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Studies

FORM(ULAT)ING MISTRUST IN THE STATE IN THE 1990s' SLOVAK LIVE-ACTION FILMS

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Abstract: The text deals with the ways in which Slovak live-action films made in the 1990s introduced the topic of mistrust in the State and in its institutions. Using specific examples, the text demonstrates that such mistrust was not primarily a critical attitude, but rather consisted of two basic forms of rejection. On the one hand, live-action films made for cinema often promoted the post-modern principle of a "relative" truth, presenting a lifestyle with minimal ties to the State, sometimes also formulating a mistrust in specific state institutions (the police, state-run artistic institutions, education system) by means of irony. On the other hand, films made for state television frequently drew attention to corruption in state organisations and the fact it was usually being generally accepted as a status that did not need to be analysed. In both cases, the message of the 1990s was carried onto the next millennium, and can eventually be interpreted as a way of solidifying the discourse of mistrust that we perceive in contemporary Slovak film for cinemas and television.
Key words: Slovak film, mistrust, state, idyl

Delay or Regress?

Several film historians share the same opinion that Slovak film after 1989 did not take the road of a brave-enough criticism of the social and political situation, which could have been based on the newly acquired freedom of ideas and speech. According to film historian Václav Macek, on the one hand, the topics that were being developed started to include messages, episodes and sequences "that would had to have been avoided prior to November '89 for political reasons"[1], and, starting already from 1990, thoroughly new and until-then unthinkable topics entered into production. Nevertheless, the first two years following the Velvet Revolution were "marked by the deepening of starting points determined by the creative situation from the end of the previous decade"[2]. Macek draws attention to the absence of a direct, straightforward "revolutionary" anti-communism. Instead, he claims, new films became mere images of the devastating psychological outcomes of the authoritarian regime, with the difference that even though their point of view has intensified, it had already existed before.[3]

[1] MACEK, Václav – PAŠTÉKOVÁ, Jelena. *Dejiny slovenskej kinematografie* [History of Slovak Cinema]. Martin : Osveta, 1997, p. 490. ISBN 80-217-0400-4.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid.

According to the opinion of several film historians, Slovak live-action film first became trapped by the inertia of dramaturgic plans, storytelling styles and topics of the era marked by the perestroika scepticism, and eventually trapped also by a gradual collapse of film industry. For example, certain lagging behind the accelerated pace of those times is also noted by Eva Filová[4], with both authors (Macek and Filová) applying their claims especially to films dealing with the traumatic aspects of the previous regime. Slightly different strategies apply to films about the present, yet, it seems the dominant perception of the Slovak film of the 1990s implies a lack of critical approach. In this sense, Katarína Mišíková repeats Filová's rhetoric of lagging behind and Macek's rhetoric of the regress into the 1980s. She draws attention to the fact that "in comparison with the dynamically changing social climate, Slovak film of the 1990s appears to be thematically unadventurous and stylistically rather traditionalistic. Even though the dictate of money in the market economy brought about an interest in making the stories attractive by means of well-tested genre frameworks like crime, history, comedy or melodrama, or a combination thereof, as well as by means of introducing the iconography of the new era (sex, drugs, crime, advertising), its poetics still lingered in the 1980s: in the better case, by linking up to the civilism of perestroika or the realistic history film, and in the worst case, by employing a stylistically neutral, linear storytelling with a weakly developed story foundation."[5]

From what was mentioned above, it is obvious that at least the academics with ties to The Film and Television Faculty at the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava share the same set of social representations of the post-November Slovak film. The quoted excerpts might create an impression that Slovak live-action film of the 1990s fell short of some expectations from film professionals, critics and historians, which were aimed at a greater degree of criticism – and not only with regard to communism, but also to the transforming present times. While films about the past work most frequently with the consensually accepted idea of anti-communism, but do not need to radicalise their critical edge, films about the present often avoid being unequivocally critical of the social situation and instead, combine psychological diagnostics of a post-socialist man's mental state with iconographic features of the new era, soaked in consumerism, pop-culture, eroticism, various external attributes of the western lifestyle, and so on. This is true not only of the populist films by Dušan Rapoš, but also of debuts by Štefan Semjan, Roman Petrenko and Miroslav Šindelka, as well as of the earliest films by Martin Šulík, and eventually also of a film by the doyen of the Slovak New Wave Juraj Jakubisko, *Lepšie byť bohatý a zdravý ako chudobný a chorý* ([It's Better to Be Wealthy and Healthy than Poor and Ill] 1992).

It is the ambition of this study to demonstrate that references to negative aspects of the transformation of state institutions (e.g. the police, education, state ministries) or public institutions (e.g. radio or television) were present as early as in the first half

[4] FILOVÁ, Eva. Spoločne, každý sám – reflexia minulosti v slovenských a českých filmoch [Together, Everybody on Their Own – A Reflection on the Past in Slovak and Czech Films]. In PTÁČEK, Luboš (ed.). *Současný český a slovenský film – Pluralita estetických, kulturních a ideových konceptů* [Contemporary Czech and Slovak Film – Plurality of the Aesthetic, Cultural and Ideological Concepts] Olomouc : Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci, 2010, p. 89. ISBN 9788024426051.

[5] MIŠÍKOVÁ, Katarína. Znovunájdenie tvorivej slobody? Pokusy o postmoderné rozprávanie v slovenskom hranom filme deväťdesiatych rokov [Rediscovering the Creative Freedom? Attempts at Postmodern Storytelling in Slovak Live-action Film of the 1990s]. In *Kino-Ikon*, 2014, Vol. 18, No. 1, p. 109.

of the 1990s. Almost none of such references can be considered a criticism in itself, if we define criticism as an activity based on an attempt at re-evaluating and aspiring to deliver an in-depth analysis of the problem. Rather than finding criticism, more frequently, we encounter a suggestion of a rejecting attitude, or simply a warning of selected negative aspects. But in spite of this, or perhaps actually because of this, it may seem we can interpret such references as a prelude to the current film image of mistrust in the State, noticeable in the second decade of the new millennium. Thus, it is the goal of this study to draw attention to the connection between the early stage of the post-socialist Slovak film and the contemporary film images of mistrust.

Loss of Certainties

While in the films for cinema the topic of institutional criticism appears only rarely, it is one of the dominant aspects of live-action films for television. However, in these two segments of film production, it performs different functions and has different forms.

For example, several films from the first half of the 1990s draws attention to the issues of economic decline, increasing unemployment and ageing population at the edge of poverty. This issue is highlighted in films made as early as around 1992 by both the younger and the older generations of filmmakers in the works made for cinema and TV alike. The main protagonist of the television film *Adam a Anna* ([Adam and Anna] 1992) by Zoro Laurinc is an unemployed former actress, taking care of her grandson abandoned by his parents. Martin Šulík's second film *Všetko čo mám rád* ([Everything I Like] 1992*)* features an episode inter-textually entitled "A Little Picture from the Old World" (paraphrasing the title of Dušan Hanák's banned 1972 film *Obrazy starého sveta* [Pictures of the Old World], with a documentary-style monologue by an elderly woman traumatised by the post-socialist change in life values. Juraj Jakubisko's *It's Better to Be Wealthy and Healthy than Poor and Ill*, another 1992 film, also responds to the problem of looming poverty. Its protagonists are two women who, after being disappointed by men, and as one of them becomes pregnant, try to get rich at all costs (even illegally). However, their desire is confronted with a variation on a motive of the biblical "birds of the air" – beings who do not work, yet, their livelihood is somehow taken care of. This motive is represented by the character of an old woman, a former nun living in the neighbourhood of the two main characters.

While the elderly woman from the TV film *Adam and Anna* is the main protagonist through whom we learn about a whole range of social problems (including unemployment, ageing, the threat of poverty, the breakup of a traditional family, increased criminality on the streets, and a high-level political corruption, the "entertainment" of TV, as well as a lack of interest in culture, e.g. problems often explicitly verbalised in characters' lines), in the films by Šulík and Jakubisko, the characters of the elderly women are portrayed merely as tragicomic, episodic figures who spice-up the central stories with the elements of the bizarre. And not only that. Jakubisko's character of sister Margita is actually associated with introducing carnivalesque poetics into the storytelling that not only belittles the issue of poverty and the ageing population, which the State is unable to take care of, but even shifts it towards the boundary between dream and reality.

On the other hand, in both films – in *Everything I Like* and *It's Better to Be Wealthy and Healthy than Poor and Ill* – the issue of poverty and the ageing population is more complex. For both directors, the characters of ageing women represent an important link to the context of authorial film of the Slovak New Wave. By her recurrent biblical quotes and paraphrases, Jakubisko's Margita reminds us of the parables of freedom in Havetta's *Ľalie poľné* ([Field Lilies] 1972), but more importantly, in Jakubisko's films of the late 1960s. For example, the biblical motive of the "birds of the air" appears already in his *Vtáčkovia, siroty a blázni* ([Birds, Orphans and Fools] 1969), where it is embodied by the characters of three young wartime orphans. This time, the motive is alluded to by Margita through direct paraphrases. She lives surrounded by cats whom she calls "tomcats of the air", those who "do not sow or reap, and yet, their heavenly Father feeds them".[6] Such inter-textual connections help confront the perception of individual social phenomena in the former socialist world, as well as in the present times. In *The Pictures of the Old World*, Hanák captured the world of poverty, physical degradation, even physical disability – however, the determining features of his film are humility, faith and a positive thinking of protagonists. On the contrary, the leitmotif of Šulík's films is the loss of faith. The angry old woman from "A Little Picture from the Old World" segment is also one of the indicators of the lack of faith, which is characteristic of the main protagonist of *Everything I Like*.

At the same time, in both films the characters of old women perceive themselves within the context of taking away the sins of younger generations. Jakubisko's good-hearted Margita, unable to reconcile with her alleged stigma (she was raped at a time of the after-war communist anarchy when she was a young girl), eventually decides to devote her life to praying for the sins of her close ones. She helps two main characters with her prescience and a positive attitude to life, merging Christian faith with the esoteric approaches of astrology and Eastern religions (thus creating a doubling effect, when the esoteric hobbies of her character correspond with the real-life hobbies of Vilma Jamnická, the famous Slovak actress rendering her). Margita's opposite is the angry grandmother in Šulík's film – turning into the wrath of God, threatening her conpatriots with Sodom and Gomorrah: "Sodom and Gomorrah upon you, for you do nothing but fornicate. All sins fall on me [...] you all lecher, but the soul – the soul is squealing!"[7]

In *Everything I Like*, the topics that are dominant for Jakubisko are only sidelined, yet, they are present in comments of the angry lady from "A Little Picture from the Old World" episode. Along with the topic of ageing population's exclusion, they also include the topics of the consumerism, a sudden increase in the eroticism in the public domain, or of growing aggression, which is in both films associated with the fear of poverty. In the end of the episode, the old woman screams: "I have nothing to eat, and all you do is fornicate [...] Shame! Shame to live here!"[8] In a similar vein, after Nona and her Moravian friend Ester from Jakubisko's film are driven away from

[6] "*It's Better to Be Wealthy and Healthy than Poor and Ill.*" [citation from the film]. The same is being promised to the future child of main protagonist Nona, who is attempting to have a miscarriage out of fear of hunger: "When God gives a lamb, He also gives a pasture for it" ("keď Boh dá baránka, dá preňho aj pašu").

[7] "Sodomu Gomoru na vás, lebo nič nerobíte, iba smilníte. Všetky hriechy padajú na mňa [...] všetci obcujete, ale duša nič – duša piští!" *Everything I Like*. [citation from the film].

[8] "Nemám čo jesť, a vy len smilníte [...] Hanba! Hanba tu žiť!" Ibid.

a hairdresser's as traitors of the nation, the former explains the situation by saying that "people are aggressive just like animals when they are afraid."[9] "And what are they afraid of?" asks Ester. "Perhaps of poverty, that's what everyone is afraid of."[10]

In his film, Jakubisko is highlighting the contrast between Margita's reconciliation with her fate and the conscious rebellion of Nona and Ester, who are dealing with their disappointment in their politically active lovers by resigning to the political events of the highly politicised era of the early 1990s, as well as by exploiting two traditional archetypes of women – the saint and the whore – against men, in their attempts to make money by selling sacred (and later erotic) pictures, and eventually also by seducing and robbing men who believe they are prostitutes. While in Jakubisko's films from the 1960s, the motive of "birdies, orphans and fools" was linked up with a search for freedom in a society full of reprisal, here it enters into a context of a chaotic era of transition that brought about – along with political freedom – also the loss of existential certainties. An external manifestation of the changing times lies in a typically decadent iconography with emphasis on illegal trade with arms, eroticism or video technology.

Away from the State

Thus, *It's Better to Be Wealthy and Healthy than Poor and Ill* is a film that does not take a critical stance towards state institutions. It focuses on the rare moment of transformation of the country that is embarking on a post-revolutionary road to its new statehood. In other words, it portrays the process of the political preparation of the breakup of Czechoslovakia into two autonomous states. Therefore, instead of criticising the existing institutions, its characters simply distance themselves from the State, and they do so at various levels: they let go their ties to high politics and the men who represent it; they live permanently on the run from the law and from the police, occasionally also resorting to diversionist activities (e.g. when they help a young Vietnamese boy avoid being deported from the country). Their distance from the State is also indicated by the fact that the main characters do not work (and most probably do not pay their taxes), but live literally off selling their beauty, convinced they are just taking back what men had stolen from them before. Their ignorance of the State is also suggested by the fact they cross borders at will, freely moving from Bratislava to Vienna, from Vienna to Prague, and from Prague back to Bratislava. They reject the State as it used to be under communism, as it became after the revolution, and also as the one it is becoming. It is under the pressure of nationalistic rhetoric and the hatred of the Czechs that makes Nona contemplate emigration.

In *Everything I Like*, numerous allusions put male passivity and hesitation in the context of a sceptical attitude to new possibilities, institutions and certainties, accompanied by the loss of faith in the old ones. The protagonist with the biblical name Tomáš (Thomas) faces a dilemma whether or not to follow his English lover to her home country and to leave behind his parents, his ex-wife and his son. The paradox of his dilemma is that his family has broken apart and he has very little in common with individual family members; despite that he decides to stay. In the film,

[9] "Ľudia sú agresívni ako zvieratá, keď majú strach." Ibid.
[10] "A čeho se bojí?" – "Možno chudoby, tej sa bojí každý." Ibid.

his decision-making process is represented by seemingly unrelated episodes (a total of 21), most of which consist of indirect comments on Tomáš's dilemma, but which also represent a list of items he likes, of the things that help him keep ties with his home or country. As far as his beloved ones are concerned, Tomáš's list is topped by his lover (as early as in the second episode, which is aptly titled "Fasting" and which ends up with Tomáš's sexually ambivalent decision to start fasting). This is followed by the fourth episode "Son", the sixth episode "A Woman with Matches", and the eighth episode entitled "Father", in which we gradually get to know the son who is just entering his adolescence, the hysterical ex-wife unhappy with her new lover, and the stubborn parent. Following the list of his "beloved" ones are the portrayals of Tomáš's ties to his home country. In the tenth episode "Something taken from Joyce", Tomáš sings the Slovak national anthem, in the thirteenth episode "Journey to the Centre of Europe", his foreign lover Ann learns from a stranger she is just standing in the centre of the continent ("This is the heart of Europe, my dear").[11] Tomáš's parents and their absurd emphasis on dysfunctional family traditions are presented in the fourteenth and fifteenth episodes ("Wedding Anniversary" and "Photographing Inhabitants of a House").

Despite the broken relations and ironically portrayed ties, by means of individual episodes, the chronology of Tomáš's gradual acceptance of his family and of his home country, as well as of the gradual, yet incomprehensible distancing from his lover, is outlined. In two specific episodes, his decisions and attitudes are explained. Both episodes feature the famous Slovak writer Rudolf Sloboda (1938 – 1995). In the first of the episodes, right after the portrayal of his ties to his ex-wife whose verbal expressions are conceived as a funny series of mutually contradicting statements, Sloboda comments on contradiction as the fundament of the world. His speech (in the seventh episode "World according to Hegel") anticipates why Tomáš resigns to the continuing misunderstandings with his ex-wife. And later, in the seventeenth episode "Thoreau, Kant, Goethe and Others (Interview with the Writer)", Tomáš's final decision is foreshadowed, when Sloboda says: "I'm not the only one who is not travelling, and who even has a theory that [...] travelling is harmful."[12]

In the end, Tomáš stays at home, "faithful" to his country and to his family, but only as a result of his indolence, of an attempt to act responsibly with regard to his son, as well as of his sceptical attitude towards the benefits of emigration. His ties to his family or to the country have been questioned. His attempts to communicate with his son are interrupted by "empty" images – ornaments from a kaleidoscope. Especially the dialogues – but also the relations between the titles of the individual episodes and their content – are dominated by the elements of the absurd and of irony, of contradiction, counterpoints and euphemisms, sometimes, having the nature of inter-textual references.[13] The storytelling focuses on the topic of the multiplication of interpretations, both on the level of alternating the episode titles, as well as at the level of their actual content. For example, the "Journey to the Centre of Europe" (paraphrasing the title of Verne's novel) begins with a shot of Tomáš's son washing

[11] "Tu je stred Európy, moja zlatá." Ibid.

[12] "Nie som ja jediný, ktorý necestuje, a ktorý má dokonca teóriu, že [...] cestovanie je škodlivé." Ibid.

[13] E.g. references to titles of other works, ranging from stories for children, through adventure novels, to works of Slovak and world cinema ["A Woman with Matches", "Sunrise", "Journey to the Centre of Europe"].

his T-shirt in the nearby river. Within the context of one of the preceding episodes (the episode "Son"), we know this activity is a consequence of his recurring nausea during the trips with his father and his lover. The rest of the episode is also a rather ironic variation on the adventurous nature of Verne's novel: it features a conflict with his father´s lover, getting lost in a forest, and Ann's conversation with a local man who does not understand her. In this film, the ironical point of view is also applied to the father's authority, family cohesion, the permanence of marriage, or the feasibility of mutual understanding between men and women, the comprehensibility of one's native language, the relationship between parents and children (based on repetitive behaviour), national anthem, Christian faith, the country's geopolitical location (in the "centre of Europe"), or even the will to learn.

All of these areas are not only symbols representing home, but also State. The combination of ironic and sceptical points of view is drawing attention to the disruption or outright breakdown of the traditional means and institutions through which the State controlled its citizens, but through which it also satisfied their basic human needs. Tomáš's family has disintegrated much like the former state, the ties to his adolescent son as well as to his faithful parents have been broken just like the trust in Slovak myth. On the other hand, even though Tomáš's singing of the national anthem is ironic, it still represents an act of defining himself as being different from his non-Slovak lover. The irony in Šulík's films can be understood in accordance with Slavoj Žižek: as a contrast to cynicism, and thus also as the lingering affection hidden under the mask of rejection.[14] This irony is not negation, but rather a kind of acceptance of that which is being ironized.

In the film, state institutions were not subject to criticism either. Tomáš is, like many other characters of the films of the 1990s, unemployed, he does not act responsibly towards his broken family, and ultimately lives without direct ties to the State. His rejection of the way in which the State operates is suggested only in one episode, "A Little Picture from the Old World", which can be interpreted as a comment to the State's (in)ability to cater to the needs of its socially disadvantaged citizens. At the same time, the topic of rejecting state institutions is formulated more clearly in two other episodes covering state schools. Similarly to Šulík's debut *Neha* (*Tenderness*, 1991), the motive of mistrust in the education system and the traditional ways of preparing young people for their future lives is being voiced. In *Tenderness*, the protagonist leaves his parents' home to study; however, instead of attending lectures, we see him meaninglessly repeating English words or even attempt to commit suicide.

In *Everything I Like*, Šulík returns to the topic of learning – not only to learn a foreign language, but also to learn to play a musical instrument. Yet again, learning is presented as a meaningless activity causing revulsion, with the positions of the teacher and the pupil not properly determined. We can see this as early as in the second episode "Fasting", in the beginning of which Tomáš attempts to rape his English teacher. From the context, it later becomes clear that Tomáš and Ann have been engaging in an intimate relationship for some time now, nevertheless, a clumsy rape attempt mirrors their constant language misunderstandings. At one point, Tomáš even

[14] ŽIŽEK, Slavoj. *Metastaze uživanja*. Beograd : Biblioteka XX, 1996, p. 136. ISBN 86-81493-25-6. For more on this topic in films by Martin Šulík see DUDKOVÁ, Jana. Between the Center and the Margin: the Notion of Central Europe in Slovak Cinema after 1989. In *Iluminace*, 2013, Vol. 25, No. 4, p. 83.

protests, saying he is Slovak and refuses to speak English. In the end, he concludes the entire incident with an ambiguous statement, saying he "doesn't have to eat at all" (the episode works as a marker that starts Tomáš's fasting, which is concluded only at the very end of the film when his lover leaves for London, and which symbolises not only refusing food but also sexual abstinence or even the rejection of new information).

As far as the institution of the classic state school is concerned, it is symptomatic that none of the mentioned films actually features state school teachers. *Everything I Like* is framed by two episodes in which Tomáš attempts to adopt a fatherly initiative and supervise his son's studies at the conservatory: the first time in the "Son" episode, when he finds his son climbing onto the window sills in an empty classroom instead of exercising; the second time in the final episode, when he decides to test his son's skills in playing musical instrument, which he was graded an F. However, the father cannot sing, the son cannot play – yet, they eventually reach a point at which they find a way to understand each other and the film ends with a metaphor of intergenerational harmony, with son playing a melody they both pretended was the one that Tomáš requested. Here, one of the films' dominant themes, that of mirroring behaviour and attitudes between parents and children reaches its climax with the demonstration of mutual mistrust in the sense of education as a kind of investing in the future.

Escape from Institutions

The image of the 1990s as a period of lost certainties is also reflected in several other films, namely those made by filmmakers debuting in the 1980s and 1990s. Roman Petrenko's debut *Hazard* (1995) draws attention to the problem of rising crime levels in the country and the perils of the decadent western values (e.g. prostitution) threatening unwary young people. The iconography of the western decadence is an important part of all three films from the 1990s made by a 1984 debutant Dušan Rapoš: *Fontána pre Zuzanu 2* ([A Fountain for Suzanne 2] 1993), *Suzanne* (1996), and *Fontána pre Zuzanu 3* ([A Fountain for Suzanne 3] 1999). They portray the pitfalls of drug addiction (*Suzanne*), the emphasis on rock and pop culture (both *A Fountain for Suzanne 2* and *Suzanne*), or account of an exotic trip to Africa (*A Fountain for Suzanne 3*), but always in combination with a parallel story of testing the bonds of partnership or friendship, which is permanently jeopardised in the new post-socialist era. In way similar to *Everything I Like*, or, *It's Better to Be Wealthy and Healthy than Poor and Ill*, these films are less critical of authorities or state institutions, focusing more on the need to break free from them. A similar concern over the crisis of faithfulness combined with a sceptical attitude and rejection of being limited by the authorities or institutions is present in the first three debuts from 1990 – 1991: *Okresné blues* ([District Blues] 1990, dir. Juraj Bindzár), *R.S.C.* (1990, dir. Martin Valent), and the already mentioned *Tenderness* by Martin Šulík.

A more direct link between the mocking of state institutions as dysfunctional, literally "museum" relics, and the desire for freedom is only present in Štefan Semjan's debut *Na krásnom modrom Dunaji* ([On the Beautiful Blue Danube] 1994). In the beginning of the film, Andy Warhol's painting is stolen from the Slovak National Gallery (abbr. SNG), and a chase between the police and the supposed thieves ensues;

however, the three friends playing thieves are never apprehended – even though besides their first, staged picture theft, intended to blur the traces of the real thieves, they regularly steal cars or even a trolleybus.

By means of references to Andy Warhol's popism, the film relativises the hierarchy between the original and the copy. In their own turn, the film's characters ignore the pious function of various monuments and memorials (the Slavín War Memorial to the fallen Soviet soldiers, the Slovak National Uprising Bridge with an architectonic recollection of socialist modernism, U.F.O.-shaped restaurant atop, etc.). And, finally, the way in which the criminal plot is established suggests the incompetence of state institutions (both SNG and the police) to protect cultural values.

Nevertheless, again the dysfunctionality of state institutions is not the main topic of the film. It rather focuses on the way of life detached from these institutions, and even based on their ridicule or outright rejection. But even more on the concept of conscious doubling of reality. The protagonists take interest in psychotropic substances, taunt the concept of conscious blinding, mock the police or the loving lovers, but in the end, they also enjoy letting themselves be fooled, i.e. at a circus, where they get just a slap across their eyes with a wet rag instead of a promised circus attraction: "You'll see what you've never seen before, experience what you've never experienced before."[15]

Similarly to Jakubisko's *It's Better to Be Wealthy and Healthy than Poor and Ill*, or the earliest films by Martin Šulík, *On the Beautiful Blue Danube* also draws from the references to the Slovak New Wave (especially Jakubisko's *Birds, Orphans and Fools*), but also from the films by Jim Jarmusch. The common feature of both inspirations is focus on characters who refuse to be tied by the orderly life of the obedient, working and family-focused citizens. Similarly, Semjan's protagonists are not only unemployed and baffle the police by staging a fake theft, they also refuse long-term partnerships. Much like Jakubisko's foolish orphans, they set off on a journey of vagabond lives based on merry performances, by means of which they prove to themselves as well as to others the end of their faith in the one-and-only truth.

The films for cinema from the first half of the 1990s dealing with the present only rarely use direct or indirect criticism of state institutions. Instead, what we observe in them is a gradual replacement of the scepticism of perestroika with the principles of post-modern relativisation of truth in their storytelling and values.[16] On the other hand, films made in this period both for television and cinema regularly draw attention to the crisis of proxy institutions, of the modern nuclear family, or of what is imprecisely regarded as the traditional way of life. At a time of political struggle for power shortly after the fall of communism, Slovak film avoids any and all signs of faith in a constructive solution to the new state establishment. As a result, it eventually prepares ground for contemporary images of mistrust in State. The fact that such mistrust can be implied directly by a double-coded image of avoiding the "State" is apparent e.g. from Miroslav Šindelka's debut *Vášnivý bozk* ([Passionate Kiss] 1994).

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[15] "Uvidíte, čo ste ešte nevideli, zažijete, čo ste ešte nezažili." *On the Beautiful Blue Danube*. [citation from the film].

[16] For more on postmodern storytelling strategies, see MIŠÍKOVÁ, Katarína. Znovunájdenie tvorivej slobody? Pokusy o postmoderné rozprávanie v slovenskom hranom filme deväťdesiatych rokov. Ibid, pp. 106 – 118.

The film ends with the symbol of a heteronormative kiss that used to conclude classical film melodramas, implying a fairy-tale certainty of marriage. However, it is an example of a typical post-modern irony. The kiss is not a reference to the reality the characters live, but rather to the institution of cinema. It is a mere imitation of a fictitious realm of the film; at the same time, it takes place right before the entrance to a local cinema (the big "film-like" close-up of a "kiss of reconciliation" is followed by an electroshock blow to the unfaithful partner, after which a camera pan reveals the title above the couple, literally reading "Kino" – "Cinema").

The topic of *Passionate Kiss* is the breakup of marriage and the crisis of female identity, caused by the husband's infidelity. In a way, it stands as a female pendant to Šulík's *Everything I Like*. In both cases, the storytelling is determined by the crisis of personal identity and the dilemma of main protagonists, who lost their faith in mutual understanding between women and men, and in marriage as a guarantee of content and socially valuable civil life. In both cases, we also encounter a similar image of male identity determined by a propensity to be irresponsible and to escape from reality (however, the protagonist of *Passionate Kiss* runs away from law, which is suggested by his contacts with the "underworld", as well as by the fact that both Czech-speaking and urban-dressed characters found themselves in a medieval Slovak mining town,[17] which at first seem to be a vacation point, but, apparently serves just as a transit station from where they intend to flee further).

However, in the case of *Passionate Kiss*, the female protagonist is confronted with someone else: with some kind of "doppelgangers of the State", hidden from the eyes of the public. On the one hand, it is literally an underground world of prostitution and crime thriving in the abandoned mining shafts, on the other hand, it is a world of the past, featuring a reminder of the Holocaust (the esoteric line of the plot suggesting the protagonist is a kind of reincarnation or a doppelganger of a Jewish woman who had died under mysterious circumstances while fleeing from German guards). These doppelganger forms of the State actually create a metaphor reference to the political events in the country: the rising crime in a country of transformation, often connected with the criminalisation of political elites, as well as with making its anti-Semitic or even fascist past a taboo.[18] By means of employing the motive of repeating fates, we also discover reference to the female emancipation as a paradoxical form of escape from society, which still continues to be the society of men: if, as it is suggested, both past and present men continue to symbolically abandon or betray their children and spouses, then female emancipation rests in the return to the role

[17] The films was shot mostly on the locations in Banská Štiavnica, a medieval mining town which was often used also as a vacation place by filmmakers. The mining history of the town was used to suggest various meanings of the "underground" (as a parable of unconsciousness, collective past, but also criminal activities).

[18] The film was produced during the break up of Czechoslovakia and tries to avoid direct definition of Slovakia as the setting of the story. Moreover, two of its main protagonists speak Czech, which further obscures the state to which the film alludes. However, the reference to "German patrols" is complemented by the fleeing couple being shot at during their attempt to escape across the Danube River. Thus, it can be interpreted as a relatively direct reference to the wartime Slovak Republic, infamously known for its deportation of Jews, while the Danube represents the border with Hungary, where Jews were safe for a short while longer. Slovak setting is referenced also by several visual and acoustic symbols. At the same time, the nature of the State can still be interpreted as a reference to the post-socialist Czechoslovakia, where presence of Czechs on Slovak territory is perceived as natural.

of mother. The film's ending creates a reference to the idyllic realm of Slovak countryside, presenting not the model of a couple in love that we know from classical melodramas, but rather the protagonist's re-unification with her disabled son. Thus, the dilemma of a woman who abandoned her child ends by her abandoning the unfaithful partner, which, nevertheless, also establishes a symbolic reconciliation with the nation's past.[19]

In a similar way, i.e. by using the metaphor of a de-sexualised idyl, which in this case can be interpreted as a clear metaphor of Slovakia, Martin Šulík dealt with the political situation in the country one year later in his third film *Záhrada* ([The Garden] 1995). Undoubtedly, it is one of the most influential films in the history of Slovak cinema. It is here where the process of reconciliation with the chaotic transformation reaches its apex. In previous examples, the protagonists lived in the proximity of the State, however, a state which was unstable, without a clear identity and direction. This lack of stability and direction was also evident in the choice of interactions that hinted at the presence of the State. These included (the invisible, absent, senseless and perhaps dysfunctional) education system, (incompetent) police, but also the cultural institutions like public television in *Adam and Anna* and national gallery in *On the Beautiful Blue Danube* (unable to protect cultural heritage). Even though some of the films made during the first half of the 1990s avoid focusing on public institutions, they at least feature protagonists as being limited by other (unstable) institutions, which are, due to their nature, controlled directly or indirectly by the State: by marriage bonds, by parental and especially fatherly authority. In all cases, the State is in constant process of change, devoid of clear identity – including the national one. That is also the reason why some films draw attention to the unstable relationship between the national and state identity by means of national symbols (e.g. singing the national anthem in *Everything I Like*, or the ubiquitous national flags in *It's Better to Be Wealthy and Healthy than Poor and Ill*). Thus, mistrust in the State works at two levels: the level of institutions that are directly or indirectly controlled by the State, and the level of Slovak identity, not only the cultural or ethnical, but also aspiring to the state identity, interconnected with state symbols.

The independent Slovak Republic was established in 1993, and the majority of aforementioned films can be interpreted as comments on the situation leading up to this event, or to those that followed: the rise of nationalism, Czecho-Slovak political tensions, and a subsequent political isolation of the country. In *The Garden*, nevertheless, the world of interaction between the State and society disappears. Most of its storytelling is linked to the idyllic realm of the garden, for which the key aspect is its resignation to the actuality of social bonds (including sexual relations

[19] The "reincarnation" plot-line suggests that even the character of the mysterious Jewish man (to whom the protagonist resembles his dead wife Ester) was symbolically unfaithful to his family. Despite the disapproval of the wife, the couple left their three-year-old son with their friends ("there was no other option") and attempt to flee the country. During the attempt, the woman was shot and drowned in the river. Her husband survived, filled with guilt he was not able to save his family. Since the protagonist suffers nightmares about drowning, she immediately starts to imagine she is a reincarnation of Ester, who – as she believes – was still alive before she fell into the river. In order to fight her dead Jewish double's guilt, she decides to follow her motherly calling. She leaves her unfaithful partner and returns to her son, "stowed away" with an elderly couple living in countryside.

and marriage).[20] The film's protagonist escapes from the authority of both the State (quitting the job of a high school professor) and his father, moves to the garden of his passed away grandfather, and establishes a symbolical dialogue with the Slovak enlightenment authors, such as Juraj Fándly and Jozef Ignác Bajza, referring constantly to the myth of building and cultivating a nation as a garden.[21] In this fashion, *The Garden* underpins the necessity to separate personal, as well as cultural (national) identity from the State.

At the same time, *The Garden* foreshadows the basic model that will be used in the coming years by Slovak cinema to come to terms with Vladimír Mečiar's authoritarian regime (1992 – 1998, with a short pause in 1994) – by means of the model of an allegoric parable. For example, the parable of an abuse of power is offered in Vladimír Balco's *Rivers of Babylon* (1998), and the parable of the country's political isolation in Šulík's films *Orbis Pictus* (1997) and *Krajinka* ([Landscape] 2000). Specific transformation of the idyllic realm of the garden gives rise to the heterotopic realms of millennial films: on the one hand, this represents a response to a series of films taking place in the seclusion of Slovak countryside[22], on the other hand, this comes as a continuation of a symbolic gesture of these films in relation to contemporary social events. In other words, the majority of millennial films dealing with the present portray characters who have decided to live independently of the State, ignoring political events and social problems of ordinary citizens.

For example, the story of *Vadí nevadí* ([Truth or Dare] 2001, dir. Eva Borušovičová) takes place primarily in the night bars of Bratislava's Old Town and in the premises of an independent radio station symbolically called "Europe". It does not criticise the State directly, yet, it portrays the dark side of its transitional era: in the same space (and often, in mutual dependence relationships and failed escapes from one another), students, artists, radio presenters keep bumping into both criminals and tired policemen, who are more concerned about their retirement than performing their duties. *Ženy môjho muža* ([My Husband's Women] 2009, dir. Ivan Vojnár) feature a hypermodern space of a television studio; *O dve slabiky pozadu* ([Two Syllables Behind] 2004, dir. Katarína Šulajová), start in a studio for television dubbing. The premises alluding to the showbusiness and advertising industries, art galleries (in *Two Syllables Behind*, as well as in *Polčas rozpadu*, [Half-Life] 2007, dir. Vladimír Fischer), bars and cafes of the capital centre, suggest not only the detachment of independent arts but also of the hyper modern lifestyle of showbusiness elites from current political cases and social issues, as well as from the State.

During the same period, films made for television took a different path. Here, the criticism of state institutions was especially patent in the early 1990s, and it was often

[20] For more on the specific chronotope of the garden in the eponymous film by Martin Šulík, refer to ZUSKA, Vlastimil. Topos zahrady v „Zahradě" a jeho časoznakové implikace [Topos of the Garden in the Garden and its Time-Sign Implications]. In BRÁZDA, Marián (ed.). *Svet v pohyblivých obrazoch Martina Šulíka* [The World in the Moving Pictures of Martin Šulík]. Bratislava : Slovenský filmový ústav, 2000, pp. 122 – 147.

[21] For more on the topic of dialogue with Slovak enlightenment authors, but also with the authors of the western modern thinking (Rousseau, Wittgenstein, Spinoza), see GINDL-TATÁROVÁ, Zuzana. The Garden. In: HAMES, Peter (ed.): *The Cinema of Central Europe*. London – New York : Wallflower Press, 2004, pp. 245 – 253.

[22] Along with *The Garden*, *Orbis Pictus* and *Landscape*, this also applies to inter-generational family dramas such as *Modré z neba* [Blue Heaven] 1997, dir. Eva Borušovičová) or *Quartétto* (2002, dir. Laura Siváková).

linked up with the criticism of the entertainment industry. Zoro Laurinc's *Adam and Anna* aptly demonstrates the socio-political crisis. A simple story about preparing Christmas celebration for a grandson includes bitter comments on ministers, pronounced occasionally by some characters, but also references to unemployment, poverty, rising crime, indifference of the police, or even the replacement of original artistic TV production with such entertainment formats as quiz shows. It even features a comment on the breakup of the traditional nuclear family: the mother emigrates (and does not intend to return even though the borders have opened up), the whereabouts of the father are unknown, and thus the grandson is brought up by his grandmother, up until recently a star of TV films who suddenly faces existential problems, since due to the public television's shift to more entertaining formats, she loses her job.

The film *Adam and Anna* corresponds with the trend of conservative family psychological dramas,[23] which is one of the most stable genres in the history of Slovak television. After 1989, it was a type of film to have most frequently alerted to the crises of fidelity, of nuclear family, of rising crime, and also of state institutions, such as the education system or the state-supported science (the latter is used as one of the secondary themes of *Čajová šálka lásky* ([A Teacup of Love] 2000, dir. Pavol Gejdoš, Jr.). In contrast with films about the past – which often take on the form of romanticised biopics and stories – TV films about the present focus much more systematically on the negative aspects of the transformation of a post-socialistic society. This is partly due to the different, yet quite stable role that is attributed to public television (in contrast with cinema, which was more-or-less just searching for its dominant social role during the past quarter-century). Television production does not have to limit itself so much with attempts to represent the country on festivals, or to attract domestic audience and "make a profit." Rather, based on a public debate on the social functions of television taking part in the energetic transitional era of the early 1990s, it most often attempts to represent or offer lasting cultural values, to be more accessible to a wide range of age and social background audiences, and to reflect on the contemporary social issues. Such priorities that were intuitively adopted by a feature-length television production during the whole late- and post-socialist period, were finally enshrined in the wording of the preamble to the so-called Contract with the State in 2010.[24]

For the sake of representativeness, television production often avoided experiments and observed conservative values and narrative principles. After its legal stabilisation by the aforementioned Contract, the two more dynamic series appeared in 2010 and 2011: *Nesmrteľní* [Immortals] and *Filmoviedky* [Film-Stories]. The scrupulously fulfilled priorities of TV production (to reflect on contemporary social issues),

[23] For more on tendencies and genres of Slovak live-action TV films made after 1989, see: DUDKOVÁ, Jana. Slovak Television Film after 1989: Between Social Drama and Popular Genres. In *Slovenské divadlo*, 2015, Vol. 63, special issue, pp. 61 – 72; also DUDKOVÁ, Jana. One Myth, Two Paths: The Slovak Television Film after 1989 Seen through the Narrative on Contemporary Slovak Cinema. In DUDKOVÁ, Jana – MIŠÍKOVÁ, Katarína (eds.). *Transformation Processes in Post-Socialist Screen Media*. Bratislava : Filmová a televízna fakulta VŠMU – Ústav divadelnej a filmovej vedy SAV, 2016, pp. 37 – 59. ISBN 978-80-8195-008-7. The following claims are based on these two texts.

[24] Contract MK No. 77/09/M on contents, goals and provision of public services in the area of television broadcasting for years 2010-2014. Available at http://www.rtvs.org/o-rtvs/dolezite-dokumenty-rtvs/zmluva-so-statom.

are reflected in the fact that most episodes of both series draw attention to the incompetence of the State (or regional) administration. Corruption at the level of regional administration is highlighted in the film *Kontrola* ([Control] 2010, dir. Viktor Csudai); corruption in health-care is portrayed in *Ema B.* (2010, dir. Laco Halama); criminality, violence against the socially disadvantaged, great social differences and homelessness are featured in *Nočný trezor* ([The Night Deposit] 2010, dir. Karol Vosátko). The series were preceded by other examples of social and state criticism, for example, the issue of unemployment was already raised in *Zima kúzelníkov* ([The Magicians' Winter] 2006, dir. Dušan Trančík). Thus, television films of the early 2010s return to formulating mistrust in the State, which was characteristic especially for TV production of the early 1990s.[25] This happens largely through encouraging mistrust in specific state or public institutions and mechanisms. It is more about presenting a certain social consensus rather than about an attempt to support critical or analytical thinking.

However, building consensus regarding the mistrust in the State, when such mistrust is neither questioned nor analysed in the light of specific historical contexts, eventually establishes a dominant part of the discourse. In the films made in the past five years, such a discourse has become the foundation of a film mosaic of mistrust built on conspiratorial narratives (e.g. *Kandidát* – ([Candidate] 2012, dir. Jonáš Karásek; *Červený kapitán* [The Red Captain] 2016, dir. Michal Kollár), followed by political and biographic documentaries (e.g. *Od Fica do Fica* [From Fico to Fico] 2013, dir. Zuzana Piussi; *Arcibiskup Bezák zbohom…* [Farewell, Archbishop Bezák…] 2014, dir. Oľga Záblacká; *Anton Srholec*, 2015, dir. Alena Čermáková). Another noticeable tendency focuses on the outcasts of society, and eventually results in an explicit condemnation of the State in certain social dramas (e.g. *Pirko* – [A Little Feather] 2016, dir. Lucia and Petr Klein Svoboda). Nevertheless, analysis of the contemporary mosaic of films focusing on the mistrust of the State is a topic for separate study.

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[25] For mistrust in the state in TV films during the first half of the 1990s, see more in DUDKOVÁ, Jana. One Myth, Two Paths: The Slovak Television Film after 1989.