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## Between the Center and the Margin

### *The Notion of Central Europe in Slovak Cinema after 1989<sup>1)</sup>*

Any debate on Slovak cinema after 1989 has to keep in mind discontinuous nature of Slovak cinema, as such: conceptualizations of cinema in Slovakia as a “national” cinema are forced to deal with its recurrent disruptions and multiple “new” beginnings, with arduous re-constructions of its “own” identity, and with periodical dissolvings within various broader, transnational contexts (e. g. within cinema of Austria-Hungary, Czechoslovakia, or cinemas of Soviet bloc).<sup>2)</sup> Slovak cinema, therefore, offers a good basis for revaluation of the term of “national cinema.” Its contemporary development (which starts with the privatisation that almost led to its extinction) is also a particularly good example of the set of laborious constructions of “national” cinemas on the ground of current co-production and festival politics : such as when “Slovak cinema” is regularly presented at prestigious film festivals in a “pair” with Czech, Slovenian or other regional cinemas, and when most of the “Slovak” films are still made as co-productions with Czech Republic or, occasionally, with some other countries — such as Belgium, Germany, Poland and so on. Thus, what is commonly labeled as “Slovak cinema” is more precisely a self-pampering fiction referring to the summa of films that were produced with respectable participation of Slovak financial, institutional and personal capital (Slovaks, in the most important film professions) and which, more or less obviously, includes topics and motifs related to common constructions of Slovak identity. The latter is, however, extremely hard to define since Slovak identity — mediated and constructed via images of contemporary Slovak cinema — appears often enough as hidden, ambivalent, and mirroring itself in feelings of marginality, in tropes of isolation, self-sufficiency and of the center. These tropes suggest the

1) This work was supported by the Slovak Research and Development Agency under the contract No. APVV-0797-12.

2) It is extremely hard to trace beginnings of Slovak cinema since the first Slovak films (linked to Slovak topics, Slovak financial capital and creative investment) appear only after the establishment of Czechoslovakia in 1918. Austria-Hungary didn't encourage cinema based on autonomous ethnic bases and the institutional basis of Slovak cinema was not successfully developed until 1938 when Slovakia gained its autonomy, and when, soon enough, a fascist Slovak State was established (1939–1945). Since the 1930's there have been

traumatic nature of Slovak identity, and the main aim of this article is to reveal the aforementioned tropes exactly in their latently-traumatizing sense while tracing several distinctive modes of conceptualizing one's own (insufficient) nation-ness.

### **"This is the Heart of Europe, My Dear"**

One of the first remarkable attempts to reevaluate and re-construct post-revolution Slovak identity in cinema links it with an idea of fading, ambivalent and even unapproachable heart of Europe. The notion of the center (of Europe) does not overlap, however, with the notion of Central European identity. It marks, instead, an ironic approach to the missed opportunity to become once again cosmopolitan. Of course, the notion of Central Europe still forms a remarkable part of collective imaginary within most of the middle-European countries, nations, or cultures. In some of the countries (such as the Czech Republic or Poland) it served as point of reconstruction of new identities even before 1989, but in Slovakia, its cosmopolitan potential was replaced by the outburst of post-Velvet Revolution nationalism almost as soon as it reappeared. The longing for positive features of Central-Europeanness became strongly affected by ambivalent feelings of marginality and cultural delay.

The notion of the center (the center of nation, of Europe or of the world) as it appears in early films by Martin Šulík, Miroslav Šindelka's *PASSIONATE KISS*, or even in some aspects of Štefan Semjan's *ON THE BEAUTIFUL BLUE DANUBE*, might be associated with perception of Slovak culture as traumatized one, located outside the "main" historical and cultural happenings within Western Europe. This is not surprising at all since Slovak cinema of this period had become an extremely marginal part of the national culture, lacking both better production and distribution strategies, and the attention of film scholars, critics or international festivals.<sup>3)</sup> With almost no state financial support, serious gaps in leg-

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many discussions on the need for Slovak cinema, but no clear consensus on what this cinema should look like — and this absence of a unified idea reappears soon after WWII, when the first afterwar Slovak film happens to be a film directed by Czech director Martin Frič, featuring a huge investment of Czech creative capital and with a semi-colonial approach to "typically" Slovak topics (*WARN HIM...!*, Varúj, 1948). The need for establishment of new national cinema dissolves once again in 1948, when Communist Party won the elections. Soon after the February 1948 coup d'état, the dictatorship of one single ideology was installed and most of the postwar projects were labeled as bourgeoisly nationalistic. In the years following, however, Slovak cinema starts to function relatively autonomously. It even rediscovers and reevaluates national topics, especially during the 1960s when it finally becomes more visible (with Štefan Uher legendarily nominated as the "John the Baptist" of Czechoslovak New Wave). When the normalization processes in early 1970s began, it already has reached federative autonomy (in 1969) but once again loses its formerly established creative continuity. I am not going to elaborate on this typical, quite schematically-presented model of discontinuous development of Slovak cinema. I wish just to remark that this model is still quite influential within common perception of Slovak film history, and appears as irreversibly confirmed when privatization of the main cinematic institutions after 1991 led to the rapid decrease of film production.

- 3) The reasons for this are pretty well known. In 1991, the state financial support for film production decreased rapidly and the film studio Koliba's (Slovenská filmová tvorba Bratislava – Koliba) monopoly was undermined by firing the most of its employees holding positions among its creative workers. Following the 1991 governmental decision, Koliba embarked a long-termed process of privatization which was finished under still unexplained circumstances during Vladimír Mečiar's era (for more, see Václav Macek, '1 297 254 000 Sk,' *Kino-Ikon*, vol. 14, no. 1 (2005), pp. 124–154).

islative support, and with only 1–2 feature-length films made per year during the 1990s, the cinema of Slovakia had no chance to gain a new continuity or diversify — which should be indispensable for a healthy transition from the old narrative and ideological patterns to (the expectedly) new aesthetics, genres, or topics which could satisfy both spectators and critics at home and abroad.

On the contrary, the cinema of Slovakia became one of the most peculiar parts of the transition to new market economy and “globalized” hyperculturality — a process which resembles many of the features identified by Alexander Kiossev within his famous “colonial” metaphor. According to Kiossev’s interpretation of the birth of Bulgarian nation, the processes of modernization at the margins of Europe rise from profound feelings of absence and insufficiency, which often lead to ambivalent strategies of both masking and recalling of one’s own marginality.<sup>4)</sup> In the case of Slovakia, the recognition of its location within the middle of Europe has had an important role in covering up its obviously marginal position within European geopolitical hierarchy. Slovakia, similar to the Czech Republic, Belarus, Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine, Hungary (and also like Romania or Germany), and other countries claiming to possess geometrical midpoints of the continent on their territories, derive its pride through the virtue of its location. My aim in this article is to analyze the notion of the center / Central Europe precisely in this kind of traumatising, or even “self-colonising” sense while pointing out several cinematic strategies of overlapping the center and the periphery.<sup>5)</sup>

To explore the aspect of middle-Europeanness as the part of a reflexive attitude toward one’s own marginality, we can, nevertheless, count at only one explicit example of pointing out the notion of Central Europe within the case of Slovak cinema. It appears in 1992, in a chapter from Martin Šulík’s second full-length feature film, *EVERYTHING I LIKE*. At the end of the chapter (entitled simply and significantly “Stred Európy” or, “The Heart of Europe,”) the film’s main character Tomáš finds his English lover Ann in the nearby woods, and overhears a part of her dialogue with a stranger she just met:

“Here is the heart of Europe, my dear,” says the stranger.

The image then fades into darkness and the episode ends. The words happen to become a quite bizarre punch line of it, relying on the strong feeling of absurdity, which was obvious from the beginning of the dialogue Ann and the stranger:

“What is your name?” asks Ann, in English.

“Sprechen Sie Deutsch?” the strange man answers.

What does Tomáš overhears then, is actually an attempt to strike back the latently colonial attitude of his English lover, who, although friendly and tamed, automatically uses English while trying to approach her new central-European acquaintance.

To understand this fragment of Slovak cinema more profoundly, we have to locate this film of Šulík’s into the specific cultural, social and political space of Slovakia at the begin-

4) See Alexander Kiossev, ‘Notes on Self-Colonizing Cultures,’ in Bojana Pejić and David Elliot (eds.), *After the Wall. Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe* (Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 1999), pp. 114–177.

5) I use the term “self-colonising” in the sense that Alexander Kiossev gave to it. A. Kiossev, ‘Notes on Self-Colonizing Cultures.’

ning of 1990s. *EVERYTHING I LIKE* refers equally to the opening of the borders with the West, to a need to overcome the Soviet era heritage, and to the current outburst of Slovak nationalism, widely encouraged by the government of Vladimír Mečiar. In the context of the constant revaluation of Slovak identity throughout the film, the stranger might appear as a proud Slovak, but more than that, he is also an old-fashioned middle-European. While don't speaking English, he doesn't choose Russian as alternative "Esperanto" either; instead he overcomes his inability to speak with Ann by evoking his germanophone Central-European identity. Both aspects of this location of the old man's home within the mythical Europe — the ambivalent (national) pride and the feeling of marginality — are underlined by simple spacial symbols, a garden and a forest. The fact that the dialogue between an Englishwoman and a Slovak takes place in the old man's *garden* located in the middle of a *forest* symbolically locates Slovakia within a specific geopolitical (and poetical) place: between periphery and the self-sufficient center, between Europe and the not-yet European.

Obviously, the meaning of the garden as a "heart of Europe" reflects rhetorics of national pride. Eventually associated with axis mundi, it connects this world with the promise of the Eden. At the same time, the image of nation as the center of Europe overlaps with the situation of getting lost in the surrounding forest which might be linked to traditional western fantasies on non-western Europes.<sup>6)</sup> The forest stands for the unmapped, chaotic, incomprehensible. In this sense, imagining the East stands hand in hand with the feeling of impossibility to reach it. The center / heart is at the same time present and denied, equated with a lost, marginal and unapproachable part of the world. In a sense, *EVERYTHING I LIKE* announces the whole new decade of neglecting the national self-centredness — while at the same time counting on the myth of it.

### **From Irony to Cynicism: From Gardens to Non-Places**

The quoted sentence is, nevertheless, still not so interesting *per se*. It is interesting precisely in its *marginality* understood as the other side of the imaginary of the center. It could be read as a fragment lost between other fragmentary utterances, chapters or features of Šulík's profoundly fragmentary film, but also as a fragment lost in the entirety of contemporary Slovak cinema. We can, indeed, claim that Slovak cinema usually doesn't bother explicitly with the question of Middle Europe. Instead of this geopolitical category, it uses various tropes of "the center" — of national self-centredness, self-sufficiency, or isolation as important features of national identity.

The symbolic milieu of the garden is most remarkably elaborated in the third Šulík's film entitled simply *THE GARDEN* and linking the symbol of the garden with re-invention and cultivation of Slovak identity. Instead of counting on a strong, fixed national identity, Šulík once again deconstructs it as a patchwork, situational one: an identity made out of heterogenous, fragmentary utterances, symbols and remarks, reinforced by the meetings

6) See for more Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe. The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).



with “the Others” (in *EVERYTHING I LIKE*, an Englishwoman plays the role of “the Other”, while the main character of *THE GARDEN* goes through a series of meetings with men named after modern Western philosophers). Both films rely on irony as a state of deep doubt about “the last dictionary” which has been currently used.<sup>7)</sup> Their narratives move freely from one text, symbolical meaning, or discourse to another, using only fragments of them and rejecting the belief in a final power or truth — thus reminding us of the difference between metaphysician and ironist according to Richard Rorty.<sup>8)</sup>

The irony of Šulík’s films is very important to remember as the most radical mode of interrogating the newly rediscovered and mutually contradictory political discourses of the era. We should understand it not only in the sense of Rorty’s determination of irony against metaphysics, but also in the sense of Slavoj Žižek’s determination of irony against (postmodern) cynicism: unlike cynicism, irony covers up the affection and replaces it with an illusion of rejection.<sup>9)</sup>

*EVERYTHING I LIKE* was released in 1992, in a significant era when the state and cultural identity of Slovaks once again needed to be reconstructed and revived, but on exactly which basis this should happen was unclear. Šulík depicts a schizophrenic situation where the opening of borders comes too late in the era of globalizing Europe and increasing consciousness of transnationality fuse with a profound inability to determine what exactly it is to be a Slovak. Instead of the continual creation of a stable, yet historically-modifiable cinematic image of national identity, Slovak cinema (with its multiple discontinuities and disruptions) found itself in the new globalizing era with a strong feeling of missed opportunity, where it skipped the chance to recognize its own identity before it was dissolved in market conditions. Slovak identity found itself somehow lost between the old Central-European and a new globalized kind of transculturality, and Slovak cinema once again almost dissolved before it even managed to dissociate itself from the cinema of late socialism and re-establish the new continuity with positive values derived from the “Golden Era” of Slovak New Wave.<sup>10)</sup>

In this context, irony helps Šulík and his generation (Semjan, Šindelka) to undermine the blind belief in the nation, even while Slovakia still remains among the things they “like.”

The accuracy of this approach springs out of a very simple acknowledgment that is well known to anybody dealing with the notion of identity: for Šulík, Slovak as well as personal identity can be re-constructed only through various relations to “the Other.” The main character of *EVERYTHING I LIKE*, a man with the biblical name Tomáš (doubting Thomas) identifies himself as a Slovak only in moments of misunderstanding with his English lov-

7) See Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

8) Ibid.

9) Slavoj Žižek, *Metastaze uživanja* (Beograd: Biblioteka XX vek, 1996), pp. 136.

10) One of the dominant questions of cinema of Slovakia in early 1990s is the question of searching for (and connecting oneself with) positive values within domestic cinema. Just like the new generation of film historians, Martin Šulík (1962) and his generational counterparts Štefan Semjan (1960) and Miroslav Šindelka (1963) pick “the golden sixties” as the main referential frame of nationally based part of the cinematic identity of their films: *EVERYTHING I LIKE*, *THE GARDEN*, but also *PASSIONATE KISS* and *ON THE BEAUTIFUL BLUE DANUBE* contain many references to Slovak cinema of 1960s, especially to work of Juraj Jakubisko, Elo Havetta, Štefan Uher and Dušan Hanák.

er, using his fluent Slovak against his broken English (and against Ann's imperfect ability to understand it) as a weapon, a symbol of power in fight for domination.

After *EVERYTHING I LIKE*, Martin Šulík goes even further in his doubt about the possibilities of reconstructing the Slovak identity out of its fragmentary and (certainly during the turbulences of socialist era) half-forgotten past. As the response to political isolation of Mečiar's Slovakia, Šulík creates the metaphorical image of Slovakia as a garden or a landscape isolated from the rest of the world. In *THE GARDEN*, he once again depicts a hero in his thirties who goes through an identity crisis trying to find his "place in the world". Šulík uses the metaphor of the garden as a complex net of associations with antique and biblical traditions, but also with periods of national revival and enlightenment.<sup>11)</sup> In *LANDSCAPE* (or "Krajinka" in the original Slovak), Šulík plays on the double meaning of Slovak word "krajinka" — a little country, or a (picturesque) landscape. And in *ORBIS PICTUS*, a young adolescent girl travels around a country that borders with nothingness, ending precisely at the point where a strange Stalin-like character Drusa tears off her map. The film proposes an image of the world that is *allowed* to be known: "Nothing is there, I have told you," says a lonely herdsman to his goat, sitting at the edge of a cliff at the point where the girl's map ends, marking the symbolic end of the world.<sup>12)</sup>

The metaphor of isolated nation is characteristic of not only Šulík's films, which reflected the political isolationism of Mečiar's Slovakia, but reappears even today. In one of her newest documentary films entitled *FRAGILE IDENTITY*, Zuzana Piusi deals with extreme manifestations of Slovak patriotism linking them occasionally and discretely with blindness or derangement. The film begins with a plane shot of ruins of Devín, a castle near Bratislava which the Slovak national myth associates with the first "Slovak" nation state (which is supposed to be Great Moravia) as well as with Slovak national revivalism of 19th century.<sup>13)</sup> The introductory shots of the castle located on a hill are taken from a helicopter, thus forming a monumental, dynamic image of a lonely isle surrounded by endless verdure and bordered by waters of two rivers, the Danube and Morava.

The "isolationist" tendency is, nevertheless, clearest in works that amplify the metaphor of the garden from Šulík's films while at the same time transforming the director's *Bildungsromans* into model family dramas (e. g. *BLUE HEAVEN* by Eva Borušovičová, *QUARTETTO* by Laura Siváková, or *FAITHLESS GAMES* by Michaela Pavlátová). Here, the metaphor loses its political, biblical and mythical meanings while, at the same time, retaining its ability to encourage nationally specific readings, suggesting a kind of escape from political and social environment of the country.

This paradigm is, however, left in the new millennium, often by the same directors who

11) For exquisite analyses of the metaphor of the garden see Zuzana Gindl-Tatárová, 'The Garden,' in Peter Hames (ed.), *The Cinema of Central Europe* (London – New York: Wallflower Press, 2004), pp. 245–253.; and Vlastimil Zúška, 'Topos zahrady v *Zahradě* a jeho časoznakové implikace,' in Marián Brázda (ed.), *Svet v pohyblivých obrazoch Martina Šulíka* (Bratislava: Slovenský filmový ústav, 2000), pp. 122–147.

12) In one of the episodes of the film, an elderly couple of actors find itself on its way to emigration. Nevertheless, neither the heroine nor the most of the other characters leave the boundaries of their place, sharing a similar attitude to the question of leaving the country as the male protagonists of previous Šulík's films.

13) On 24th of April in 1836, the members of the Slovak national movement led by Ľudovít Štúr organized a trip to Devín Castle. Within Slovak ethno-political myth, this trip is imagined as the beginning of the group's extensive efforts on behalf of national awareness.

at the first adopted it: this is the case of *TRUTH OR DARE* by Borušovičová or *HEAVEN, HELL... EARTH* by Siváková. Both of these fit into what some critics labeled as “city lifestyle” films.<sup>14)</sup>

Based on advertising, lifestyle magazines aesthetics, and a fusion of various imported genres, these films give a new content to the notions of nation and nation state. Instead of Šulík's searching for Slovakness, (followed by irony as an approach still infused with belief in some kind of authority), “city lifestyle” films count on nation as an already-empty as well as marginal phenomenon. And instead of searching for the constantly-disappearing essence of the nation (lost between the two different ways of modernisation and transculturation, middle-European and “global”), these films depict a world of cultural fusion, transnationality and emptied, occasionally and casually approached, national symbols.

In films by Vladimír Adásek (1972), Eva Borušovičová (1970), Katarína Šulajová (1975), or directors of slightly older generations such as Vlado Fischer (1962), Miro Šindelka (1963) [or even the “classical” Miloslav Luther (1945)],<sup>15)</sup> identity appears as fluid, unstable, contextual and performative. Slovak ethnical identity is unpresent or reduced to empty gestures of autoexoticism in the frame of intercultural fusion, like in Borušovičová's film *TRUTH OR DARE* where a multicultural housing community is offered „bryndzové halušky“, the Slovak national dish, while casually chatting on life experience of a refugee from an nameless (South-) Eastern European country.

It is good to remember that Šulík's *GARDEN* offered an enclosed space of a garden as a kind of idyle where one can reach essential connection with generations of his ancestors while not doing anything special (besides reading a lost diary of his grandfather, recalling the discourse of Slovak enlightenment and experiencing encounters with characters named after well-known modern philosophers — st. Benedict, Rousseau, Wittgenstein, Spinoza). However, in 1994 (one year before *THE GARDEN*), two other films appeared which share a symptomatic fascination with spacial metaphors of the nation with Šulík's film. Both films are inhabited with bohemian characters wandering around the historical places of Slovak cities. In *PASSIONATE KISS*, the bohemian life in the streets of medieval mining town appears confronted with underground striptease clubs, while the neglected feminine identity of the heroine is encouraged by her acquaintance with a mystical elderly Jew living in his Old Town flat. The stratification of space is quite similar to the stratification we will experience one year later in Emir Kusturica's *UNDERGROUND*: the underground spaces serve as references to the suppressed collective and individual desires, to the criminalisation of the country and to the archeological layers of the communal past.

In the most important predecessor of later “city lifestyle” films, *ON THE BEAUTIFUL BLUE DANUBE*, three bohemian friends spend their time wandering around border-like

14) The term was proposed by Juraj Malíček, ‘Pop po domácky,’ *Slovo*, vol. 7, no. 9 (2005), p. 16. Later on it was widely accepted by other critics such as Martin Šmatlák, ‘Hľadanie vlastnej cesty,’ *Kino-Ikon*, vol. 12, no. 1 (2008), pp. 135–147.

15) The most typical “city lifestyle” films are (in a chronological order of appearance) *HANNAH AND HER BROTHERS*, *TRUTH OR DARE*, *IT WILL STAY BETWEEN US*, *TWO SYLLABLES BEHIND*, *HALF-LIFE*, *HEAVEN, HELL... EARTH*, *MY HUSBAND'S WOMEN*, *MOSQUITOE'S TANGO*, *CANDIDATE*, and, within a special subcategory of films about prefab Petržalka — in less fancy and more hip-hop influenced manner — also *BIG RESPECT*, *BRATISLAVA FILM* and *LÓVE*.

places, *lieux de mémoire*, as well as around spaces symbolically related to the Slovak national identity (and to the various phases of its construction). The friends have no stable love relationships nor stable employment, and they symptomatically enough never cross the boundaries of the city which is, however, “Westernized” through the music (of John Lurie), and through the playfully criminal plot about stealing an Andy Warhol picture.

Although both of the films share the same tendency of replacing the anthropological “place” with heterotopias with films by Martin Šulík,<sup>16)</sup> they also include a completely different approach to the notion of cultural memory. In Šulík’s debut film *TENDERNESS*, for example, we are confronted with the unspoken shame of the communist past, revealed only through a mute Super 8 film. In *THE GARDEN*, the past is embodied in grandfather’s diary just as well as in the odd visitors named after dead Western philosophers. On the other hand, *ON THE BEAUTIFUL BLUE DANUBE* presents rather cynical approach to the past represented by empty architectonic symbols of the Slovak capital: the post-war memorial of Soviet soldiers Slavín, the famous U.F.O.-shaped café at the top of a bridge across the Danube (The Bridge of the Slovak National Uprising), or an old historical flat of elderly “Pressburger”<sup>17)</sup> German woman. Similarly to *PASSIONATE KISS* (and unlike Šulík’s fascination with memories embodied in things and people), *ON THE BEAUTIFUL BLUE DANUBE* deals with memory preserved in architecture only — memory that is not alive anymore, not enlivened by individual nor communal consciousness.

In this sense, the mid-1990s already anticipated later “city lifestyle” films. In many of them, travelling around Europe became a natural way of life — although the characters still reflect their trips as evidences of specific border-like existence in which Slovakia have found itself. Entrapped between the fading Central-European identity of their ancestors and a new hypercultural transnationalism, characters of these films desperately try to become (post)modern, while film style appears as a *creolized* version of Western European cinemas. In *TWO SYLLABLES BEHIND*, for example, the heroine is desperately stuck between several identities. Thanks to her Hungarian grandmother, she still “recalls” the Central-European identity of multicultural pre-war Pressburg. Thanks to her own childhood, she recalls the unifying socialist past, and thanks to the heroine’s desire to belong to globalised Europe, she experiences the painful difference between rapidly self-colonised, Westernized contemporary Bratislava (full of immigrants from China) and the French capital as the “real” European city.<sup>18)</sup>

16) A part of the social site that is excluded from everyday life of the society, albeit it has “the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect”. Michel Foucault, ‘Des Espace Autres,’ *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité*, vol. 5 (1984). Available in English online: <<http://www.foucault.info/documents/heterotopia/foucault.heterotopia.en.html>>, [date of the access: 20th October 2013].

17) Pressburg is the name of Bratislava used during Austro-Hungarian era. In contemporary Slovak, the adjective *prešpurácky* (related or belonging to Pressburg) suggests the moral and cultural values of the pre-war Bratislava and its multicultural society (in which Slovaks formed only one of the minorities).

18) I have written more about this film and the self-colonising aspects of its fabula, motifs and style: Jana Dudková, *Slovenský film v ére transkulturality* (Bratislava: Drewo a srd. – VŠMU, 2011); Jana Dudková, ‘The Problematic Other and the (Im)possibility of Cross-Cultural Dialogue in Slovak Cinema after 1993,’ in Petra Hanáková and Kevin B. Johnson (eds.), *Visegrad Cinema. Points of Contact from the New Waves to the Present*. (Praha: Casablanca – KFS FF UK, 2010), pp. 109–129.



There is yet another remarkable feature within the “city lifestyle” trend. In many of these films, the gardens are replaced by exclusive cultural “ghettoes” located in the historical centre of country’s capital. Both spacial metaphors refer to nation’s isolation, but within the city-center locations, the search for the essence of the nation dissolves. Šulík’s irony is almost completely replaced by postmodern recyculation and cynicism as the stance of respecting *jouissance* instead of authority of symbolic order.<sup>19)</sup>

Deliberating as this new stance could seem, it still springs out of the same epistemological basis as nationalism.<sup>20)</sup> The national “self” still persists in the form that could be linked to Alexander Kiossev’s definition of self-colonisation — as a process of late modernisation (falling behind the formation of “big” nation states), and as an attitude leading to various strategies of reconciliation of the communal feeling of the *absence* (the absence of one’s own history, identity, nation, institutions...). In the mentioned film *TRUTH OR DARE*, for example, the transcultural intellectual “ghetto” takes form of Rádio Európa (Radio Europe) carried on by a group of cosmopolitan college students. But it is important that cosmopolitanism and postmodern flux of identities come hand in hand with the — still typically traumatized — need for reaching Europe, for making one’s own voice be heard beyond limited boundaries of one’s own site (the topography of which is suggested in the opening of the film by a list of well-known cafés, located within Bratislava’s midget city center and visited mostly by a stable community of intellectuals and college students.)

### Negotiation of Borders

While Borušovičová (in *TRUTH OR DARE*), Adásek (in *HANNAH AND HER BROTHERS*), or Šulajová (in *TWO SYLLABLES BEHIND*) place their stories within historical centre on the left bank of Danube, a member of the newest generation, Jakub Kroner (1987), re-discovers Bratislava’s right bank with one of the biggest Slovak prefab boroughs, Petržalka, which was established in the context of 1970s unification and rationalization of standards of living.

Architectural traces of different historical layers of country’s modernisation appear once again as mere visual background of the plot. The semi-underground culture of city center and its bohemian cafés is now replaced by the hip-hop culture of Petržalka’s young people. In this sense, images of both river banks of the capital invest in a similar double function: hip-hop refers to the topographical and cultural periphery, to the culture of minority ghettoes and urban suburbs, but in the context of Slovak cinema it also (and similarly to cosmopolitan subcultures of the left bank) mediates the connection with the metropolitan “Big Other” — which in this context means Europe or, in a broader sense, “the world.” In fact, both approaches to identity of Bratislava reveal a similar need to cover up the disappearing illusion of a unique communal memory with newly imported cultural or genre influences — which might itself resemble some features of Kiossev’s definition of

19) Slavoj Žižek, *Metastaze uživanja* (Beograd: Biblioteka XX vek, 1996), pp. 136–139.

20) This claim owes much to Wolfgang Welsch’s early comments on multiculturalism, which he links to the same Herderian tradition of thinking as modern nationalism. See e. g. Wolfgang Welsch, ‘Transculturality — the Puzzling Form of Cultures Today,’ in Mike Featherstone and Scott Lash (eds.), *Spaces of Culture: City, Nation, World* (London: Sage, 1999), pp. 194–213.

self-colonization (the feeling of absence — of absent nation, its institutions, history and traditions — leads to embracing of foreign models of modernization that, however, comes too late, so that the emerging consciousness of delay gives rise to various strategies of masking and reconciliation.)<sup>21)</sup>

ON THE BEAUTIFUL BLUE DANUBE and its later counterparts TRUTH OR DARE, HANNAH AND HER BROTHERS, or TWO SYLLABLES BEHIND, depict a world reduced to the old town streets, cafés, art schools, universities, dubbing studios, small radio broadcast stations, or even flats of forgotten pre-war middle class. This reduction of actual social and political reality to a quite elitist segment of it is not only isolationist,<sup>22)</sup> it also reveals a kind of empty nostalgia for modernization. These places don't really affect the characters, forming just an attractive urban visuality as the reaction to Šulík's countryside idylls. The film TWO SYLLABLES BEHIND offers a particularly good set of examples for this phenomenon, using multiple montages that refer to some crucial periods of artistic or architectural modes of imagining the Slovak identity. In clips interrupting the fabula, references to Slovak artistic modernism of 1930s (with its folk and proletarian motifs) alternate with architectonic references to socialism (the mentioned U.F.O.-shaped café on the top of the Bridge of the Slovak National Uprising), and confronted with images of Paris, reduced mostly to architectonic memorials of Art Nouveau. The two different and uncomparable historical experiences are hidden in these seemingly innocent montages: experience of Paris as the capital of 19th century — a true modern city and the site of heroine's desire, and the traumatic experience of discontinuity and ever-delaying constructions of Slovak identity. The latter leads to recurrent feelings of insufficiency in relation to the Western modernity. The film, in fact, refers to existential dimensions of too wild and too fast transition to capitalism that lead to the experience of uprootedness.

The beginning of the new millennium is not only the period of revaluation of Bratislava's past (which becomes just an attractive set of nostalgic surface phenomena).<sup>23)</sup> It is also the age of completely different filmic spaces reminding us of Marc Augé's definition of a non-place — the neutral space that finally neglects connections to any communal or ethnic memory, including the absence of memorials of the communal past.<sup>24)</sup> The film IT WILL STAY BETWEEN US is, for example, set exclusively within ultramodern flats with glass

21) Such are inventions of glorious national past, or, on the contrary, admitting of insufficient modernity that leads to biblical interpretations — "the last will be the first" — or, as Kiossev reminds us, also a kind of accelerated modernisation trying to catch up on the missed. See A. Kiossev, 'Notes on Self-Colonizing Cultures.' Of course, none of these strategies (that had a sense in the second half of 19th century) appears in the urban stories of Slovak cinema *stricto sensu*. Most of them are simply using "foreign" genre structures or images of hybrid globalisation in order to reveal the absence of a coherent idea of the nation.

22) The first "city lifestyle" films emerge within intellectual and artistic circles in Bratislava that felt to be in opposition to the regime of Vladimír Mečiar and its political isolationism and nationalism. Most of them are released several years after the end of Mečiar's government, but their metaphoric isolationism refers to this opposition.

23) One of the examples are recurrent images of the mentioned U.F.O. — shaped café, most often used as fancy evidences of Bratislava's odd modernity (ON THE BEAUTIFUL BLUE DANUBE, TWO SYLLABLES BEHIND). The café actually follows a futurist tendency in socialist art and is incorrectly associated with Soviet era cosmopolitan successes. The trouble is that the whole bridge on which top it is installed was built after the old Jewish quarter was destroyed during 1960s and thus it includes the potential meaning of deleted memories.

24) Marc Augé, *Non-places. Introduction à un anthropologie de la surmodernité* (Paris: Seuil, 1992).

walls and within shopping centres as the most typical examples of Augéan non-places, suggesting the final separation of individual identity and the communal memory.<sup>25)</sup> The seemingly terminal silence of ethnical identity (appearing in the „supramodern“<sup>26)</sup> mode of symbolical filmic „self-colonisation“) springs out of the disturbing unification caused by specific form of contemporary transnationalism, which happens to be one of the appearances of *culture-monde*.<sup>27)</sup> Since contemporary conceptions of culture or nation determine them mostly as matters of global market(ing), it is not surprising that the visibility of the market interesses mirrors itself in a wide range of seemingly marginal transnational phenomena like, for example, the Czech and Slovak cast of some films referring to supramodernity or hyperculturality (e.g. *IT WILL STAY BETWEEN US* or *CANDIDATE* where the mixed casting and dual language identity are motivated solely by the inevitability of coproduction with Czech Republic.)

A kind of response to the silence of national identity might be recognized in Jakub Kroner's films. *BRATISLAVAFILM* and *LÓVE* are both based on genre creolisation and both are invested in Slovak identity as a kind of transgressive identity (which is incorporated in some distinctive types of characters like criminals and youth — especially youth from notorious Petržalka or college campuses in Bratislava's Mlynská dolina.) The impacts of gangster films and romances, of hip-hop music clips and popular domestic TV series are connected with short pre-production phase and semi-amateurish expression. The result is not only surprising commercial success (thanks to its marketing campaign, *LÓVE* became one of the commercially most successful Slovak films in the last twenty years), but also a kind of self-reflexive *pidgin* version of „western“ genre patterns.<sup>28)</sup> Slovak identity is referred to as identity of world's cultural periphery. It is not surprising that, in this kind of cinema, even the metaphor of center (as incorporated in images of country's capital) becomes revealed as a mere prop of a peripheral, self-colonized culture. *BRATISLAVAFILM*'s opening shots offer a good example. The introductory rapidmontage of images of Bratislava is followed by North-African rhythms and musical instruments, thus suggesting a poetics of Third World-ization which allow the Slovak capital to be compared with hybrid metropolises of the Third World.

Obviously, re-discovering of the right bank, replacing of fancy, globalized, or even supramodern images of Bratislava with the city's neglected prefab led to a different set of cultural references. Instead of images inspired by „White West“ and preferred by previous „left bank“ films, Kroner chooses images inspired by hip-hop and North American black sub-

25) Of course, this separation started already in Šulík's stories about individual escapisms and profoundly asocial searchings for the nation's past.

26) For definition of supramodernity, see also M. Augé, *Non-lieux. Introduction à un anthropologie de la surmodernité*.

27) Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy, *La culture-monde. Réponse à une société désorientée* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2008).

28) I am using the adjective „pidgin“ as an opposite to adjective „creolized“, following the definition proposed by film theorist Nevena Daković in her texts about genre creolisation in Serbian cinema. Daković considers creolisation as a kind of upgraded form in comparison to the „pidgin“ *mimicry* of imported genres, the latter being determined by grammatical unperfections, stutterings, or limited dictionary. Nevena Daković, 'Kreolizacija srpske kinematografije: Srpski film i EU integracije,' in Nevena Daković and Mirjana Nikolić (eds.), *Obrazovanje, umetnost i mediji u procesu evropskih integracija*. (Beograd: Fakultet dramskih umetnosti, 2008), pp. 41.

cultures — which help him to determine the image of Petržalka as a kind of Third World located in the heart of the nation.

BRATISLAVAFILM is, however, not the only one, which counts on a double identity of Slovakia's capital, possessing both the meaning of the center and the meaning of a border, crossroad, the threshold of worlds, which differ from the modern notions of Europe. This kind of conceiving of Bratislava is, in fact, a reproduction of a sole, relatively stable ideological layer that appears in most of the contemporary Slovak films dealing with hidden references to undeterminable Slovak identity. We can recognize the layer not only in most of the urban stories but also in images of Eastern Slovakia,<sup>29)</sup> especially in those that appear in feature-length documentaries by the so called "Generation of the 1990s".<sup>30)</sup>

Post-1989 Slovak cinema invents two dominant tropes referring to peripheral positioning of Slovakia within the new world order. Both of them include the meaning of marginality while at the same time reproducing an illusion of a center. Bratislava is, just like the region of Eastern Slovakia, located on the margins of the country. Its double identity of the center and the border is quite logical consequence of its position as a capital, which is, nevertheless, located at the borders with Austria and Hungary. Floating on the river of Danube (this itself might be read as the metaphor / metonymy of the border between Central and Western Europe), Bratislava represents not only the self-sufficient identity of the center of country's government, administrative and culture, but also a border-like place stuck between the East and the West, the (multicultural) past and the (transnational) future.

Thanks to its geographical position, Eastern Slovakia inducts similar meanings of the border, and "thanks" to the huge lack of economical and institutional support from the state, it also inducts meanings of periphery, or even of a godforsaken place. In some Slovak documentaries, however, it plays the role of the center as well: the center in the sense of specific and usually strongly multicultural micro-world that hides the truth about ourselves, a kind of axis mundi, which could connect us with our forgotten past. In Peter Kerekes' 66 SEASONS, the first feature-length documentary after Dušan Hanák's PAPER HEADS, this is particularly obvious. The film presents subjective histories of visitors of communal swimming pool in the capital of Eastern Slovakia, Košice. The swimming pool is exactly a kind of the center of the aforementioned micro-world, which reflects the

29) One of the most recent feature films that confirm this claim is INDIAN SUMMER, the first Slovak feature that, instead of "obligatory" Bratislava, depicts Eastern-Slovak metropole Košice. The film juxtaposes several nationalities (Slovaks, Gypsies, Hungarians) and several distinctive ambients within a criminal plot of revenge, most of them referring to a hybrid yet peripheral nature of the city: the Gypsy prefabricated borough Luník, the 1990s-style underground cafés, and „supramodern“ non-places like fancy shopping centre Aupark.

30) This umbrella term has been proposed by film critic Pavel Branko (Pavel Branko, 'Slovenský dokumentárny film — Generácia '90', *Film.sk*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2004), pp. 22–24.). It was soon embraced by other critics in order to cover up the style of works by Peter Kerekes, Robert Kirchhoff, Juraj Lehotský, Marko Škop, Jaro Vojtek. Most of these directors graduated from Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava during 1990s and already as students started to reevaluate (in a playful but also in a deeply critical manner) both Slovak contemporary identity and its past. They invented many new strategies for encouraging of documentary film industry in situation of the lack of state support. Organizing themselves in their own production companies and, finally, making feature length documentaries intended originally for movie theatres (with attractive narrative elements of fiction or animation film), they actively explore possibilities of gaining the attention of audiences, critics and international film festivals.



diversity of communal life throughout the second half of the 20th century, and becomes the metaphor of the whole country's history.

Osadné village in the film of the same title by Marko Škop, as well as the Šariš region in *OTHER WORLDS* by the same director, share very similar roles of self-centred microworlds located at the margins of Europe. All of the particular places serve as mirrors of the state nation, helping to determine Slovak identity in times of transnationality. *OSADNÉ* is a film about Rusinian community, while in *OTHER WORLDS* six characters of various ethnic identities appear, including a Jewish woman, a Romani and a Rusinian man. Similarly, Jaro Vojtek's *BORDER* is located in a village divided between Slovakia and Ukraine and consisting mostly of members of Hungarian ethnicity.

The mentioned documentaries feature various Eastern Slovakian settings and various ethnical communities (including *66 SEASONS* in which the director presents his own Hungarian grandparents among other respondents of both Slovak and Hungarian nationality). Among the mentioned examples, only *OTHER WORLDS* is more explicitly related to the premise of the hegemony of Slovak identity in the common state. The emphasis on the peripheral and economically underdeveloped parts of the country, and on the multiculturalism / multinationality of the region as well, is one of the consequences of the new, more systematic support of film industry, its production and distribution after 2004 (often provided by European grant commissions and support funds such as Eurimages, or by prestigious European film festivals). The encouragement of European identity, of populist versions of multiculturalism, and of nostalgic images of the old modes of diversity — all of these new phenomena follow the supposed priorities within the rhetorics of European Union, in which Slovakia entered in 2004. On the other hand, the aforementioned documentaries use minority communities and their strong connections with their past as mediators that help to determine the position of Slovakia in new historical and geopolitical circumstances. Eastern Slovakia is, very much like pre-war Bratislava, one of the regions of Slovakia with strong ethnical, religious, and generational diversity. The emergence of two different historical versions of transculturality in the dominant imaginary of Slovak cinema is not accidental. Both versions suggest that cinema of Slovakia is facing a deep inability to determine one's own (national) identity. Eastern Slovakia represents an East of the East, being metonymy of the Slovakia as the Europe's margin. At the same time, it appears as a metaphor, an exemplary micro-world reflecting the complexity of life, history and culture — a nostalgic image of multicultural community living in mutual understanding and peace.<sup>31)</sup> In both senses, Slovakness of this region is often neglected and the state identity is often subordinated to various linguistic, religious or ethnic identities. Thus, we are tempted to imagine Slovak identity as both omnipresent, absent, and *natural* to the extent that it doesn't even need to be named — yet it has to be simultaneously (and neurotically) covered up by identities of the others.

31) In this sense, the nostalgic reminiscence on the old "Pressburgian" (Austro-Hungarian) kind of multinational identity that appear in images of idyllic relation between the heroine and her Hungarian grandmother in *TWO SYLLABLES BEHIND* is not so distant from utopian images of friendly meetings between representants of various ethnic, generational and religious identities in *OTHER WORLDS*.

### Fetishes of the Absent

In this sense, Eastern Slovakia is not only a synecdoche, it is also the metaphor and metonymy of Slovakia as a peripheral country; a country that gives birth only to a traumatized nation in the sense that A. Kiossev gives to the word, emphasising the feeling of absence which makes the starting point of the creation of modern nations at the imaginary margins of Europe.

It means that Slovak identity (as constructed by Slovak cinema) depends on a certain lack that might be compared to the notion of lack in psychoanalysis. The lack on which Slovak identity depends, must be metaphorically *masked* while it still remains metonymically recalled, pointed out, made *present*. In this sense, it has the meaning of the lack in Kiossev's analysis of traumatized cultures (which he also calls self-colonized), as well as the meaning of the lack in Homi K. Bhabha's definition of (racial) stereotypes, elaborated on the basis of Freud's notion of *fetish*:

The process by which the metaphoric 'masking' is inscribed on a lack which must then be concealed gives the stereotype both its fixity and its phantasmatic quality — the *same old* stories of the Negro's animality, the Coolie's inscrutability or the stupidity of the Irish *must* be told (compulsively) again and afresh, and are differently gratifying and terrifying each time.<sup>32)</sup>

The examples I have enumerated till now suggest that the "mute" Slovak identity present itself a kind of lack (within Slovak cinema) which is constantly and neurotically referred to. Its self-centredness doesn't exclude the fact that it can not be defined or is, very often, defined only through relations to the others. The number of films about Romani people<sup>33)</sup> remind us that this cinema has its common, recurrent (but not less exotified) fetish-characters, and that it, just as well, discovers fetish-characters that are temporary or even surprising, like the "fetish" of an old Chinese shoemaker in *TWO SYLLABLES BEHIND*.

But what is even more disturbing is that these living "fetishes" that were intended to cover up the lack of Slovakness, to mask the lack while at the same time reminding one of it (as reminders of the marginal geopolitical position of the country) — these "fetishes" sometimes have more memories than "ourselves." In this sense, even remembrance of one's own Central-Europeaness is actually the memory of someone else's, and the country itself is still depicted as the country with no recollections. The story of Slovak cinema still, with the most remarkable continuity, fits into the story of the traumatized nation — and its ever transforming strategies of masking and reconciliation.

32) Homi K. Bhabha, 'The Other Question. Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism,' in Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London – New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 110–111.

33) I have in mind Martin Šulík's *GYPSY* as well as numerous documentaries from *THE GYPSY HOUSE* by Marko Škop to *BELLS OF HAPPINESS* by Marek Šulík and Jana Bučka.

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## SUMMARY

### **Between the Center and the Margin**

#### *The Notion of Central Europe in Slovak Cinema after 1989*

**Jana Dudková**

The article concentrates on some distinctive modes of negotiation of Slovak identity within (and via) Slovak cinema of the past quarter of the century. Inspired by texts of A. Kiossev, H. K. Bhabha and M. Augé, it proposes a story of contemporary Slovak cinema as the cinema of the lack (of national identity). This lack is both metaphorically masked and metonymically recalled by various treatments of communal memory, and by various references to geopolitical location of the country, while national identity appears as lost between notions of the center and the margin.