

## CONTEMPORARY SLOVAK FILM AS A NARRATIVE OF RESURRECTION

MIŠÍKOVÁ, Katarína – FERENČUHOVÁ, Mária (eds.). *Nový slovenský film. Produkčné, estetické, distribučné a kritické východiská* [New Slovak Film. Production, Aesthetic, Distribution and Critical Foundations]. Bratislava : Academy of Performing Arts, 2015. 161 pages. ISBN 978-80-89439-91-1.

Within the realm of Slovak film studies, the New Slovak Film publication is a rather unusual phenomenon. Rarely is a book published in our country that covers such recent period as the one spanning from the foundation of the Slovak Audiovisual Fund until the present day (i.e. 2010 –2015). However, this reflection is legitimate: there is a marked difference in both quantity and quality of Slovak films produced before and after 2010. The foundation of the Slovak Audiovisual Fund and related systematic state support for film industry brought about dramatic changes in production, aesthetic, distribution and critical areas of Slovak cinema. And thus, it is again possible to speak of a genuinely contemporary Slovak film, more over in the light of a shorter time period. This “narrative of resurrection” is also employed by six authors whose publication examines six different areas of Slovak cinema: live-action film (Katarína Mišíková), documentary film (Mária Ferenčuhová), animated film (Eva Šošková), student film (Žofia Bosáková), distribution (Eva Križková), and critique (Václav Macek).

However, several research related problems crop up when dealing with a publication of such structure. Since the researchers work with a constantly mutating discourse, what is necessary along with a thorough analysis of the chosen topic is also understanding of what is most important, together with the ability to predict future development. As a result, its individual chapters differ not only in their ability to be enumerative and exact, but also in the author’s ability to capture the essence of the given area.

In the introduction to her study entitled *Hľadanie žánru v súčasnom slovenskom hranom*

*filme* [In Search of a Genre in Contemporary Slovak Live-Action Film], Katarína Mišíková cites Martin Šmatlák, who –referring to Pavol Branko – refers to the current state of Slovak cinema as the “new threshold of maturity”. Both Mišíková and Šmatlák base their arguments on comparing today’s situation with the previous critical period of the 2010s, on the: quantity of produced movies, generational span, number of debuts, diversity of topics and genres, success at festivals, etc. The arguments conceived in such a way cannot be disputed, although it would help if the current status quo named with greater caution. Slovakia still lacks true and significant authorial figures of two generations, such as those who emerged during the late 1960s (e.g. Dušan Hanák, Juraj Jakubisko, Elo Havetta, Štefan Uher, Eduard Grečner). Our cinema does not have a sufficient number of other film professionals (especially scriptwriters and dramaturgs), there is no overall dramaturgic concept, not to mention large-scale professional studios such as the former Koliba studios, and so on.

The text is predominantly focused on the topic of genre. By utilising a semantic-syntactic-pragmatic approach, Mišíková convincingly debunks the myth that there is a lack of genre-films in Slovak cinema. She draws attention to the positive influence of dramaturgic stimuli from the Slovak Audiovisual Fund on the development of certain genres, especially social drama and history movies. At the same time, she also pinpoints the absence of “solid mainstream” films that would attract masses to cinemas. We also learn about the considerably rich spectrum of genres within the contemporary Slovak cinema (ranging from horrors, through thrillers, all the way to sci-fi films), as well as about the misunderstandings in genre classification arising from marketing strategies, or from amateurism of several non-professional online movie databases.<sup>1</sup> According to Mišíková, the fundamental reason behind the failure of genre films to reach commercial success is the filmmakers’ inability to define the framework of genres

<sup>1</sup> That is the case of the CSFD.cz movie database, which often misclassifies film genres.

in such a way as to simultaneously appeal to several types of audiences.

The pivotal area for both the Slovak cinema and the study being reviewed herein is namely the group of films categorised as social dramas. Mišíková polemicizes with film theorist Jana Dudková<sup>2</sup> about the extent to which social drama can be said to exist in Slovak cinema as a genre of its own. In the films, she recognises and convincingly identifies common semantic elements, syntagmas, topics, as well as production and distribution strategies. Citing American film theorist Rick Altman, Mišíková is referring to a “process of genre ripening,” which will be, according to her, completed in the near future.

In her study entitled *Obrazy “iných” a “druhých” v súčasnom slovenskom dokumentárnom filme* [The Images of “The Different” and of “The Others” in Contemporary Slovak Documentary Film], author Mária Ferenčuhová focuses on documentaries, especially on “social, ethnographic or anthropologic films.” Her text is divided into two chapters. In the first, she briefly introduces a relatively wide group of historicizing documentaries or film portraits; in the second, she focuses on the images of “the different” and of “the others”. There is a marked disproportion in the length of both chapters, as well as a difference in the analytical methods employed. In academic writing, the individual chapter’s length is irrelevant, however, in the case of this particular study, the result is a noticeable marginalisation of one area of Slovak documentaries to the benefit of the other. Thus, in the second chapter, Ferenčuhová offers new and highly interesting reading about the awarded and critically acclaimed documentaries (*Všetky moje deti* [All My Children]; *Zvonky šťastia* [The Bells of Happiness]; *Tak ďaleko, tak blízko* [Comeback; So Far, So Near]; etc.). Referring to a text by sociologist Miroslav Tížik<sup>3</sup>, she decided to explore these docu-

mentary films through discourse analysis outlined in a study entitled *Pornografia poznania, etnografia a diskurz moci* [The Pornography of Knowledge, Ethnography and Discourse of Power].<sup>4</sup> Ferenčuhová is drawing attention to the pornographic and power-politics character in the attitude to protagonists – the marginalised groups, which appears, although to a much greater extent and devoid of humanism, also in TV shows like *Exchange of Wives*, or *Extreme Families*. In conclusion, the author admits the analysed documentaries are exceptionally interesting and that such a comparison might be inappropriate. Nevertheless, her analysis shows a certain negative phenomenon in Slovak documentary film. According to her, the way out of the “vicious circle of dominance” is represented by the approach of Daniela Rusnoková in her film *O Soni a jej rodine* [Soňa and Her Family], in which she treats the Romany protagonist as an equal partner. However, this film does not represent the analysed sample group, as it is a student film made in 2006.

The text by Eva Šošková entitled *Na poli animovaného filmu* [In the Domain of Animated Film] is intriguing by its symptomatic nature. However, what it perhaps demonstrates the most is the fact that the author is unable to follow a specific development within a larger cycle, genre, or at least within a sufficiently large group of related films, such as is the case with documentaries or live action films. Her study is thus divided into several groups of similar size (feature-length, experimental, student, poetic female films, etc.), in which she offers inspiring analyses of individual films within the context of smaller categories. Even though the author does not perceive the situation as negative, indirectly, the study creates an impression that the segment of Slovak animated films is incoherent and small. But because Šošková highlights the positive tendencies (the Fest Anča festival, release of the Virvar DVD collection, opportunities presented by the VOD

<sup>2</sup> DUDKOVÁ, Jana. Medzi minulosťou a prítomnosťou. In *Kino-Ikon*, 2015, Vol. 19, Issue 2, pp. 53 – 69.

<sup>3</sup> TÍŽIK, Miroslav. Documentary Film 2014 (Dokumentárny film 2014). In *Kino-Ikon*, 2015, Vol. 19, Issue 2, pp. 39 – 52.

<sup>4</sup> HANSEN, Christian – NEEDHAMOVÁ, Catherine – NICHOLS, Bill. Pornografie, etnografie a diskurz moci. In *Vizuální etnografie – kultura žitá a viděná*. Červený Kostelec : Pavel Mervart, 2010, pp. 147 – 187.

platforms, preparation and production of feature-length films or new TV projects), however, in contrast to the previous chapters creates a generally positive image of Slovak animated films. Indeed, the situation is improving and there is no reason for scepticism, even though in comparison with the previous chapters, the reader does not get an accurate picture of the Slovak animated film's status quo. While in live-action and documentary cinema we may speak of movements and genres represented by approximately ten films, in the era of independent Slovakia (since 1993), it had typically taken many years of preparatory work before a second or third feature-length film was produced in the animated film segment. Financing problems and profession-switching by respected filmmakers (e.g. Marta Prokopová or Zuzana Žiaková) still persist, which is inevitably reflected in the low number of completed professional animated films (especially in comparison with the other two film segments).

Žofia Bosáková focused on student films. In my opinion, the most interesting aspect of her text entitled *Študentský film na Slovensku* [Student Films in Slovakia] is that she is drawing attention to the increasing quality of live-action student films, which were considered as the least distinct for many years. However, to agree with her claim that these films are currently even better than those made by students of animated or documentary film is a little more difficult. For example, there is continuity in animated student films evident in the form of various tendencies: e.g. the long-term poetic feminine line represented by Marta Prokopová, Mária Olhová, Anna Vančurová and Zuzana Žiaková (and others), or the use of the "aesthetics of ugliness" – in the films of Peter Martinka, or in the film *tWins* – which is building on the contemporary festival trends. From this point of view, animated film seems to be much more coherent and perhaps even capable of producing a kind of a unified and influential movement at some point in the future.

What I find interesting is Bosáková's analysis of the distribution channels, identifying the film faculty's insufficient contact with Slovak television, as well as her evaluation

of the student films' aesthetics. However, what her text notably lacks, is an analysis of the situation at and the films produced by the Academy of Arts in Banská Bystrica, as Bosáková completely ignores this institution. Even though she initially claims the scope of the study allows her to only focus on the Film and Television Faculty at the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava (VŠMU), she later also examines the professional work of some of its graduates that has already been analysed in the previous chapter about documentary film. Although the development of these films had started at VŠMU, in this case, we can hardly refer to them as student films. Therefore, a question arises whether it would not be more appropriate and interesting to at least briefly mention Slovakia's other film school as well.

The chapter by Eva Križková entitled *Zlomky a transformácie v slovenskej kinodistribúcii* [Turning Points and Transformations in Slovak Movie Distribution] is particularly rich in statistical data. The author is drawing attention to the positive development in the box office success of (not only) Slovak films, in the digitisation of cinemas, and in new formats. However, in my opinion, this chapter's problem lies in its excessively enumerative nature. Križková focuses more on listing the owners and activities of the distribution companies, or of the Film Distributors' Union, as well as on various figures and other information that is easily available on the Internet, rather than on the pressing issues – such as the influence of illegal file sharing (downloading films) on movie distribution, or the unwillingness of multi(mini)plex movie theatres to screen Slovak art-house films, etc. Thus, the readers knowledgeable of film industry do not learn much new about this area. In addition, Križková's text surprisingly also includes a sub-chapter focused on online streaming (VOD – video on demand) that does not correspond with the study's title. When the author decided to also cover a topic other than cinema distribution, the question is why she chose this VOD segment and ignored other forms of distribution, or why she at least did not explain this to the readers in her introduction.

To some extent, Václav Macek treated his contribution entitled *(Ne)kriticky o kritike a poznámky k teórii* [(Non)Critically about Critique and Side-Notes on Theory] as a response to last-year's discussion about the status quo of the Slovak live-action film (during the Slovak Film Week), which in the end turned into a personal and expressive criticism of critique. At that time, the filmmakers claimed that Slovakia lacked continuous reflection of their work. In his study, in fact, an essay on the need of critique in contemporary world, Václav Macek disagrees with them and employs a meta-critical text by Peter Michalovič<sup>5</sup>, to examine four different forms of reflection in Slovakia. At the same time, he is tracking changes that have taken place in thinking and writing about film with the onset of the Internet age. Macek primarily highlights the reflections by the "minimalists" Pavol Branko and Zuzana Mojžišová, as well as by many other authors, arriving at a conclusion that the Slovak film critique is, in fact, in a surprisingly good shape. His text has a clear structure and goal – it has been written primarily as an answer to the filmmakers, but also as a possible recommendation to the readers.

The New Slovak Film publication offers a relatively comprehensive picture of the situation in Slovak cinema and in film reflection (critique). The Slovak book market was clearly in need of such a publication which is an important contribution to the current debate on the situation in Slovak cinema. The individual texts differ mostly with regard to the individual authors' experience. The studies by Katarína Mišíková, Mária Ferenčuhová, Václav Macek, but also by Eva Šošková are distinct by their ability to accurately and aptly formulate the most important aspects, to shed new light on the given topic, but also to describe it as a whole and to finally presented in a clearly structured text. The publication highlights the fact that Slovak film is experiencing another renaissance period and brings hope of a positive development in the future.

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Translated by Tomáš Beňo

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<sup>5</sup> MICHALOVIČ, Peter. *Orbis terrarum est speculum ludi*. Bratislava : The Soros Centre for Contemporary Art, 1999, p. 70.