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## SLOVAK TELEVISION FILM AFTER 1989: BETWEEN SOCIAL DRAMA AND POPULAR GENRES

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**Abstract:** The paper deals with the dominant genre of Slovak live-action television film after 1989, a psychological family or relationship drama, and puts it in the context of isolationism of contemporary Slovak cinema while at the same time comparing it with later processes of pluralisation of Slovak television film that appeared in line with the first Contract with the State (valid from 2010). It also compares development of live-action television and cinematic film and shows how television production often signalled some major changes in Slovak cinema but also featured remarkable differences between seemingly common genre structures.

**Key words:** television film, social drama, isolationism, monologue narratives

### Withdrawnness

The tendency to focus on the area of private relations appears equally in films for cinema and in live-action production for television. Within the portfolio of live-action TV films made after 1989, socially attentive psychological dramas form one of the most stable genres that appear during the whole quarter of the century. This emphasis on intimate dramas arises from a long-term television tradition, but also from the chaotic situation of social transformation and fast onset of the new authoritarian political power. In a way, many films that exhibit such degree of isolation from the outside world may even appear as symptomatic, as if they are intentionally distancing themselves from the political issues of their time.

However, when we look at settings used and depicted in this group of films, and the typology of cinematic *places*, it becomes obvious that this typology is radically different from that in Slovak cinema, where more than ten years a tendency to lock the stories into isolated countryside family residences dominated – starting with Martin Šulík's *Záhada* (*The Garden*, 1995), Eva Borušovičová's *Modré z neba* (*Blue Heaven*, 1997), and continuing with Laura Siváková's *Quartéto*, 2002, Peter Bebjak's *Marhuľový ostrov* (*Apricot Island*, 2011), or Mariana Čengel Solčanská's *Miluj ma alebo odíď* (*Love Me or Leave Me*, 2013). Besides this tendency, at the beginning of the new millennium, some film-makers also chose modern or hypermodern urban settings. We witness this tendency in Vlado Adásek's *Hana a jej bratia* (*Hannah and Her Brothers*, 2001), Eva Borušovičová's second film *Vadí nevadí* (*Truth or Dare*, 2001), Miro Šindelka's *Zostane to medzi nami* (*It Will Stay Between Us*, 2003), or Vlado Fischer's *Polčas rozpadu* (*Half Breakdown*, 2007). Starting with early Martin Šulík's films, most of the Slovak films for cinema feature utopian, idyllic or heterotopic spaces (while after 2000 they also start to point out to the existence of specific spaces that I dub 'non-places' in the

vein of Marc Augé's definition).<sup>1</sup> Until new genres (like social drama but also horror, thriller or sci-fi) and new approaches to collective identities started to appear around 2009, this meant that in majority of cases the cinematic settings were characteristic with their suppressed or even complete elimination of everyday social interactions, neglecting the sense of community and collective identities other than the identity of isolated families or love couples.

Nevertheless, the situation in TV film was during the same period so different it forces us to revise the notion of isolationism in Slovak film. It is true that the tendency to isolate the story to countryside residencies remains also in the portfolio of TV films. However, in TV production we encounter a tendency to interconnect the private realm with the social context of the period much more frequently. After all, it was within TV production where the first film was made that signalled the need for a socially attentive family drama – *Ticho* (*Silence*, 2005) by Zuzana Liová.

Another sign of TV production's greater sensitivity to the pressing social issues is the fact that the setting of a family residence is frequently replaced with alternative settings. For example, two films draw attention to stratification of society, taking place in a retirement home (which on one hand enables to concentrate the story into a well isolated space, but on the other hand presents issues that are markedly absent from live-action production for cinema, like ageing of population, or friendships made across social classes). Another variation of the countryside residence is the setting of a city flat, again being characteristically interconnected with the current social life. Most of television family dramas dealing with identity crises take place in such flats. Sometimes, the setting of the flat is intentionally portrayed as a place in the middle of a busy urban life, but from which it remains isolated like in TV film *Klietka* (*Cage*, dir. Stanislav Párnický, 2000).<sup>2</sup> In other cases, a flat becomes a space from which the character experiencing the identity crisis can escape, seeking a cure within city streets, encountering with representatives of various social and generational groups (e.g. *Dlhá krátka noc – A Long Short Night*, dir. Peter Krišťufek, 2003). In a similar way as with the family residence setting in Šulík's *The Garden*, the city flats are often used as links to family history as well as to history of a community. In *Smutný valčík* (*A Sad Waltz*, dir. Jaroslav Rihák, 1996) old flats of Budapest evoke memories of the pre- and post-war past of their tenants, which shaped the country's history; in other cases, history appears in the form of flashbacks of a life in a different, more pleasant setting, with the current place of living in a concrete block-of-flats housing estate being understood as a punishment and imprisonment (*Cage*).

It means that in comparison with cinematic production, typology of settings in TV films more frequently draws attention to private spaces being defined by wider social

<sup>1</sup> See DUDKOVÁ, Jana. *Slovenský film v ére transkulturality* (*Slovak Film in the Era of Transculturality*). Drewo a srd. – FTF VŠMU 2011, and for an even more precise differentiation of cinematic places also DUDKOVÁ, Jana. *Between the Center and the Margin: the Nation of Central Europe in Slovak Cinema after 1989*. In *Illuminace: The Journal of Film Theory, History and Aesthetics*, 2013, Vol. 25, Issue 4 [92], p. 79–94.

<sup>2</sup> Similar understanding of the block-of-flats-settlement setting appears also in other genres, e.g. the absurd farce *Niekedy by som Ťa zabila* (*Sometimes I'd Kill You*, dir. Karol Vosátka, 1996) based on a script by Viliam Klimáček (inspired by his play *Smrtičky a vraždenička*). The film is an example of the attempt to introduce a more varied dramaturgy which, along with politically demanded national topics, actually focused much more frequently on producing intimate dramas about family relationships, but at the same time tried to revive its relatively conservative stylistics by applying new filmmaking approaches.

and sometimes historical contexts. Characters more often leave their private spaces to liberate themselves from ties of mutual dependencies, with their internal or interpersonal conflicts being motivated by means of (conventional) references to specific social or historical issues (unlike Šulík's *The Garden*, where history is represented only via inter-textual references to works of philosophers who have shaped the concept of modernity, and the current social-political situation is lacking, portrayed, at most, via a metaphor of isolation from the outside world, without any influence on the protagonists' actions).

On the other hand, even though TV films focusing on the topic of (fragile) interpersonal relations have greater variability with regard to their settings, they also feature various thematic and ideological duplicities. For example, both Peter Krištúfek's *A Long Short Night* and Stanislav Párnický's *Cage* deal with a problematic relationship between a dominant mother and her unmarried adult daughter.<sup>3</sup> *Priateľstvo padajúceho lístia* (*Friendships of the Fallen Leaves*, dir. Juraj Nvota, 1998) and *Dušičky seniorov* (*Halloween of Seniors*, dir. S. Párnický, 2011) share the similar stories of delicate friendships made in retirement homes. Infertility jeopardising a seemingly working marriage is the topic of *Prášky na spanie* (*Sleeping Pills*, dir. J. Nvota, 1996) and *Čajová šálka lásky* (*A Teacup of Love*, dir. Pavol Gejdoš Jr., 2000) – and it eventually becomes also the topic of one of the short stories within the *Filmovedky* (*Film-stories*) series: *Evína krížová cesta – náhradná matka* (*Eva's Calvary – Surrogate Mother*, dir. Yvonne Vavrová, 2012). These duplicities prove the existence of a certain mental continuity of taste, opinion and ethics that influenced choice of topics and building up specific narratives. Thanks to this, majority of TV films were able to overcome limitations that appear in production for cinema which neglected current issues of the Slovak society (the differences between television production and cinema are, of course, caused also by differing overall ideologies of free-market cinema and public television; albeit Slovak audio-visual environment lacked any official consensus on the proper social functions of cinema and television, the legalization of television as public institution in 1991 led to implicit understanding of its social roles so that most of the television films could and did tend towards fulfilling the ideals of a public service, while on the other hand cinema was for a long time trying to find a proper model of achieving the ideal of competitiveness).<sup>4</sup>

The differences derived from implicit understanding of different social roles of a national cinema and a national/public television led also to entirely different types

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<sup>3</sup> It comes as a curiosity that both films use the same, not entirely usual model of a mother-daughter relationship. In both films, the mother is portrayed as being dependent on the daughter, and at the same time boasting about her past successes with men; both also suggest the mother despises *her* (currently not present) husband, while the daughter has resigned to partnership relations; and in both cases a dark secret is eventually revealed: in the past, both mothers deprived their daughters of their suitors (in *Cage*, the mother actually seduced him), thus robbing the daughters of their personal happiness.

<sup>4</sup> Discussions about the functions of the public television were lively only at the very beginning of its transformation, with public discussion on this topic having consequently almost completely disappeared – see MISTRÍKOVÁ, Zuzana – ZMEČEK, Andrej (Eds.). *Mediálna ročenka – Slovensko 1990–2000* (*Media Yearbook – Slovakia 1990–2000*). Bratislava: Media Institute 2001, p. 11; Despite this, production of TV films was still influenced by the need to represent national cultural values together with the current status of society, so it implicitly did embrace idea of a public service. On the other hand, production for cinema was influenced more by searching for the proper path towards the ideal competitiveness, be it in the context of international film festivals, audience interest, or at least critical acclaim.

of social and political withdrawnness. Within the portfolio of television films, this withdrawnness could be described as a tendency towards a rather conservative style and choice of life values.

This means formation of a completely different concept of withdrawnness from the social-political atmosphere of the period when compared with cinematic production. Unlike in the similar trend of relationship or family dramas within production for cinema, we are not dealing with a case of isolating social and cultural elites combined with neglecting the current issues of the social-political environment of the country. In psychological dramas made for television, we can rather observe a very distinct conservativeness of indirectly promoted values, both in film style and in the implicit ethical attitude. In most of the films, emphasis is being placed on fatality of family relations that sometimes even result in the loss of personal happiness (e.g. in the case of mother-daughter relationship in TV film *Cage*). Many films also involve a topic of how relationships depend on whether the partners are raising a child (*Sleeping Pills, A Teacup of Love*), others draw attention to the carelessness or even recklessness of young people (it is portrayed e.g. in the bus scenes in *A Long Short Night*, but also in *Halloween of Seniors*, or in the *Nočný trezor (The Night Safe*, dir. Karol Vosátko, 2011), the latter being another of the *Film-stories* cycle).

Individual films also feature emphasis on mutual dependency between parents and their children (but also on various other forms of mutual dependency, even within friendships), with the key message being the responsibility towards the weaker, dependent ones. For example in *Friendships of the Fallen Leaves*, the main female protagonist gives up her right to love, indirectly causing the death of her suitor, when she realises how defenceless her seemingly robust and touchy flatmate is; in *Dušička (A Little Soul*, dir. Juraj Nvota, 1994), the emphasis is placed on responsibility towards the more dependent of the spouses, ignoring whom can lead even to a tragedy – in this case, the mentally ill wife murders her husband's lover.

The conservativeness of television production also includes an elitist attitude towards social stratification of society, where the moral credit of the elites prevail. Sometimes, intellectual elites find themselves victimised by the corrupt state, usually represented by a combination of wild capitalism with political populism in work of state institutions. In *A Teacup of Love*, a brief peak into the work environment of two orientalist reveals that in order to survive, they have to combine academic work with various other activities: the protagonist work as a tourist guide for foreigners, while his colleague stumbles between unsuccessfully publishing and selling books, applying for meaningless but politically supported grants (“In the Footsteps of Slovak Tinkers in China”) and listening all day long to an erotic hotline from an office phone (thus actually helping his daughter make some money, as she fails to find a better job).

I do not understand the term “conservative” and “conservativeness” in the line with politological meaning of conservatism, but rather as representing the preference of traditional Christian and old bourgeois values. Conservative films are promoting on one hand values such as family, fidelity, love, but also tolerance and solidarity with the others. They admire characters with good manners, elegance, education and cultivated behaviour, but also promote a belief that presence of such values can help cultivate people excluded on the periphery of society.

Conservativeness understood in this sense is a dominant feature of most of the

psychological dramas of the period. From the point of view of an implicit political content, in a majority of them it is possible to see their rejection of neoliberal as well as populist values. Conservativeness is also present at the level of style and storytelling: Slovak psychological (and) family dramas made for television usually favour mimetic realism with great emphasis on character motivations. Instead of the tendency to tell the story by means of allegoric images and allusions, which was introduced to post-revolution Slovak cinema by Martin Šulík, these films opt for more traditional ways of constructing the narrative, and do not provide much space for audience activity while explaining motivations or the past of their characters in much detail and quite explicitly (usually via dialogues).

Values promoted by television psychological dramas draw attention to the fact that society was not immediately prepared to accept all benefits of the hypermodern time. However, they also make a positive contribution by rejecting numerous political concepts in conflict with humanistic ideals of tolerance and solidarity. They are immune to the glorification of the nation, sometimes even promoting inter-racial or inter-class understanding (e. g. *A Teacup of Love*, *Friendships of the Fallen Leaves*, *A Long Short Night*, *The Night Safe...*).

Conservative humanism in psychological dramas about inter-generational gaps or partnership crises appeared as early as at the very beginning of 1990s, both in films for youth – e. g. in *Jediná* (*The Only One*, dir. Anton Majerčík, 1991) – and in those for adults, e.g. in *Citové cvičenia* (*Emotional Exercises*, dir. Ladislav Halama, 1990), *Adam a Anna* (*Adam and Anna*, dir. Zoro Laurinc, 1992), or in most of the films by Ľuba Velecká (*Rodina – Family*, 1990, *Rozruch na onkológii – Turmoil at Oncology*, 1991). We can understand this conservatism as a heritage of the previous era, when emphasis on humanistic values and dominance of intimate psychological dramas were among the main features of television production. However, from a statistical point of view, this trend started to dominate since 1994,<sup>5</sup> and appeared with increased frequency also at the turn of the millennia, i.e. in a time when production for cinema started to be dominated by hyper-modern urban films about loose relationships, drawing attention to important social changes in Slovak city environment, but most importantly trying to present Bratislava as a city that is able to compete with other capital cities – e.g. in *Vadí nevadí* (*Truth or Dare*, dir. Eva Borušovičová), *Zostane to medzi nami* (*It Will Stay Between Us*, dir. Miro Šindelka), *O dve slabiky pozadu* (*Two Syllables Behind*, dir. Katarína Šulajová, 2004), *Ženy môjho muža* (*My Husband's Women*, dir. Ivan Vojnár, 2009), *Tango s komármi* (*The Tango with Mosquitos*, dir. Miloslav Luther, 2009).

The dominance of conservative psychological dramas is the tell-tale sign of the Programme Centre of Literary-Dramatic Programmes department with Marián Puobiš as its chief dramaturge (1998–2003). The Centre contracted directors who were sidelined in previous years. While among the most contracted directors of older generations, mainly those of 1990s were Martin Kákoš (1955), Jaroslav Rihák (1951)

<sup>5</sup> Conservative psychological dramas were, together with films for children and youth and with video fairy-tales, the dominant genre of television production also between 1990 and 1992. In 1993, the annual production was dominated by engaged humanistic films about populism and totalitarianism. The emergence of this kind of films was extremely short-lived since another authoritarian regime started already in 1992. Since the Main Department of Films for Children and Youth ended its activities also in 1992, it was no wonder that psychological dramas appeared as the most dominant genre in the further period, offering an escape from current political issues but still following some functions of engaged public television.



or Juraj Nvota (1954), only Nvota continued in directing during Marián Puobiš's era. From the representatives of older generations, the new dramaturgy management contracted mainly skilled storytellers (Martin Hollý – 1931, Miloslav Luther – 1945, Stanislav Párnický – 1945), but also theatre directors (Emil Horváth Jr. – 1945). Opportunity to direct was also given to representatives of the middle generation, who debuted in late 1980s or early 1990s – e.g. Martin Šulík (1962), who directed a TV staged drama *Zabíjačka* (*Hog Killing*, 1999), or Pavol Gejdoš Jr. (1958) who made already mentioned *A Teacup of Love*.

The turn of millennia was also the period during which – after a decade of ignoring the debuting filmmakers – TV dramaturgy slowly started to contract the younger directors. Nevertheless, they had to embrace the dominant conservative values. Eva Borušovičová (1970) who's first film *Modré z neba* (*Blue Heaven*) was released in cinemas in 1997, made soon after that a family television film for the Programme Centre of Programmes for Children and Youth. *Amálka, ja sa zbláznim* (*Amálka, I Will Go Crazy*, 2000) promotes inter-generational understanding while shaking the idea that, except for Martin Šulík, it was impossible for debuting directors to continue in their work. Despite the prevalence of conservative values, her *Amálka, I Will Go Crazy* inconspicuously changes the usual dramaturgy of films for children, achieving its didactic effect with a greater dose of playfulness than was usual during the last decade. At the same time, it also returns to the somewhat forgotten combination of popular music and visually attractive, almost cinematic image.<sup>6</sup> Another young director, Peter Krištúfek (1973), was also given a chance to direct in television. His feature-length debut *Dlhá krátka noc* (*A Long Short Night*, 2003) was based on a script by his mother, the experienced scriptwriter Zora Krištúfková (1948) which also provided it with traditional conservatism of Slovak television dramas. After his television debut, this writer and film-maker nevertheless moved more towards his own authorial projects made for television as well as for cinema (like documentary film about famous Slovak composer Dežo Ursiny *Momentky – Snapshots*, 2008 or fiction film *Viditeľný svet – Visible World*, 2011).

The dominance of conservative present-day psychological dramas focusing on crises of traditional partnerships or family relationships, enabled Slovak television production to retain a certain level of intellectual standard, but also led to stabilisation of its mediocrity. However, that does not mean it was impossible to develop some new topics, new approaches to reality or new genres even within this, rather conservative, framework.

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<sup>6</sup> The film was shot on classical celluloid material and, after Jakubisko's *Takmer ružový príbeh* (*A Rosy Story*), it is in fact the first to build on attractive camerawork and appealing popular music (it employed songs by Tóno Popovič and the Ska-pra šupina band featuring Marián Jaslovský and Eva Dočolomanská). Unlike in Jakubisko's film and in similar cinematic films for youth from the turn of 1980s and 1990s (like Dušan Rapoš's *Fontána pre Zuzanu – The Fountain for Susan*, 1985 or Jaroslav Soukup's *Discopříběh – Discostory*, 1987), popular music in this film is not supposed to suggest a rebellious attitude towards parents, but, on the contrary, unites the family and helps to solve the conflict between younger brother and his just-married sister.

### Towards the new plurality

After the still-standard level of production output at the beginning of the new millennium, television production decreased rapidly due to the economic decline of Slovak Television (STV). During 2002–2009, only one or two feature-length live-action TV films were made annually, which is equivalent to the number of films produced for cinema during the period of its greatest crisis (1992–2002). Following this slump, the programme structure has started to focus more on the feature-length live-action format only since 2010, after the so-called “Contract with the State” was signed,<sup>7</sup> the goal of which was legislative amendment of conditions for increasing state support for original TV programmes, including the goal of following the functions of public service and developing the national cultural heritage. In line with the Contract, a remarkable number of live-action films were released in 2010 and 2011. This rapid increase in production was a part of introducing two TV films cycles, *Filmoviedky* – which could be translated as *Film-stories* – and *Nesmrtelní* (*Immortals*). After finishing their last parts, however, and due to low audience rates, television dramaturgy once again started to neglect the production of live-action films, concentrating more at documentary formats. Besides the emergence of the mentioned TV cycles which introduced also a variety of new genres and topics, however, already during the era when Slovak television was directed by Richard Rybníček (2003–2006)<sup>8</sup> new approaches to reality gradually started to emerge. Zuzana Liová’s debut *Ticho* (*Silence*, 2005) is unusually authentic family drama, highly attentive to the economic reasons behind the deterioration of traditional family values. With regard to promoted values, the film finds itself more on the side of conservative humanism, defending the pro-life stand, as well as the importance of preserving family ties. Nevertheless, while introducing an exceptionally concentrated storytelling that draws from newer trends of art-house cinema, it is more a reaction to contemporary Slovak *cinema* and reflects on the demand for a more realistic portrayal of regional economic decline within it. In fact, *Silence* might be understood as foreboding of future cinematic trends, more than an example of continuity with psychological TV dramas of the period.

Not only *Silence*, but also Dušan Trančík’s *Zima kúzelníkov* (*The Magician’s Winter*, 2006) reflects on the situation of the country’s economic downfall. Almost ten years after *Friendships of the Fallen Leaves* (1998), it also rediscovers the topic of growing old. Albeit the film itself lacks vigour and drive of Trančík’s works from 1970s, it is valuable also for its attempt to complement scepticism towards institutional state support of the old and unemployed with humour and a sense of absurdity that almost disappeared from television as well as from cinematic live-action production.

<sup>7</sup> It was namely Contract no. MK-77/09/M on content, goals and provision of public services in the area of TV broadcasting for years 2010–2014, hereafter referred to only as the Contract with the State. The Contract was signed on December 21, 2009, coming into effect on January 1, 2010 and it covered the period from January 1, 2010 to December 31, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Rybníček has radically cut STV staff and, according to his numerous political opponents and direct competitors, caused a long-term decline in original TV production. This is claimed e.g. by Marek Maďarič, contemporary minister of culture who has worked in Slovak television as a dramaturge, but was also a member of the STV Council (in 1996 and 1997, he was even the head of Scripts Department and deputy head of the Department of Literary-Dramatic Programmes, and from 2002 to 2004 the vice-chairman of the STV Council). See KOLÍNSKÝ, Jiří. Rybníček riadil STV dobre aj zle. In *Pravda*, 8 July 2006. Available at <http://kultura.pravda.sk/film-a-televizia/clanok/28854-rybnicek-riadil-stv-dobre-aj-zle/>.

In the year when Slovakia joined the European Union, an unusual fairy-tale focused on multi-cultural education appeared – namely *Zlatý hlas* (*The Golden Voice*, 2004) directed by Jozef Banyák. The film was marketed as a “fairy-tale based on Roma motives”, while in fact it is a rather didactic narrative based on the structure and motives of conjuring fairy-tales and pointing out topics like stigmatisation, (un)successful attempts at integration into the majority society, and searching for ethnical tolerance.

Jozef Banyák directed two fairy-tales with Roma motives already in 1994<sup>9</sup> and even *The Golden Voice* was in the making since 1998. Nevertheless, it has appeared at the time of the prevalence of ethnical monologue within national live-action film when the Roma topic started to resonate mostly within documentary film. Despite the fact that the emergence of documentaries about Roma at the beginning of new millennium might be understood as a reaction to demands of EU toward Slovak society, in *The Golden Voice* it responds more to the positive exoticism of portraying the Roma as a singing and dancing ethnicity that is more characteristic for live-action cinema. Its contribution that makes it significantly different from Rapoš's *Cinka Panna* (released four years later, in 2008) lies, among other things, in its non-heroic portrayal of Roma musicians (the film's protagonist is a terrible singer for a Roma, but is granted a “golden voice” from a witch until he realises that his “golden voice” is worthless when compared with the life of his brothers – so he decides to give up the voice in order to save his brothers from the death sentence for theft).

The educative and historicising exoticism in *The Golden Voice* stress out the situational and social aspects of Roma's behaviour, as well as diversity that helps the viewer not to perceive Roma as being professionally, ethically and culturally uniform. For example, the film features a family that attempts to integrate into the “white” society as servants, completely neglecting their cultural origins, but also a community of trough-makers, or a young untalented protagonist, who yearns to have a beautiful voice so that he can fulfil his idea of Roma identity.

More impulses for abandoning a relatively limited cultural perspective of Slovak television film were established after several important system changes in Slovak Television took place at the end of the first and beginning of the second decade of the new millennium. The most important were the new Law on Slovak Television, the digitalisation of the national television broadcasting, and the introduction of the Contract with the State.<sup>10</sup> Especially within the intentions of the Contract, the original TV production started to be revived. On the other hand, revival of live-action feature-length film was extremely short-lived. It was represented by creation of the two already mentioned cycles of TV films focusing on establishing a complex generational, genre and thematic diversity. Rapid process of project development and production led to the fact that this unique dramaturgy resulted in a set of qualitatively very uneven films which failed also in terms of audience ratings, even though it did offer many inspiring features.

<sup>9</sup> *O Zorali a dvoch bratoch* (*About Zorala and Two Brothers*), and *O krásnej strige* (*About a Beautiful Witch*).

<sup>10</sup> The new law about RTVS (Act no. 532/2010 Coll.) enacted December 15, 2010, effective as of January 1, 2011. The Contract with the State became valid at the beginning of 2010; digitalisation of broadcasting has been under way since 2009 and was finally completed in December 2012, while during 2011 most of the television broadcasting was already digital.



For example, the cycle of *Immortals* reflected on the abandoned tradition of TV adaptations which, in the pre-revolution era, managed to fuse the ideas about artistic refinement, social engagement, and at the same time audience popularity. The tradition was incorporated especially in regular broadcasting of so called “Bratislava’s Television Mondays” (“Bratislavské televízne pondelky”), the featured TV-staged plays (mostly adaptations of famous literary works by renowned world or domestic authors) which had – in contrast with majority of Slovak TV production – a large audience not only in Slovakia, but also in the Czech Republic. It is no wonder professional public perceived a sudden cancellation of broadcasting “Bratislava’s Mondays” in 1990 as a traumatic event, albeit this format probably couldn’t compete with new global trends and new forms of education and entertainment. Interrupting this tradition was for a long time perceived as one of the key failures of the transition period, namely in the context of a narrative on missed opportunities,<sup>11</sup> but also in the context of a collective imaginary about the total collapse of Slovak film production: “To give up the 30-year tradition and a strong position on the market with an audience of 15-million was a fatal mistake that was never remedied afterwards. Even though the management of the F1 television channel pushed through re-introduction of Slovak dramatic works in its programme in 1991, only 15 out of the almost 40 produced titles were eventually broadcasted. The situation was slightly better in the last year of the Czechoslovak Television’s existence, when Slovak dramatic works were broadcasted on the federal TV channel more-or-less with a two-week frequency, but already with a declining resonance.”<sup>12</sup>

In this context, the cycle of *Immortals* can be understood as an attempt at reinstating continuity under completely new conditions. It brings works of world and Slovak literature to contemporary audience through genres that are familiar to it, sometimes even from television’s own formats. At the same time, *Immortals* “translate” the original stories into contemporary Slovak settings. So, *Sense and Sensibility* can turn into a Rosamunde Pilcher kind of romance with almost unnoticeable irony and local charm rendered by its Eastern Slovak setting (*Lúbi neľúbi – Loves Me, Loves Me Not*, dir. Róbert Šveda). Or, a cultural translation of Gogol’s *The Government Inspector* deals with the topic of misuse of the so-called ‘Euro-funds’ in Viktor Csudai’s *Kontrola (Inspection)*.

From 2010 to 2011, a total of 10 films were produced and premiered in television as a part of the *Immortals* series: *Diabol (Devil)*, dir. Roman Polák), *Dlhá cesta domov (Long Road Home)*, dir. Katarína Ďurovičová), *Ena B.* (dir. Ladislav Halama), *Fejs* (dir. R. Šveda), *Hon na legend (Hunt for a Legend)*, dir. S. Párnický), *Kontrola (Inspection)*, dir. V. Csudai), *Kvety a Lucia (Flowers and Lucia)*, dir. S. Párnický), *Lúbi neľúbi (Loves Me, Loves Me Not)*, dir. R. Šveda), *Náramok (Bracelet)*, dir. Emil Horváth Jr.), and *Projekt Alfa (Project Alpha)*, dir. Karol Vosátko).

<sup>11</sup> The narrative is described also in the Media Institute’s Yearbook for 1990–2000: “It could be expected the scope of Slovak dramaturgy would develop further, since a considerable part of its repertoire was strong due to its humanistic approach, which was able to fully present itself within the new social context. All of the repertoire’s limitations were lifted, and several authors have indicated they had had good-quality scripts in their shelves waiting to be produced (...). However, nothing of that kind ever happened. The department justified its incomprehensible downturn by ‘performing an inventory’ and ‘searching for new topics’, which was necessary, yes, but it was not a reason for abandoning positions.” MISTRÍKOVÁ, Zuzana – ZMEČEK, Andrej (Eds.). *Media Yearbook – Slovakia 1990–2000*, p. 14.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

Modes of storytelling and choice of genres of the series' individual films stems from demands formulated within professional community of film-makers, therefore some films come ahead of new trends that were being introduced to the national cinematic production much later, while others continue with the aesthetics of TV series, or even completely stand out from the rest of the existing Slovak audio-visual production. This is the case of the visually attractive adaptation of the *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* novel. *Project Alpha* managed to keep pace with global trends in arthouse sci-fi, employing elements of retro-futurism, neo-noir, as well as comic book inspirations. Announced as Slovak *Sin City*, it made use of the green-screen filming technology with background added in postproduction, and appeared to be the most expensive project within the whole cycle while at the same time reaching the lowest ratings.<sup>13</sup> In most of the other cases, however, the results remained inconsistent and overall ratings low. From among all films within the *Immortals* series, Róbert Šveda's *Fejs* – an adaptation of Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac* – stands out by its consistent dramaturgy and sovereign visual-acoustic style. It fuses the genre of romance with elements of popular youth subcultures and offers an effective genre hybrid that can be regarded as a professionally quite unusually-mature predecessor of *Lóve* (dir. Jakub Kroner, 2011), a cinematic hit released one year later and (despite its unusual commercial success) quite amateurish in style, script and performance. This means that although the portfolio of television films usually doesn't have much impact on how the "Slovak film" is perceived among film historians and critics, and despite of its usual mediocre qualities, it is sometimes able to offer more interesting examples of trends developing also within contemporary cinema.

The *Film-stories* cycle had similar reviving ambitions like *Immortals*, introducing seven parts during the years 2010–2011: *Halloween of Seniors* (*Dušíčky seniorov*, dir. Stanislav Párnický), *Nočný trezor* (*The Night Safe*, dir. Karol Vosátko), *Zradení* (*Betrayed*, dir. Martin Kákoš), *Evína krížová cesta – Náhradná matka* (*Eva's Calvary – Surrogate Mother*, dir. Yvonne Vavrová), *Obhliadka* (*Field Inspection*, dir. Mariana Čengel Solčanská), *Olé, zápražka* (*Olé, Roux*, dir. J. Banyák) and *Výstrel navyše* (*One More Shot*, dir. Ján Stračina).

Despite the diversity of the involved directors, the cycle features narrative motifs and genre patterns that are often duplicated. Majority of films included in the cycle revolve around an investigation or a well-kept secret, sometimes even deception. In two cases, investigation of an accident reveals strained family relations (*Field Inspection* and *Betrayed*); in another two cases, the story builds on the (attempt of) murder (*The Night Safe* and *One More Shot*). This means that in order to innovate the existing portfolio of television films, authors of the cycle ended up entrapped within a new but relatively limited set of topics.

Nevertheless, both *Film-stories* and *Immortals* effectively break the relatively

<sup>13</sup> The project suffers also from the discrepancy between its aesthetic concept and acting styles typical for national filmmaking, revealing thus the hasty decision to make an aesthetically inventive, yet professionally uneven film. Data obtained during premiere broadcasting of individual projects within the cycle showed this one had the worst audience interest, albeit produced at the highest cost, which immediately triggered negative reactions with regard to the economic effectiveness of the entire project. For more details about the ratings see e.g. KOČÍŠEK, Lukáš. Slovenské Sin City včera na Jednotke prepadlo. Nesmrteľní skončili s podielom 5,5%. In *Mediálne.sk*, 18 January 2011. Available at <http://medialne.etrend.sk/televizia/slovenske-sin-city-vcera-na-jednotke-prepadlo-nesmrteľni-skoncili-s-podielom-5-5.html>.

monologue structure of television production of previous decade or two. The ambition to bring more of polyphony into television dramaturgy is obvious in the very idea to contract different authors and introduce film cycles instead of solitary films. But this ambition is made visible also with regard to narrative structure of some of the films included. For example, three of *Film-stories* instalments have a short-story structure, portraying the same event from different perspectives in the vein of Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950): *The Night Safe*, *One More Shot*, and *Betrayed*.

With regard to their genre structure and selection of topics, innovations of both of the cycles are in line with the Preamble of the Contract with the State, according to which "Slovak television must strive to achieve the greatest possible level of representativeness with its production, so that the structure of its audience for whom its programmes are intended is in line with the social-demographic structure of Slovakia's population. With its creation of programme structure of the individual programmes, Slovak television is not governed by the principle of broadcasting for 'economically useful' audience, but by the principle of broadcasting for 'socially legitimate' audience."<sup>14</sup> Both *Immortals* and *Film-stories* aspire to introduce socially pressing topics in order to offer a more realistic and statistically more adequate and more variable image of Slovak society, but at the same time strive to adopt new genres in order to be more attractive for a broader television audience. The choice of topics was determined primarily by the world economic crisis that started in 2008. The genre structure of most of the films was, on the other hand, defined by ideas on what could be interesting for the audience interested more to television series than to solitary television films. Having said that, it is interesting to observe also how the two series diverge from but also complement the contemporary production for cinema. Neither of them integrated the social drama genre that had already started to resonate in Slovak cinema – and that become its most remarkable trend since 2012, with films as *Až do mesta Aš* (*Made in Ash*, dir. Iveta Grófová, 2012), *Ďakujem, dobre* (*Fine, Thanks*, dir. Mátýás Prikler, 2013) and *Môj pes Killer* (*My Dog Killer*, dir. Mira Fornay, 2013). In case of *Film-stories*, along with the dominant inspiration by family and relationship psychological drama as already the most stable genre in history of Slovak television live-action film, an attempt is evident at responding to a demand for more popular genres such as thriller (*One More Shot*) or romantic comedy (even with in-homogeneously integrated elements of satire like in *Olé, Roux*). Both cycles offer examples of popular genre hybrids a bit earlier than they appear in Slovak cinema. An attempt at a romantic film for young audience appeared only in 2011 in aforementioned Kroner's *Lóve*. At the same time, Slovak cinema witnessed a trend inspired by suspense and horror genres, consisted especially of horror films (*Attonitas*, dir. Jaroslav Mottl, 2012, *Zlo – Evil*, dir. Peter Bebjak, 2012) or even of an attempt at a mystery sci-fi (*Immortalitas*, dir. Erik Bošňák, 2012). Television films included in *Film-stories* and *Immortals* introduced genres of suspense and horror once again a bit earlier, but never reached pulp genre forms like aforementioned cinematic works. While the topic of violence and horror was embraced by several television series based on true or fictional criminal cases, feature-length films for television were rather inspired by detective stories, thrillers

<sup>14</sup> See CONTRACT no. MK-77/09/M on content, goals and providing public services in the area of TV broadcasting for years 2010–2014 (ZMLUVA č. MK-77/09/M o obsahoch, cieľoch a zabezpečení služieb verejnosti v oblasti televízneho vysielania na roky 2010 – 2014), p. 1.

and film noir. We can find elements of this inspiration in both cycles: in *Project Alpha* within *Immortals* as well as in some of the *Film-stories*, like *Inspection*, *One More Shot* or even in some noiresque parts of *Night-Time Safe*.

But in spite of high ambitions, most of these films lack convincing dramaturgy as well as convincing professional skills: even though being mostly works by experienced scriptwriters and directors, they are frequently affected by hasty production and Slovak television's relative unpreparedness for a sudden increase in live-action production. Albeit it is true that new live-action cycles represented an important step towards greater polyphony within live-action TV production, in fact they also lag behind their more inspiring documentary counterparts, which employed polyphony and multiplication of perspectives in a much more conceptually consistent manner – especially in cycles and works that focused on important and controversially perceived periods of national history. Television series like *Fetiš socializmu* (*Fetishes of Socialism*) or *Prvá* (*The First*), as well as some solitary feature-length films like *Garda* (*The Guard*, dir. Ivan Ostrochovský, 2015) use the point of view of alternative, “small”, personal and oral histories while dealing with critical periods of 20th century, usually from the existence of the Slovak State (1939 – 1945) until the end of communism. These television formats proved to fulfil the demands of a public service broadcasting much better, both in terms of ratings (*Fetishes of Socialism* reached a quite remarkable popularity for a documentary format) and possibilities of cultivating and provoking the discussion on current issues of national identity and its historical traumas. Thus, feature-length live-action production again experiences a downturn, motivated not only by a relative success of documentary formats, but above all by lack of competitiveness in the context of popular Slovak and foreign TV series.

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