resistance, with its necessities of pretense, codenames and disguises, already introduces themes of masquerade, duplicity and uncertain identity. Robbe-Grillet exploits this context as apt ground for the narrative and existential games of Trintignant's protagonist, the film's titular liar. "My name is Robin, Jean Robin," announces this protagonist in voiceover at the opening of the film, apparently resurrected from death after being shot by pursuing German soldiers. He commences an account of the surrounding scenery, but his narration falters and he begins again, now stating that his name is Boris but that "usually people call me Jean". Boris (and I am referring to the protagonist as such because it is his most common appellation throughout the film) also remarks that he was sometimes, inexplicably, known as "the Ukrainian", a throwaway yet apposite reference that both exemplifies the film's engagement with a specific national history — Slovakia borders the Ukraine, and the Soviet Union had organized partisan activity in Slovakia from Kiev — and gestures towards ideas of foreignness and transnational masquerade. The name "Jean" soon recurs, although Boris no longer refers to the name as his, but as that of "my friend,

30) Robbe-Grillet in Pierre-Marc De Biasi, 'Revoir L'Édenet après,' in Roger-Michel Allemand and Christian Milat (eds.), *Alain Robbe-Grillet: Balises pour le XXIe siècle* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2010), p. 237.

31) Susan Hayward, *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 122–123.

my ally, my comrade at arms". Boris thus introduces the film's second most important character, supposed resistance hero Jean Robin. At the same time, this opening voiceover adumbrates the confused, ceaselessly mutable relationship that the film will play out between the two characters.

Whatever the significance of his being nicknamed "the Ukrainian", Boris is literally a foreign presence, given that he is played by a French actor in Slovak surroundings. Trintignant's actual foreignness in this context is reinforced by the narrative that the film proceeds to develop, in which Boris, a stranger, enters a small rural town and tries to persuade others, falsely, that he was a close confidant of the town's native, now missing hero — Jean Robin. Like the uprooted actor of the co-production playing another nationality, Boris is an alien presence who tries to pass himself off as something he is not. Further details emphasize Boris-Trintignant's alien-ness, such as the modern, fashionable suit the actor is wearing, an especially incongruous touch when he is seen fleeing German soldiers through the Tatra forest. The figure Boris cuts is very much that of the familiar urbane Trintignant, and an early scene in which Boris visits the town's tavern — already a spin on the "stranger comes to town" saloon scene of the Western — seems designed to contrast the Frenchman against the rural dress and heavy, rugged features of the actors playing the tavern locals.

The key motif of the liar, the fraud, or the impostor is one in which Trintignant, as actor, seems to be implicated: Boris's claim, upon entering Jean Robin's household, that he is unrecognizable because he had previously been hidden behind glasses and a false beard is a nod to the stereotyped image of the "man in disguise" that also evokes actorly masquerade, movie cliché, and even Trintignant's own career — he had worn just such a disguise in Robbe-Grillet's preceding film, Trans-Europ-Express. As a way of foregrounding the ersatz identities constructed by the co-production, the motif of imposture might be considered negative, a means of indicting co-production for its artifice and cultural impurity, especially given how Boris's mendacity abets aims of intrusion and usurpation: for Boris uses his professed closeness to Jean as a means to acquaint himself with and seduce Jean's maid, sister and wife — though he successfully seduces only the first two — and ultimately to become master of the large château in which Jean had lived. The narrative might alternatively be considered a celebration of transnational imposture in the most provocative terms, as Boris remains a seductive and sympathetic figure, a more duplicitous K. compulsively seeking entry to the Castle (even if it was the Slovak Ivan Mistrík whom Robbe-Grillet had cast for his resemblance to a 'young Kafka').[32] Besides, as we shall see, Robbe-Grillet's heightening of artifice and falsity in formal, stylistic terms suggests all too clear an identification with Boris's deceits, which after all are themselves flights of creative imagination.

Boris's "creative" power as a protagonist goes further still, for the film's radical supplement to its motif of mendacity is the implication that these impostures conceal no ultimate truth. In a tactic characteristic of his work, Robbe-Grillet offers no suggestion of an authentic identity, for either Boris or Jean, that might subsist beneath Boris's ever-shifting testimony, and hints rather that these accounts have a generative quality, summoning to

32) R. Armes, *The Films of Alain Robbe-Grillet*, p. 94.

life the realities and selves described: as Robbe-Grillet puts it, Boris "speaks in order to be."[33] Through the lack of a solid existential basis against which Boris's self-account might be judged, the film undermines notions of essential identity, a denial that, if extended to issues of *national* identity, might be seen as validating co-production in fundamental terms. In implicitly refusing the idea of fixed, essential national cultures, The Man Who Lies is legitimizing, or at least asserting the inevitability of, processes of transformation, intercultural absorption and hybridization — phenomena that the transnational arrangements of the co-production can ideally foster, promote or emblematize, even if in reality co-production frequently enacts little real cultural fusion and is determined more by practical, economic objectives. Boris possesses the protean fluidity of an ideal "transnational subject", and is it significant that his oscillation between two identities is also a shift between a French name (Jean Robin) and a vaguely Slavic-sounding one (Boris Varissa)?[34]

Further reflections in the same vein are enabled by the casting of Ivan Mistrík as Boris's confidant-antagonist-alter ego Jean Robin. If, in narrative terms, Boris attempts to steal Jean's home and wife and to appropriate his legend, so, in real terms, might the international French star be seen as "stealing" his role, along with the limelight, from the locally renowned Slovak actor — the well-established Mistrík might, after all, have played the lead in a solely Czechoslovak production. As a comment on co-production or transnational film ventures, Boris's usurpation of Jean's home and heritage resonates even more strongly in an era of large foreign productions housed in venues like Prague's Barrandov studios, displacing the native talent for whom such facilities are now too expensive. Yet Boris and Jean are not only antagonists, and not ultimately separate characters: Boris claims early on that his comradely bonds with Jean were such that they virtually "shared the same mind", and the film finally affirms this as in some sense literally true. The film's climax strikingly depicts the merging of the two men: a vengeful Jean returns to his château and shoots Boris, only for Boris to rise once more from the dead, address the camera and transform into Jean — who speaks with the voice of Boris! That is to say, Mistrík appears on screen in place of Trintignant, but is dubbed with Trintignant's voice. Literalized in this bravura conceit, the fusion of these two identities, tellingly embodied in a French and a Slovak performer, once again emphasizes the possibilities — utopian as they may be — of transnational convergence, negotiation and interchange within the co-production. (The very act of dubbing both actors with Trintignant's voice apparently resulted in a real instance of linguistic interchange: according to Robbe-Grillet, Mistrík, who did not speak French, articulated the language "in an awkward way", which meant that Trintignant spoke French "with a Slovak accent" when recording his dub, forced to follow Mistrík's lip movements.[35]

In using such technical-formal devices Robbe-Grillet is of course also flaunting and extending the artifice entailed in co-production. That separation of voices and bodies,

33) Alain Robbe-Grillet and Anthony N. Fragola and Roch C. Smith, *The Erotic Dream Machine: Interviews with Alain Robbe-Grillet on His Films*, p. 42.

34) Admittedly this implied shift in national identity is only present in the film's French-language version. In the Slovak dub the name Jean Robin is quasi-domesticated as Ján Robin.

35) Alain Robbe-Grillet and Anthony N. Fragola and Roch C. Smith, *The Erotic Dream Machine: Interviews with Alain Robbe-Grillet on His Films*, p. 43.

sounds and images, that the post-synchronised soundtrack enforces, often all too obviously, is developed into a sustained artistic strategy. As Roy Armes notes, the film foregrounds its own mendacity in the various "false" relationships it establishes between voice and image. For instance, we "see images which contradict Boris's interpretation: Jean protesting furiously as Boris leads him away from the inn, while the voice-over talks of the pair's 'total communion of view.'" Elsewhere, "we hear Boris's words but do not see his lips move," or alternately, he is seen "clearly talking, but his words are not recorded."[36] This conscious mismatching of images to words and voices is in turn absorbed into the anti-realist approach to sound design exhibited throughout Robbe-Grillet's films, an approach that reaches its experimental apex in The Man Who Lies. Grafted onto the image are obtrusive, recurring and blatantly non-diegetic sounds, such as that of a falling tree or of shattering glass, while even motivated sounds are "denied their 'natural' perspective (footsteps remain equally loud as a character moves into the distance)."[37] More radically still, at one point Robbe-Grillet and sound designer Michel Fano excerpt the sound recording of a Comédie-Française production of a Pirandello play.[38]

The film's approach is thus to increase that sense of artificial, detached sound that is often considered a flaw of co-productions and of post-synchronized films and dubbed versions more generally. Indeed Robbe-Grillet and Fano reinforce that detachment through the use of sounds embedded in specific cultural contexts alien to the one on screen, as with the Pirandello excerpts (although admittedly these excerpts would be difficult to recognize as such without Robbe-Grillet's own identification.) In the very externality of sound to image that the film so conspicuously demonstrates, we might discern an implicit assertion of hard cultural boundaries, as though Robbe-Grillet were inscribing his relation to the Slovak context as an irreducibly foreign distance. The same is not true, however, of the film's visual (as opposed to aural) representation of language, which rather helps suggest a fractured, hybrid space in which difference has been internalized. Verbal signs in the film appear in both French and Slovak, an illogical touch in literal, historical terms but one that can be seen as diegetically reflecting the film's existence in dual language-versions. Of course this internal bi-linguality might simply have been an expedient measure, and the same strategy appears in another French-Czechoslovak co-production, Juraj Jakubisko's Birds, Orphans and Fools, which suggests that this was not Robbe-Grillet's invention alone.

Nonetheless, Robbe-Grillet's second Slovak co-production, Eden and After, sees a further development in the representation of linguistically and culturally hybrid space, at least in the film's preliminary and most interesting scenes, set in the fictional Eden café. A remarkable, labyrinthine construct composed of sliding mirrored panels and primary-colored geometric shapes a la Mondrian, the café is the site where the film's listless student protagonists play-act macabre fantasies. Alongside the reprised bilingual signs, the café features a variety of diverse cultural references, including advertisements for Cinzano and

36) R. Armes, *The Films of Alain Robbe-Grillet*, p. 113.
37) Ibid.
38) Alain Robbe-Grillet and Anthony N. Fragola and Roch C. Smith, *The Erotic Dream Machine: Interviews with Alain Robbe-Grillet on His Films*, p. 44.

for holidays in Tunisia (where the film's derisory mystery-adventure plot will later transport us). This appropriately mirrored space is again a reflection cast back on the film's production: rather than papering over transnational relations with the illusion of cultural unity, this conflation of signifiers gives fictive flesh to the multi-national space of the co-production, and, as before, it does so in terms of a dense commingling that implicitly affirms the exchange and hybridization of national cultures. Ewa Mazierska, in her own recent essay on co-production in Eastern Europe, observes a similar scrambling of time and (national) space in the films she discusses, and she connects this tactic to the Foucauldian concept of the "heterotopia", which denotes a real yet liminal, paradoxical, incoherent space.[39] The notion is surely relevant here too, where the interactions of culture translate into the uncertainties and instabilities of space (something in part achieved through the moving around of the café's mirrored and colored panels between shots.)

Yet there is also a possible critical — and self-critical — aspect in these scenes. The commercial nature of a number of the café's cultural signifiers could be said to evoke and parody the tendency in 1960s co-production and European 'international' filmmaking to render cultural identities as 'empty clichés', signature commodities and tourist-board imagery: Bergfelder, for instance, points to the James Bond films' constitution of British-ness through "fashion accoutrements and self-mocking stereotypes".[40] Robbe-Grillet might even be using such reference points to signal the limits of his own intercultural adventuring, not least in this film: Eden and After's narrative shift to Tunisia never presents the country as more than an Orientalist simulacrum, a colorfully "exotic" backdrop for the exploits of the white European protagonists. Robbe-Grillet's deployment of cultural stereotype, here as elsewhere, is of course parodic and self-conscious — Eden's heroine seems literally to enact her passage to Tunisia via a film about the country — yet we should hold back from too enthusiastic an endorsement of Robbe-Grillet as proponent of transnational intercourse. Despite Robbe-Grillet's acknowledgement of the creative role played by his Tunisian assistant, the future director Ferid Boughedir, the North African involvement in the film did not result in the same degree of artistic collaboration or cultural penetration as we find with regard to Slovakia.

If I have discussed these films in terms of a recognition of fluid cultural identities and a broad valorization of the transnational, I wish finally to situate their aesthetic strategies and cultural fusions in a specifically Slovak context, and to suggest how these resonate with the domestic reassessment of Slovak culture in the 1960s. As Slovak art historian Jan Bakoš explains, this small nation belongs to the "artistic periphery": Slovakia has never counted among the "the active regions of art history" that founded specific styles and initiated widespread cultural developments. Slovak culture has rather fed off "external stimuli," foreign trends that it adopted "from many sides, set beside one another, alternated and combined."[41] This appropriative tendency is evident if we examine, say, the emergence of Slovak Surrealism (a French-Czech import that Slovak artists "naturalized" un-

39) Ewa Mazierska, 'International Co-productions as Productions of Heterotopias,' in Anikó Imre (ed.), *A Companion to Eastern European Cinemas* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), p. 484.

40) Tim Bergfelder, 'The Nation Vanishes: European Co-Productions and Popular Genre Formula in the 1950s and 1960s,' p. 150.

41) Jan Bakoš, *Periféria a symbolický skok* (Bratislava: Kalligram, 2000), s. 169.

der the name "*Nadrealizmus*/*Nadrealism*"), or even the specific biography of a figure like Marenčin, whose sensibility as an artist (and a dramaturg?) was developed in close relation to French-founded artistic movements. Bakoš argues that the 1960s saw a positive re-examination of Slovakia's "peripheral" culture, albeit within Czech scholarly circles, by means of a revised conception of artistic creativity: "the choice and combination of [artistic] impulses" now came to be grasped as "an equal type of creativity, one that is adequate for a communication-based model of art. Stylistic originality stopped being the sole dimension of artistic creation, communication was shown to have equal status as an aspect of art."[42)]

Beyond academic art-historical discourses, it could be argued that Slovak cinema of the 1960s offers its own affirmation of what Bakoš calls Slovakia's cultural "syncretism", overtly incorporating and combining foreign cultural sources, from Godard and Resnais to silent cinema and Pop Art. In a heightened reprise of earlier Slovak modernisms, the New Wave films of Jakubisko and Elo Havetta bluntly combine pan-European experimentalism with native folk traditions, thus throwing the foreign into sharp relief against the local. Robbe-Grillet's two Slovak co-productions are literally films directed by a foreigner, films that inscribe their own foreign elements and illustrate various cultural syntheses: does not Bakoš's affirmative description of Slovakia as a "cultural crossroads" apply also to the Bratislava-shot Eden café, as a hub of diverse cultural signs, a meeting-point of East and West? *The Man Who Lies*' Boris Varissa, this anachronistically chic stranger who half-succeeds in captivating a Slovak village, joins a roster of foreign, alien or "outsider" figures in Slovak New Wave films: the entrancing female enigmas played respectively by Polish actress Jolanta Umecka and American model Paula Pritchett in The Miraculous Virgin and Adrift, the magical French impresario of Havetta's Party in the Botanical Garden (Slávnosť v botanickej záhrade, 1969), the persecuted potter of Dragon's Return, and even Trintignant's fellow icon of edgy Gallic modernity, Jean-Pierre Léaud, playing a pop singer in Dialóg 20-40-60 (Peter Solan, Zbyněk Brynych, Jerzy Skolimowski, 1968.) Such figures might be seen to emblematize the incursion of the 'foreign' into a newly liberalized, internationally connected society, the foreign as a seductive if perhaps also anxiety-inducing quantity. At the same time, Boris himself, the mendacious usurper, can be seen to stand for appropriation in its creative dimensions, since he borrows the identities and histories of others while remaining boundlessly inventive and resourceful.

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42) Ibid., p. 185.

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SUMMARY

Alain Robbe-Grillet in Slovakia

Transnational Encounters and the Art of the Co-Production

Jonathan Owen

This essay concerns two Czechoslovak-French co-productions directed by celebrated filmmaker and '*nouveau roman*' author Alain Robbe-Grillet. These two films — The Man Who Lies (L'Homme qui ment / Muž, ktorý luže, 1968) and Eden and After (L'Eden et après / Eden a potom, 1970) — were made in collaboration with Slovakia's Koliba studios. Paying particular attention to *The Man Who Lies*, I explore these films both as works rooted in contemporaneous Slovak cinema and as self-consciously transnational texts that thematise their co-produced status. I discuss the important contributions of Robbe-Grillet's Slovak collaborators, notably production-group leader Albert Marenčin, and examine how The Man Who Lies, set during the Slovak National Uprising, can be and has been read in contextually specific ways. At the same time these films inscribe and foreground the hybrid mingling of nationalities that is the reality of co-production. The key theme of imposture in The Man Who Lies reflects back on co-production's masquerade of national identity, while the film's experimental sound techniques extend, rather than efface, the dubbing practices that were a longtime 'necessary evil' of co-production. Finally I suggest how the very cultivation of national hybridity is relevant to the Slovak context, serving to illustrate — and valorise — Slovakia's status as a 'cultural crossroads', absorbing and synthesising foreign artistic trends.