
CONTEMPORARY SLOVAK FILM: A SYMPTOM OF THE TIMES OR A REPRESENTATION OF SOCIETY?

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Abstract: The phenomenon of Slovak cinema after 1989 is often linked with metaphors of absence and sterility. There are many reasons why this can be stated, and they are to a great extent closely connected with the reckless transformation and denationalisation of cinema which almost ruined it in the 1990s. On the one hand, cinema is no longer controlled or supported by the state; on the other hand, it is still financially dependent on it. (Until 2009, the ministers of culture are still responsible for the division of film funds, and frequent changes in the volume of available funds or the state's preferred subject matter have resulted in a number of projects that received short-term funding but have never been finished.) The focus is no longer on the middle class; therefore, there has been a decrease in cinema attendance and box office success. However, films are still reflecting some social changes and specifics as well as the position of Slovakia in a certain "global" world order. This article is going to outline some often overlooked approaches to post-1989 Slovak cinema as a reflection of social change. The focus will be on the sense of belatedness in generational gestures which embody the beliefs of the transition period as well as the spatial metaphors of one's relationship to society. Last but not least, attention will be paid to the unconscious self-reflection of cinema and its role in the shift of society towards the market economy. This has enabled film to connect with a whole range of phenomena such as the combination of the local and the global as well as of the industrial and the artistic.

Key words: Slovak film, society, representation, generational gestures

Too unprepared or too late?

With the shift to a market economy, Slovak cinema has had to deal with several new specific phenomena of today's culture such as the society of the spectacle,¹ globalisation, hyper-culturality, supermodernity and world culture.² Before adjusting to these phenomena, which have been happening only in the last couple of years, cinema itself has had to survive the unstable conditions of the transition from a state monopoly to market cinema. In 1991 the majority of staff from the state-owned film company Slovenská filmová tvorba (SFT) were made redundant. In that year the government radically lowered its subsidies for SFT and was also responsible for the non-

¹ This term was suggested by Guy Debord in his eponymous book from 1967 as an expression for a society which is controlled by modern conditions of production. This society is dominated by images; everything that is experienced directly slides away in representation. DEBORD, Guy. *La société du spectacle*. Paris: Buchet-Castel, 1967.

² World culture (*culture-monde*) is a term used by many French theoreticians for today's hyper-cultural situation, which glorifies culture as part of a "global" free market. For more information, see LIPOVETSKY, Gilles – SERROY, Jean. *La culture-monde. Réponse à une société désorientée*. Paris: Odile Jacob, 2008; and JUVIN, Hervé – LIPOVETSKY, G. *L'Occident mondialisée*. Paris: Grasset et Fasquelle, 2010.

transparent denationalisation of its property.³ Until 2002 Slovak producers had been bringing only two to four feature films per year to Slovak cinemas, including co-productions with minority Slovak participation. This situation was new, but at the same time not as new as one would think. The whole history of Slovak cinema is replete with interruptions and new beginnings, discontinuities and an exhausting search for identity (which were all caused by changes in production conditions as well as ideological "directions" resulting from the political changes in 1918, 1939, 1945, 1948, 1968, 1989, 1993, 2004 and so on). Since the Second World War, when its institutional foundations were laid, cinema has clearly mirrored political and social change in the country. Regardless of whether it was in the period of the Slovak State, the period following the 1948 election and the victory of the Communist Party, the early stages of "normalisation" after 1968, or the period of "loosening" ideological pressure, film always reflected the state's attitude to the control of social change. The situation did not change dramatically after 1989 either. The ideological purpose of films and their ability to symptomatically describe society have been preserved. However, there has been a substantial change in their relationship to the state authorities. For the first time since the Second World War, cinema not only broke free from state censorship but was almost completely "abandoned" by the state. Its funds were cut, and in the era of Vladimír Mečiar, the former Slovak prime minister, the film industry was also denationalised in a non-transparent way and as a result almost breathed its last breath.⁴ Nevertheless, to a large extent it remained financially dependent on the state, more precisely on the decisions of ministers of culture. It was only in 2009 that the situation changed and the Slovak Audiovisual Fund was established. From then on films have received funding based on the decisions of competent boards, and only a part of the funding comes from the state budget.

Slovak film cannot really be compared with that of other post-socialist countries, where cinema has been stabilising since the wild times of the early 1990s. In contrast, Slovak film scratched out a living as if it was outside of cinema until recently. It is as important to draw attention to this matter now as it was in 2008. Martin Šmatlák, a film theoretician and the future head of the Slovak Audiovisual Fund, emphasised that the (state) cinema may have disappeared after 1991 but that Slovak film had not.⁵

There were some factors which were responsible for the low production of films as well as for the increasingly evident sense of Slovak film as lagging behind society and being unprepared to fully accept its challenges. Among those that can be named are the closure of two major institutions (SFT and Filmexport), increasingly lower state grants, the inability of filmmakers to get organised and create a model of cinema which would be interesting for viewers as well as critics, major flaws in legislation⁶ and covert state censorship, which some directors blamed for the low financial support from the ministry of culture and state television.⁷

³ For more information, see MACEK, Václav. 1 297 254 000 Sk. In *Kino-Ikon*, 2010, Vol. 1, pp. 125–154; ŠMATLÁK, Martin. Hľadanie vlastnej cesty. In *Kino-Ikon*, 2008, Vol. 1, pp. 135–147.

⁴ The denationalisation of the main cinematographic institution in Slovakia, Slovenská filmová tvorba in Koliba, is examined in MACEK, Václav.

⁵ ŠMATLÁK, Martin, p. 142.

⁶ It was only in January 1996 that the state monopoly in cinema ceased to exist. However, in reality most films have been produced by private film production companies since 1991. *Ibid.*, p. 138.

⁷ It is not only Slovak documentary makers or debuting directors who complained about the lack of state

It is, therefore, no surprise that a rumour eventually arose among Slovak film critics, filmmakers and viewers in the 1990s that Slovak film was not capable of reflecting any major social and political issues, whether in the present or the past.⁸ The reason for this construct of impotency in post-November 1989⁹ film production is, besides others, the discrepancy between expectations and actual film production. There had been vivid discussions about the necessity of greater diversification of arts already before November 1989.¹⁰ Afterwards, it was expected that the former regime would be subjected to uncompromising and open criticism. Unfortunately, neither of these happened in Slovak film.

The sense of belatedness we have already mentioned started in 1989–1991, when pre-November 1989 production plans were still being realised. The films which were released just after the revolution were therefore “anachronistic”. This is the case of such perestroika films as *Právo na minulosť* (*The Right for the Past*, dir. Martin Hollý, 1989), *Let asfaltového holuba* (*The Flight of a Clay Pigeon*, dir. Vladimír Balco, 1990) and *Keď hviezdy boli červené* (*When the Stars Were Red*, dir. Dušan Trančík, 1990). Václav Macek also places Martin Šulík’s *Neha* (*Tenderness*, 1990) into this group of films which were not critical enough. They chose to describe the psychological consequences of the former regime instead of depicting the “revolutionary” and anti-communist attitudes.¹¹ This evaluation is very interesting from today’s point of view. The allusive-

funding. Films by the renowned Martin Šulík had similar problems. In September 1996, during the making of *Orbis pictus* (which eventually arrived in cinemas in 1998), the producer Rudolf Biermann told the public that the film had not received any support from Pro Slovakia, a state fund subsidised by the ministry of culture, or from Slovak Television despite the international success of Šulík’s third feature film *Záhrada* (*The Garden*) from 1995. HLADÍK, Dalibor. R. Biermann nezískal od STV a Pro Slovakia financie na nový film M. Šulíka *Orbis pictus*. In *SME*, 20 Sept. 1996, p. 8. Slovenská televízia a Pro Slovakia nemajú záujem podporiť nový film Martina Šulíka. In *SME*, 20 Sept. 1996, p. 1.

⁸ An investigation of this rumour would be interesting, but nobody has assumed this task yet. However, this development can be documented by film reviews and records from discussions and surveys. The 1991 survey by Ján Lacina for the weekly newspaper *Reflex*, which is quoted by Martin Šmatlák, shows that filmmakers themselves were very critical of the disorientation of Slovak film: “We are still only looking for big topics. We can’t decide whether to go deep or stay on the surface,” claims Juraj Jakubisko. “We’re in danger of being buried by an exclusive form,” answers Dušan Trančík (qtd. in ŠMATLÁK, M., p. 139). Zuzana Gindl-Tatárová’s article about the film *Modré z neba* (*Blue from the Skies*, dir. Eva Borušovičová, 1997) was also aware of the rumour and implied a critical attitude of Slovak film-makers towards the “hanging gardens” of Slovak film (TATÁROVÁ, Zuzana. Visuté záhrady Slovenska. In *Kino-Ikon*, 1998, Vol. 2, No. 4, pp. 75–76). The situation changed after the year 2000 when journalists started paying more attention to the success of documentaries and animated films, and after 2009 due to the success of live-action films with social themes at film festivals. In addition, alongside film industry professionals, they started working on improving the image of Slovak film. However, the myth of Slovak film’s impotence still survives in the minds of laymen and potential viewers. This phenomenon is currently being researched by Marek Urban from the Institute of Theatre and Film Research of the Slovak Academy of Sciences.

⁹ The Velvet Revolution, which was responsible for the downfall of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia, began in November 1989.

¹⁰ Ivana Taranenková addresses this phenomenon in the context of literary criticism and states that the basic expectations of literary critics were defined in two essays published in the Slovak literary journal *Slovenské pohľady* at the beginning of 1989 (the first essay was written by Milan Šútovec and the other one by Eva Jenčíková and Peter Zajac), as well as in the presentations at the conference *Situácia súčasnej literatúry* (*The Situation in Contemporary Literature*), held on 16 May 1989 in Budmerice. TARANENKOVÁ, Ivana. Premeny poetík? (Niekoľko poznámok k reflexii slovenskej literatúry po roku 1989). In *Slovenská literatúra: revue pre literárnu vedu*, 2009, Vol. 56, No. 6, pp. 72–79, and Bratislava: Vysoká škola výtvarných umení – Galéria Medium, 2011, pp. 31–39.

¹¹ MACEK, Václav – PAŠTÉKOVÁ, Jelena. *Dejiny slovenskej kinematografie*. Martin: Osveta, 1997, pp. 490–491.

ness of *Tenderness* is part and parcel of its fragmented narration, which is based on a gradual revelation of information and the preservation of a secret. The film is not progressive due to its theme, but rather its narrative style, which follows the trend of minimalist narration that started to dominate prestigious European film festivals in the late 1980s. Macek's attitude is later revised in the works of Martin Ciel, Martin Šmatlák and Eva Filová.¹² Apart from the works of Šulík, there were no other films that were peculiar for their progressive form, although there were some attempts in the 1990s which (like Šulík's early films) tried to combine the Slovak view of postmodernism with references to formal experiments of the "Golden Sixties" New Wave. An imperfect dramaturgy was the reason why two 1994 films, *Na krásnom modrom Dunaji* (*On the Beautiful Blue Danube*, dir. Štefan Semjan, 1994) and *Vášnivý bozk* (*Kiss of Passion*, dir. Miroslav Šindelka, 1994), did not succeed in this effort. Balco's *Rivers of Babylon* (1998) met a similar fate, which meant that other films did not even bother to seek higher values. They chose the populist version of postmodernism and eventually became quite popular among viewers – I am talking particularly about Dušan Rapoš's films, which over and over again explored the adventures of the beautiful Zuzana/Suzanne (Eva Vejmelková) from the popular teenage film from 1985, *Fontána pre Zuzanu* (*The Fountain for Suzanne*, 1985). It is clear now that the expression "too late" in the context of the beginning of the 1990s can be perceived in two different ways. On the one hand, there are these "outdated" themes, topics and methods of narration which belong to the rather cautious perestroika period (whether we are speaking about the depiction of the former regime in films like *When the Stars Were Red* and *The Right for the Past*, or about the sententious criticism of adolescent subcultures as it was portrayed in Martin Valenta's 1990 film *R.S.C.*). On the other hand, some are trying to recompense for the lost time with attempts lacking conception and structure. Their aim is to present aesthetics that did not really have time to get established in the Slovak environment. Commercially successful genres could be mentioned as examples: *Rošáda* (*Rochade*, dir. Peter Patzak, 1991) or the already mentioned postmodernism. It is never too late, but in the words of Eva Filová, the problem of this era's cinema in Slovakia is the withholding of important information concerning social and political change:

Now that the years have passed, we can state that the events which defined the course of our society's development were about the immediate experience rather than recording – the evidence to support this theory can be found in the relatively scanty film material (...). It is as if the intensity and urgency of the lived experience paralysed the ability to respond spontaneously by 'grabbing the cam and shooting'. It is more natural to be there and see things as a citizen rather than as a chronicler.¹³

Filová based her thoughts on the film revolution at the beginning of the 1990s on

¹² CIEL, Martin. Popis filmu *Neha*. In BRÁZDA, Marián (Ed.). *Svet v pohyblivých obrazoch Martina Šulíka*, Bratislava: Slovenský filmový ústav, 2000, pp. 22–53; ŠMATLÁK, M.; FILOVÁ, Eva. Spoločne, každý sám – reflexia minulosti v slovenských a českých filmoch. In PTÁČEK, Luboš. *Současný český a slovenský film – Pluralita estetických, kulturních a ideových konceptů*. Olomouc: Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci, 2010, pp. 87–101.

¹³ FILOVÁ, E., p. 89.

a fact which had also been examined by other film historians. Documentary films, which are by nature more prompt, are miles ahead of feature films, which are becoming anachronisms in terms of production and content.¹⁴ After several attempts at updating the rapidly obsolescent themes with insertions of archival journalistic material, which is the case of *Skús ma objať* (*Try to Embrace Me*, dir. Miloslav Luther 1991) and *Lepšie byť bohatý a zdravý ako chudobný a chorý* (*It's Better to Be Rich and Healthy Than Poor and Ill*, dir. Juraj Jakubisko, 1992), films seem to have surrendered. This withholding received a symptomatic response in Šulík's aforementioned debut. Film can in fact serve as a medium capable of *recording* events as they happen. It can also be a trace or an archive of the past. However, film was not used in this way in Slovakia during the transition period although we may think that the euphoric feelings at that time must have suggested it. Šulík's debut is nowadays still perceived as symptomatic thanks to his ability to work with "*zeitgeist*, a period's specific climate, which is embodied in the characters. It paralyses them in their activities, which may seem to be the exact opposite of the hectic and fully experienced rebirth of society."¹⁵ The plot itself is very simple and the narration is allusive. It is a story about a teenage boy, Šimon, who after a big fight with his father decides to move to town, where he idles away time in a rented flat until he accidentally meets a couple of thirty-year-olds, Viktor and Mária. He is drawn into their complicated relationship full of hidden remorse and mutual dependence. At the end of the film the boy returns home where he is visited by the couple and learns that Mária is pregnant.¹⁶ The secret that binds the couple is captured on a Super 8 mm film. It is a *record* of seemingly random activities of the two protagonists which discredits them as collaborators of the former regime (we can see Mária engaging in the activities of an interpreter and occasional lover of political officials while Viktor is a bodyguard). There is no sound or explanatory notes in the recording which is part of the whole conception of *Tenderness*. The narration consistently and repeatedly juxtaposes the word and the visibility of *indexical* image. This film deals with the difference between the cinematographic and verbal image of the rapidly changing society. It can be silent, but at the same time a testimony of the period. Words are exhausting because they complicate things too much and they are not capable of expressing them (every time Viktor is exhausted from the complicated relationship with Mária, who is, as an interpreter, very closely connected with words, he seeks the company of his deaf-mute lover). *Tenderness* can, therefore, be perceived as a reflection of tiredness from an excessively fast change in discourse. A very important fact needs to be taken into account: this film was created after the post-revolutionary euphoria, when the political discourses of numerous lobby groups were competing each other, which again compromised the entity of the word. The difference between the word and the image and in particular between the imprecise verbal speech and the existentialist condemnation of the "lost in transla-

¹⁴ ŠMATLÁK, M., pp. 136–7.

¹⁵ FILOVÁ, E., p. 89.

¹⁶ The film contains numerous biblical references, such as in the character names and with the use of apples as a symbol of temptation. Moreover, Šimon's (Simon's) situation is reminiscent of the biblical Simon in the desert and Mária (Mary), whose partner Viktor is infertile, becomes pregnant. They come to Simon and try to indirectly suggest that they will have the baby and that Simon is the father. This particular situation symbolises the understanding between generations which the traumatised post-revolutionary society was still waiting for.

tion" phenomenon is also displayed in the next Šulík film *Všetko čo mám rád* (*Everything I Love*, 1992), in which misunderstandings originate from language, both foreign (in the relationship of Tomáš and his young English lover) and Slovak. Words are not the same as things, images or events.

Generational aspects

It may be true that *Tenderness* is now viewed as a symptom of the era, but it does not necessarily depict the same social classes, places and political groups which were strongly perceived by the film's first recipients. Almost the entire plot is set outside of society in places like isolated flats, spiral staircases of pre-war houses, empty fancy cafés (and at the beginning and end of the village, near the house of Šimon's parents). On the one hand, there is a simplification of important social issues, which results in attempts to introduce Western pop culture to Slovak cinema (the films of Dušan Rapoš and the political thriller *Rochade*). On the other hand, it seems that numerous films which entered cinemas after 1992 shifted their attention away from social issues on purpose. Some films deal with the past rather than the present, for example, Milošlav Luther's *Anjel milosdenstva* (*The Angel of Mercy*, 1993). There are also films which by means of parables tried to capture the social changes but which gradually became perceived by viewers as well as by critics as forms of escapism or even as redundant works emphasising the passive "national" character. This does not apply only to Šulík's films, but also to the feature film debut of Semjan and Šindelka, *On the Beautiful Blue Danube* and *Kiss of Passion*. These films tried to create a certain generational gesture, which is characterised especially by a new understanding of the relationship between reality and fiction. Both these films, as well as *Everything I Love*, reflect a generation's attitude towards political change while using traditional national symbols in an ironic fashion. In addition, they all contain paraphrases and citations from other films and genres. *On the Beautiful Blue Danube* and *Everything I Love* even cite Slovak works, which reflects the need to find values in older cinema, which could be further developed after the regime change. *Tenderness*, *Everything I Love*, *On the Beautiful Blue Danube* and *Kiss of Passion* tried to change the perception of the relationship between film and social reality, whose image is created by seemingly insignificant and marginal characters. The integration of these characters, whether it is in the domain of work or the family, is either not specified or is influenced by negation and temporary crises. The films are no longer committed commentaries of social and political events or the past as one would expect, but an expression of scepticism about the possibility of finding the truth. All these films used some of the basic ideas of post-structuralism according to which we are living between texts, more precisely in language, without any direct access to reality. Thanks to the previously mentioned facts as well as numerous specific themes and motifs, all four films are from today's point of view a testimony of their time. However, they all expose only the attitude of a certain social, generational and ideological group towards the possibilities which presented themselves during the transition period. Generational gestures are not always associated with these films;¹⁷ nevertheless, from today's perspective they may be viewed

¹⁷ In *Dejiny slovenskej kinematografie*, Václav Macek writes about the significant differences in their approaches to film. He believes that the debuts of Semjan, Šindelka, Šulík and Roman Petrenka cannot be asso-

in these terms because of similar aesthetic sources and a similar reductive approach to selecting fragments referring to the current social environment. The generational attitude is reinforced by the age of the protagonists, which coincides with that of the debut directors (even though scripts were co-created with older scriptwriters such as Ondrej Šulaj, who co-operated with Šulík, and younger ones like Maroš Hečko, who helped Semjan). *Tenderness* is an exception because it is a variation on the *bildungsroman* with an adolescent boy as the main protagonist. The other three films focus on the feelings of thirty-year-olds whose adolescence was full of hopes for a brighter future, but whose productive years are filled with disillusion and the absence of life goals. The film *On the Beautiful Blue Danube* is a story about three friends who avoid steady relationships or family duties, do not have a lasting job and spend most of their time in the capital's cafés. The theft of Andy Warhol's painting, which is part of the plot, moves attention to changes in the notions of authenticity and creativity. The preferred method is recycling; there is no search for new values and solid characters are replaced by ones whose identity shifts. Allusions to the values of the Slovak New Wave of the 1960s, mostly related to the motifs of *Vtáčkovia, siroty a blázni* (*Birds, Orphans and Fools*, dir. Juraj Jakubisko, 1969) such as flying, positive madness, a feeling of uprootedness and a disbelief in fathers' values, point out the loss of the essentialist understanding of reality. Each step the protagonists take confirms the idea that we live between representations with no originals: "But certainly for the present age, which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, fancy to reality, the appearance to the essence (...); for in these days illusion only is sacred, truth profane."¹⁸

Warhol's Marilyn Monroe painting is itself a reference to recycled pop culture. *On the Beautiful Blue Danube* is basically about the stolen painting, which is made available in several copies, and the three main protagonists (as well as others) try to cover up the crime of forgery. The film also contains other symptomatic allusions to the local appropriation of "post-modernism". The city's memory is devalued, which is represented by the way the three friends appropriate various places of memory (*lieux de mémoire*) while strolling around the city. The places allude to the formation of national history during the 20th century (for instance, Slavín – the monument dedicated to fallen Soviet soldiers from the Second World War; the UFO café, which is situated on top of the Bridge of the National Slovak Uprising and shaped like a flying saucer;¹⁹ and the Slovak National Gallery). The historical layers of the city are liberated from former ideological meanings and transform themselves into the signified without referents.

The recurring motifs of blindness and observation have a similar symptomatic effect. They are both evidence that old forms of ideological manipulation have survived in the new regime. For instance, the main protagonists visit a circus where they get

ciated with the idea of generational solidarity because they are too different. MACEK, V. – PAŠTÉKOVÁ, J., p. 495.

¹⁸ FEUERBACH, Ludwig, *Essence of Christianity: Preface to the Second Edition*. In <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/feuerbach/works/essence/ec00.htm> (20. 9. 2014). This quote was also an inspiration for Guy Debord in his book *La société du spectacle*.

¹⁹ The café is one of the city's landmarks, built in an architectural style of socialist modernism style and at the same time an indirect reference to the history of the Bridge of the National Slovak Uprising (1967–1972). Because of its construction, a large part of old Bratislava and the former Jewish quarter had to go.

voluntarily *blinded* by a wet cloth. Furthermore, in the city they are *pursued* by a mysterious man in a grey coat.²⁰ Another plotline seems to be symptomatic as well: the bohemian lifestyle enjoyed by the protagonists is, as if by coincidence, accompanied by the pretended theft of the painting which they are paid for by a contractor. On the one hand, the film displays playfulness, a principle which entered Slovak culture and cinema in the second half of the 1960s thanks to the relieved ideological pressure linked with the essentialism of moral values. On the other hand, the principle of playfulness is also connected with involvement in criminal groups and suggests the demoralisation of the members of the social elite who prepared the regime change.

On the Beautiful Blue Danube was rejected by critics mainly because the director and his team were not able to create a compact piece of art. They were reproached for the film's long-winded script and as a result the film's distributor ordered them to shorten the four-hour film to a two-hour one, which was accompanied by many dramaturgical errors. The film and its creative elements are on the edge of creative amateurism, which makes this film a post-modernist and thematic "symptom" (with the selection of social reality which comes along with these themes). In addition, the young filmmakers were not prepared for the transition to new aesthetic forms, ways of funding and film distribution. A similar symptom can be found in *Kiss of Passion*, which has a brilliant Almodóvar-like beginning but which fails after a while due to insurmountable differences in acting schools.²¹ Moreover, there is also an imbalance in dramaturgy between motifs and their theatrical nature, which in some scenes is not ironic enough. Social elites are once again associated with crime. While the film *On the Beautiful Blue Danube* works with space and the hypocrisy of city life, *Kiss of Passion* is set in an unknown mining town full of underground tunnels and rooms. The spatial stratification also includes an old attic with mystical motifs of magnetism and reincarnation. The underground embodies the nation's consciousness, where erotic and criminal scenes take place. This may be the first time this metaphor appeared in post-socialist cinema. A year later it could be found in the long-prepared Emir Kusturica film *Underground* (1995). Another "aspect" characteristic for the film makers making their debuts in the 1990s, apart from the outlined environment, is the "opposition" of the village to the city, which is expressed by a search for identity. This applies to Šulík, Šindelka and Semjan as well.²² Towards the end of *Kiss of Passion*, the village is depicted as an ironised kitsch. The caption "The End" in the middle of a sunset vanishing behind the mountains and the ethnic motifs in the accompanying music could be perceived as an image of national identity. Nevertheless, in terms of

²⁰ The mysterious man is portrayed by the famous theatre director Lubomír Vajdička. This creates a whole new line of absurd connections between the character and the real-life occupation of the performer. The ambivalence of the character, which evokes connotations of a former member of the secret police as well as a detective-story character, is reinforced towards the end of the movie when the man in the coat is morally and intellectually superior in reality. He also reveals the reason for his pursuit. The hope of spiritual rebirth he was placing on their life style is eventually declared lost.

²¹ The incongruity in actors' performances occurs when the muted and impersonal expression of Czech actors Ivana Chýlková (1963) and Jiří Bartoška (1947) is compared with the auto-ironic and almost infantile performance of Jozef Kroner (1924), a Slovak actor of the old generation. The performances of younger actors such as Szidi Tobias (1967), Roman Luknár (1965), Matej Landl (1963) and even the famous amateur actress Katarína Kolníková (1921) have a similar effect.

²² There is no direct village environment in the preserved version of *On the Beautiful Blue Danube*, but some scenes are situated on the outskirts of Bratislava or even in its unpopulated areas.

plot the village symbolises the discovery of the main protagonist's lost and neglected feminine (maternal) identity. The Czech actress Ivana Chýlková, who portrays her, speaks her mother tongue during the entire film.

Adjustment to cinema through genre and thematic trends

Slovak film reflects social change mainly through its settings as it often uses the basic oppositions of village and city, centre and periphery, or architectural symptoms (architectural symbols can be used as symptoms of change). This all can be found in the debuts of Semjan, Šindelka and Šulík as well as in Slovak urban films.²³ A journalistic myth states that it is only now that the Slovak film is dealing with social issues as a result of a higher demand for documentary methods and real authentic stories. It most certainly stayed on topic after 1989 as well. This myth is invalid because fiction films of the 1990s, like documentaries of the new millennium and Slovak contemporary fiction films with elements of social drama, which are typical of the recent years in Slovak cinema, are all balancing on the thin line between documentary and fiction. The documentaries of the new generation of filmmakers, who the film critic Pavel Branko labelled "Generation '90",²⁴ use more narrative and genre schemes which are typical for feature films as well as animation techniques and interpositions. They do not use documented authentic situations or professional actors for fictional characters. One of the real characters in Jaroslav Vojtek's *Hranica* (*The Border*, 2009) is portrayed by an actor. In Peter Kerekes's *66 sezón* (*66 Seasons*, 2003) the character of Hitler is actually a Hitler imitator in real life, and in *Zamatoví teroristi* (*Velvet Terrorists*, dir. Peter Kerekes, Ivan Ostrochovský and Pavol Pekarčík, 2013) the fictional characters portrayed by amateurs represent real people. Mária Ferenčuhová states that the documentaries of the new generation seem to be true, or more precisely authentic, thanks to special usage of tropes and figures of speech. Therefore, they are a rhetoric adaptation of reality rather than a simple recording. "It is no longer a rule that only the raw, untouched material – the 'actual recording' is truthful. A comprehensible and familiar message which corresponds with our vision of the real world and the inconspicuous fictions present in our lives can be true as well."²⁵

Films after 1989 use different ways to express their attitudes towards history and current society. The late appearance of post-structuralist theories and the general tendency to challenge the truth, which after 1989 grew stronger in Western Europe, lead to an ironic and cynical attempt at the relativisation of the relationship between fiction, reality and autobiography. This phenomenon is present in the films of Šulík, Semjan and Šindelka. Their potential is not really fulfilled mainly because the new generation is unprepared and cannot deal with the new aesthetics (and the "devastated" cinema is not able to give them another chance). The only one capable of this is Šulík, who is the sole representative with a continual production during the 1990s.

²³ More in DUDKOVÁ, Jana. Between the Center and the Margin: the Nation of Central Europe in Slovak Cinema after 1989. In *Illuminace: časopis pro teorii, histórii a estetiku filmu*, 2013, Vol. 25, No. 4 [92], pp. 79–94.

²⁴ BRANKO, Pavel. Slovenský dokumentarný film – Generácia '90. In *Straty a nálezy 2*. Bratislava: Slovenský filmový ústav – FOTOFO – FTF VŠMU, 2005, pp. 47–50 (previously: In *Film.sk*, 2004, Vol. 5, No. 2, pp. 22–24).

²⁵ FERENČUHOVÁ, Mária. Figúry a trópy slovenských dokumentaristov. Poznámky k rétorike a poetike súčasného slovenského dokumentárneho filmu. In *Kino-Ikon*, 2011, Vol. 15, No. 2, p. 17.

Gradually, this potential, partly also under Šulík's influence, results in a new form of relating to social reality in which the history of the nation and cinema are no longer autobiographical and cease to be an intellectual play among the insiders. They seem to have become a symptom of the narrowing of interests of young filmmakers who do not care about history and the concept of the nation anymore. Playing with double identities in *On the Beautiful Blue Danube* can be perceived exactly in this fashion. The same applies to the autobiographical elements of *Modré z neba's* script, directed by Eva Borušovičová and written by Jana Skořepová (*Blue from the Skies*, 1997), or *Hana a jej bratia*, directed and written by Vladimír Adásek (*Hana and Her Brothers*, 2011). This narrowing of the experiential world and its hidden political connotations (for example, those present in the ideological formation of the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava as a centre of disagreement with the political restrictions of culture during the "Mečiar period") can distinguish the new millennium films whose ideology was still influenced by a silent anti-regime resistance and the atmosphere at the academy before 1998. Casting classmates and professors for minor and leading roles in *Hana and Her Brothers* and *Vadí nevadí* (*Truth or Dare*, dir. Eva Borušovičová, 2001) functions as an inside joke. This simultaneously defines the ambivalent relationship of 1990s Slovak cinema towards the general social situation. The situation resembles the one from *On the Beautiful Blue Danube*, where only a group of chosen ones understand the jokes.

This phenomenon also creates the particular impression that Slovak cinema is closed within its own universe. It also still slightly lags behind the current trends in relating to social and political reality. However, in recent years, this has led to a new type of response that filmmakers have made to the vicious circle situation which they have found themselves in. In other words, these are mainly marketing-related questions directed at the media which cover issues like whether or not to present a film at a festival, an art cinema or a multiplex cinema; or whether to seek international success or speak to local viewers. Various strategies to overcome the feeling of belatedness are developed during this period. On the one hand, there is a strong will to show the world the forgotten Slovak cinema; on the other hand, there is an attempt to attract a broader viewership.

The term "Slovak tiger" is a metonymy of the Hivos Tiger Award,²⁶ which was given to *Môj pes Killer* (*My Dog Killer*, dir. Mira Fornay, 2013) during the Rotterdam Film Festival. In a more general sense, it can be used to describe the growing recognition of Slovak cinema at European film festivals. Despite this fact, Slovak films with festival success battled with low cinema attendance at home in 2013.

Is recent success the result of a more authentic depiction of reality? Is Slovak cinema capable of animating social change? Does it reflect the state of Slovak society adequately enough? All these questions are useful even though they are rhetorical and remain unanswered. The debuts of Peter Kerekes, Robert Kirchhoff, Marko Škopa, Marek Kuboš, Juraj Lehotský, Zuzana Piussi and Jaroslav Vojtek – all members of Branko's Generation '90 – have taken Slovak cinema to a place where it has not been for a long time. They examine the themes of official and individual history, or more

²⁶ The award was shared by these films: *Soldate Jannette* (by the Austrian director Daniel Hoesl), *Larzanandeyecharbi* (by the Iranian director Mohammad Shirvani) and *My Dog Killer* (by the Slovak director Mira Fornay).

precisely of history and memory (Kerekes), or criticise the political situation, state power structures and national ideologies (Piussi and Kirchhoff). Attention is also paid to different minorities through which the limits of defining majorities are often expressed (Lehotský, Škopa and Vojtek). The demand for more adequate images of social reality, which is evident from critics' positive evaluations of documentaries and from their opposite reactions to feature films, has been sporadically reflected in the responses of feature film directors. In 2005 Šulík's *Slniečny štát* (*Solar State*, 2005) entered Slovak cinemas and Zuzana Liová's *Ticho* (*Silence*, 2005) premiered on television. Thanks to these two films, social aspects of life outside the capital have come to the foreground. Slovak cinema had been hit by several waves, including of films of more or less familiar ethno-political myths as well as genres of fear and suspense (horror, sci-fi or thriller).²⁷ Only then did room for films inspired by the genre of documentaries, which dealt with lower class issues, the economic crisis and a crisis of traditional social values, open up and lead to the creation of several films in 2009–2012, including *Lištičky* (*Foxes*, dir. Mira Fornay, 2009), *Dom* (*The House*, dir. Zuzana Liová, 2011), *Až do mesta Aš* (*Made in Ash*, dir. Iveta Grófová, 2012), *Ďakujem, dobre* (*Fine, Thanks*, dir. Mátyás Prikler, 2013), *My Dog Killer* (dir. Mira Fornay, 2013) and *Zázrak* (*Miracle*, dir. Juraj Lehotský, 2013). It is also possible that none of these waves has subsided if we take into account what films are currently being prepared or are coming to cinemas.

All these waves mirror social preferences, but they are reactions to personal needs (heterogenic and opened) of professional-friendly "communities" of the film industry rather than direct representations. Besides this, the periodically emerging and recurring trends reflect the unpreparedness of Slovak cinema and its inability to fully use the possibilities offered by the selected genres. A great example of this and also of the reactions of cinema to the chaotic social and political change as well as to the thirst for new cinema models are the already mentioned genres of fear and suspense. On the one hand, they are connected to the personal preferences of filmmakers (script-writers, directors and producers); on the other hand, they may result from the sense of loss of life's certainties. This is reflected in the glocal character of projects which develop the sub-genres of horror, sci-fi or thriller. The fact that these films attract viewers and have a low cost may have been a decisive factor. Some choices of sub-genres and plots are clearly inspired by particular films that were already successful. This is the case of Peter Bebjak's *Zlo* (*Evil*, 2012), which was inspired by a series of film projects that started with *Blair Witch Project* (dir. Daniel Myrick, Eduardo Sánchez, 1999). *Devínsky Masaker* (*The Devín Massacre*, dir. Gejza Dezorz and Jozef Páleník, 2011) was created several months after the media brought the story about the massacre which took place in the urban district of Devínska Nová Ves in Bratislava on 30 August 2010, when a single culprit murdered eight people and injured fifteen more. The media reported that his acts were racially motivated. An interesting piece of information is that this film was created very "quickly", maybe even a little too quickly. The goal was not only to attract viewership, but also to raise funds for a long awaited and unrealised slasher horror film called *Fabrika smrti* (*The Death Factory*).²⁸

²⁷ Several 2012 films, such as *Evil* (by Peter Bebjak), *Attonitas* (by Jaroslav Mottl) and *Immortalitas* (by Erik Bošňák).

²⁸ A part from the film crew released another project, the film *Babie leto* (*Indian Summer*, dir. Gejza De-

The speed with which films are produced is a double-edged weapon. Slovak cinema still struggles with proper timing as well as with the harmonisation of two basic approaches (fast reaction and careful preparation). Even though support is more systematic thanks to the Audiovisual Fund, which was created in 2009, we still encounter films which were created outside this circle in a very quick fashion or with a semi-amateur expression. In addition, their conception of distribution is not thought-out properly. This is the case of the almost amateur like sci-fi film *Immortalitas* (dir. Erik Bošňák, 2013), the "summer" comedy *Tak fajn* (*Alright*, dir. Paľo Janík, 2012), or the already mentioned documentary/slasher horror film hybrid, *The Devín Massacre*. These "fast" films, in contrast to those "fast" films which were praised by critics as well as by audiences, such as the urban films for adolescents like Jakub Kroner's *Bratislava film* (2009), *Lóve* (2011) and Viktor Csudai's *Veľký rešpekt* (*Big Respect*, 2008), do not really influence the society of the given time. They have the potential to become retrospectively recognised as cult films, and their imperfect narration and expression could attest to certain aspects of cinema. They do not seem to have the ambition to record events as they are happening. Their only purpose is to reflect the internal issues of Slovak cinema. An entirely different approach was used by the almost perfect debut of Zuzana Liová's *The House*. This film had a longer but more effective preparation phase, which was used effectively by the author. Together with the scriptwriter, she polished the script in several international workshops. This type of films is gaining on what has been missed in terms of quality, but sometimes deals with anachronistic themes. Another cited film could be *Made in Ash*, directed by Grófová. In this case the preparation phase lasted a long time because the authors had to decide whether to make a documentary or a feature film.

Slovak cinema deals with numerous issues. One of them is the question of an amateur or entirely professional approach. Another one is connected with the target audience and whether to focus on local or foreign (festival) audiences, which is very closely linked with the speed of scriptwriting and production. However, cinema struggles for time as well. Some films got the timing right and are based on the current political and social situation, all thanks to their authors' intuition. This is exactly the case of the successful film *Kandidát* (*Candidate*, dir. Jonáš Karásek, 2013) whose book version was published just before the outbreak of the Gorilla scandal.²⁹ The publication of the book was rushed so that the book, although with editorial errors, would reach potential recipients while they still had the scandal in living memory. There was a similar intention with the simultaneously prepared film, but as a result of some realisation issues its release was postponed. The final cut entered the cinemas in October 2013, just before municipal elections and with the looming vision of the 2014 presidential election. However, its actual success was due to specific attempts at branding and the well-thought out polyphonic and sometimes auto-ironic teasing, marketing and PR campaigns of the film.

There are several findings which can be abstracted from the outlined fragments

zorz, 2013). This film was supported by the MINIMAL experimental programme, which was an attempt by the Audiovisual Fund to encourage the production of popular films within a budget of €100,000. The producer of this film made a feature-documentary comedy about the unsuccessful preparation of *The Death Factory*, which came to cinemas with the title *Prvý slovenský horor* (*The First Slovak Horror Film*, 2014).

²⁹ The Gorilla scandal was a political corruption scandal in Slovakia.

and used for further research. Slovak films after 1989 are not far from social “reality”, but they are not a direct representation of it either. They are symptoms of social, economic, legislative and political changes in the country as well as in cinema. Firstly, they have a direct (the economic crisis in *Fine, Thanks*) or indirect (escapes to idyllic, utopian, heterotopical and other types of environment as well as to genres and stylistic forms) relationship with these changes.³⁰ Secondly, they continue within a certain “climate” of cinema, which is a specific branch of culture created and controlled by different professions, institutions, lobby groups or communities. This “climate”, or rather discourse (and the repetition of some characters, ideas and themes on unofficial discussion platforms as well as texts transmitted by the media), is the reason for the silencing and recurrence of trends, themes and genre models. The same goes for the authors’ approach to the definition of film and its relation to reality, (auto) biography and fiction. The perfect example of how to summarise this is once again Jonáš Karásek’s *Candidate*. This film portrays the role of an advertising agency and the church in a presidential election. It also represents an attempt to start a discussion about cinema as a part of *the society of spectacle*.³¹ This phenomenon seems to be criticised through the conspiratorial plot; on the other hand, the film itself seems to be a well-thought out project and a successful advertising product, all thanks to great teasing and PR campaigns in the media and on social networks. Alongside the already mentioned campaign, the ambiguous narration supports, subverts and denies the phenomenon of the spectacle.³² In some cases, it even emphasises the role of the producer as he is one of the main authors and is therefore capable of incorporating some autobiographical features into the film.³³

Social change is no longer reflected only by films, which are closed texts, but also by the auto-referential relationship of an artefact (film) and the process of film making, production and distribution. This reflection depends very much on an understanding of the world as a series of manipulative images. A deeper analysis of the relationship of Slovak cinema and social and political change, events and phenomena still needs to be performed. This will be a part of a recently-started grant project entitled *Slovenská kinematografia po roku 1989* (*Slovak Cinema after 1989*), which is the core of this article.

Translated by Jozef Ferencz

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³⁰ DUDKOVÁ, J.

³¹ DEBORD, G.

³² For example, in some of the film crew’s photos or interviews.

³³ The producer of this film was Maroš Hečko, the author of the film’s theme, model and script. Similarly to the film’s director, he had also worked in advertising for several years.

SUMMARY

The article deals with several overlooked approaches to Slovak cinema after 1989 and the way they mirror social change. The first part describes the interrupted development of Slovak cinema and the feelings of belatedness which go with it. It focuses primarily on generational gestures, reflections on impressions of the transition period (in the debut films of 1990s directors such as Martin Šulík, Štefan Semjan and Miro Šindelka). It reveals basic themes and spatial metaphors of one's relationship towards society in these gestures, which indicate a gradual separation of filmmakers from reality. Other parts explain recent cinematographic developments as a reaction to this separation. Films have begun to adjust themselves to globalised culture, which has led to the connection of several features characteristic for the combination of the local and the global and of industrial and artistic images as well as with phenomena like festival films, popular films and auto-ironic films which reflect their own marketing mechanisms (*Candidate*).