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Velvet (Re-)Generation: New Slovak Documentarism after the Turn of the Millennium

Absztrakt

Introducing the concept 'New Slovak Documentarism', the study examines contemporary Slovak docufictions, with its direct foundations laid by the so-called 'Generation '90' (*Generácia 90*). Firstly, the essay argues that the era of change of Slovak cinema did not begin in 1989, and as a next step it contextualizes "New Slovak Documentarism" in a broader international film historical context. Subsequently, the paper keeps track of the transformation of non-fiction documentary into fiction film through *Môj pes Killer* and *Eva Nová*. Finally, it examines the capacity of contemporary Slovak cinema for international dialogue through the possibility of adapting postcolonial (film) theory, and tests it on Slovak Roma-themed films in *Zvonky šťastia* and *Cigáni idú do volieb*. The author concludes that the movement regenerated Slovak cinema, so it can be called the 'Second Slovak New Wave'.

Szerző

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<https://doi.org/10.31176/apertura.2021.17.1.11>

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To Stanislava Spáčilová

1989 or 2009?

Papers ^[1], summaries and journals in film history have conventionally linked the concept of Central European ‘contemporary cinema’ to the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, the regime changes of 1989, and – in the case of Czechoslovakia – the Velvet Revolution. In other words, such discourses identify the concept of contemporary film with the post-communist era. Speaking of Central (and/or Eastern) European cinema in general, in her opening article to the journal *Studies in Eastern European Cinema*, Ewa Mazierska perceives the boundaries between ‘old and new approaches’ in the change of the political–economic environment, repeatedly dividing the histories of the region’s cinema into ‘before 1989’ and ‘after 1989’ periods (Mazierska 2010, 5–16). Peter Hames does the same in his book about Czech and Slovak film, discussing the works of Martin Šulík, the most famous Slovak film director after the change of the regime in the context of ‘directors [...] since 1989’ (Hames 2010, 223). Similarly, Martin Palúch begins his overview of contemporary Slovak documentary film from 1989 onwards (Palúch 2015).

There is no doubt that the regime changes of 1989 are a significant milestone in the history of Central European cinema: the political transformation was accompanied by slow cultural changes, as well the confusion arising from the transition to market economy, resulting in the transformation of previous film production and distribution structures. As Peter Hames writes about the context of Czecho-Slovakia: “[t]he fall of Communism inevitably created a crisis in production, particularly since all government subsidies were virtually removed and, in the famous words of the current president, Václav Klaus, ^[2] the film industry was ‘a business like any other’” (Hames 2010, 12). However, Slovak film historian Jana Dudková warns that 1989 does not represent a sharp boundary in Slovak film history, as the former formal peculiarities and attitudes had not disappeared at once due to the Velvet Revolution, and new trends had not emerged on the horizon immediately (Dudková 2014, 40–53). Dudková identifies the temporal tension arising from unpreparedness for change and cinematic belatedness in the following way: “*ideological pressure [...] did not change dramatically after 1989 either,*” (Dudková 2014, 41), ^[3] so the films made before 1989 and “*released just after the revolution were therefore ‘anachronistic’*” (Dudková 2014, 42).

The asynchrony of changes affecting the political system and film history respectively are not limited to Slovak cinema; the same time lag can be observed throughout Central Europe. According to film historians, the thematic–stylistic features of Hungarian feature films from the 1990s show continuity with Hungarian cinema of the 1980s. The cinematic turn took place only a decade after the change of the regime. Following film historian Gábor Gelencsér, film historiography named this new kind of sensitivity ‘young Hungarian cinema’ (Gelencsér 2014, 320–324). With almost no internal antecedents, the movement launched in Romania in 2001 and known as the ‘Romanian New Wave’ (*Noul val românesc*) has become dominant not only within Romanian national film history, but remained one of the most exciting chapters of post-millennium European film culture. [4] In Czech cinema, the attitude towards the past changed after the turn of the millenium: the more benign earlier, nostalgic retro films gave way to historical films questioning past responsibilities. According to a recent overview, a similar trend can be observed in the post-millennial Polish cinema, where, in addition to the rise of entertaining film genres, the exalted-romantic representation of “sacred” national themes and Catholicism has been replaced by a demystifying and critical approach (Goscilo and Holmgren 2021). Based on these selected examples, the change in the history of Central European cinema occurred, in a formal sense, with a delay of about a decade and a half after the political climate change, creating a transnational context for the post-1989 Slovak cinema.

In the light of the above, it is worth separating the notion of ‘contemporary Slovak cinema’ from the Velvet Revolution. Thirty years have already passed since the change of the regime, questioning the uniformity of such an expanded political, cultural and filmic period. Looking into the period of Slovak cinema between 1990 and 2020, however, we can observe the internal division that characterizes other Central European national film practises in a similar way. Taking into consideration the diverse institutional, financial and aesthetic qualities of the films concerned, unlike previous approaches, I can *not* consider the period starting from the change of regime of 1989 to be the initiating milestone of ‘contemporary Slovak cinema’.



66 seasons

Still, it is not easy to designate a specific year as the starting point of the new period. The

establishment of the Slovak Audiovisual Fund (*Audiovizuálny Fond*) in 2009 marked a radical turning point in stabilizing the financing of Slovak national film production and making it predictable. In order to grasp the significance of its creation, the new financing model of the Fund must be understood in the light of previous practices. Due to the cessation of state subsidies in the 1990s, independent Slovak film production was practically put on the brink of termination, with only a few completed feature films per year, and even those were made mostly in international cooperation. This suggests the misleading impression that Slovak film is a phantom, a non-existing entity. After the split of Czechoslovakia in 1993, the situation was aggravated by the suspicious privatization of Koliba Film Studio in Bratislava (*Filmové ateliéry Koliba*) – founded in 1949 and operating from 1953 onwards as the first autonomous Slovak feature film studio. In 1995, during the third term of Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar (1994–1998), the studio was *de facto* closed. Privatization was part of a larger series of activities. Slovak historian Dušan Kováč notes: “*The governing coalition conducted privatization through direct sales to its own devotees, although it should not have been carried out by the government but by the National Property Fund*” (Kováč 2001, 317).^[5] The Slovak Audiovisual Fund eased problems of film production not only by increasing the amount of support, but also by its professional attitudes regarding self-government, accountability, the flexible use of funds and transparent decision-making.^[6] Jana Dudková sees the introduction of the new financial model as the beginning of a new era: “*It was only in 2009 that the situation changed and the Slovak Audiovisual Fund was established*” (Dudková 2014, 41).

Based on these considerations, the transformation of contemporary Slovak cinema, from an organizational and financial point of view, can be tied to 2009 instead of 1989. However, a shift in the history of Slovak cinema, characterising the choice of themes and forms, had already become visible by that time. In other words, the institutional turn was preceded by a cultural transformation, which can be attributed to *Generation '90*.

Generation '90

The new phase in Slovak film history can be associated not so much with the Velvet Revolution of 1989, or to the introduction of the new kind of support system in 2009, rather with the emergence of a new sensitivity of directors to problems in the first half of the 2000s. No sharp rupture emerged between ‘old’ and ‘new’ practices, rather a slow transition, shaped by the dialectic of continuity and discontinuity. Thus, it is not entirely useful to mark the starting point of the new period with a specific year. The beginning can be traced back to the first years of the new millennium, while the emerging trends were accelerated by the establishment of the Audiovisual Fund. Like the ‘young Hungarian film’ and the ‘Romanian New Wave’, the new era in Slovakia is also generational, and was named *Generation '90* (Generácia 90) by film critic Pavol Branko in 2004 (Branko 2004, 22–24). Indeed, in Slovak cinema the filmic turn was achieved by *Generation '90*. This generation laid the foundations for the international visibility of contemporary Slovak film. A broader time frame may help us understand the heterogenous quality of the

transformation.

Cooking history

One director, Martin Šulík, was able to break out from the ‘anachronism’ and ‘belatedness’ of Slovak cinema mentioned by Jana Dudková, i.e. lagging behind international trends. The existence of independent Slovak cinema was repeatedly questioned in discourses on the film culture of the first decade after the change of the regime. Alternatively, with a patronizing gesture, Slovak cinema was described as the ‘younger brother’ of Czech cinema. Speaking about the death of Slovak filmmaking, as well as directors who ‘emigrated’ to Prague or made films from Czech financial support (Juraj Herz, Juraj Jakubisko, Dušan Hanák, Martin Šulík), Peter Hames declares that Slovak cinema remained in the shadow of Czech cinema (Hames 2001.). Šulík’s feature films, which are in dialogue with the ‘Slovak New Wave’ (*Slovenská nová vlna*) of the sixties and seventies,^[7] especially *Everything I Like* (*Všetko čo mám rád*. 1993), *The Garden* (*Záhrada*. 1995) and *Orbis Pictus* (1997), were almost the only ones to represent Slovakia abroad. Beside these, *Rivers of Babylon* (Vladimír Balco, 1998), a film reflecting on the political (and economic) affairs of the Mečiar era satirically, was one of the few that reached the threshold of international interest. Emerging in the 2000s, *Generation '90* put Slovak cinema on the map again. Databases (sfu.sk, aic.sk), journals (*Kino-Ikon*, *Film.sk*, *Kinečko*, *Vlna*, *CinemaView*), festivals (*Medzinárodný filmový festival in Bratislava* since 1999, *Filmový festival inakosti* queer festival since 2007, *Fest Anča* animation festival since 2008, the student film festival *Skrátka študenti*), scientific research programs, DVD releases and foreign film weeks all indicate institutional regeneration.

Generation '90 mainly refers to directors with documentary interest, who began their careers in the 1990s but achieved their first domestic and international success in the 2000s. Film critics view their works as successfully filling a vacuum, a large deficit in Slovak cinema in the '90s, namely the lack of reflection on contemporary social conditions. Jana Dudková finds it 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 on any major social and political issues, whether in the present or the past” (Dudková 2014, 42). In light of this insight, it is hardly a coincidence that the allegory of *Rivers of Babylon*, foregrounding issues of corruption and the thirst for power, was a success among intellectuals. The film met the desire for the missing political commentary. While Balco’s film used fiction film tools, *Generation '90* chose predominantly the documentary. It is the documentary format that groups under the same umbrella directors such as Jaroslav Vojtek, Pavol Barabáš, Marek Šulík, Marko Škop, Juraj Lehotský, and a director from Košice with a double national identity, Peter Kerekes (in Slovak, or Kerekes Péter in Hungarian) as well as the ‘Slovak Michael Moore’, Zuzana Piussi, who was subject to political attacks due to her films (*Disease of the Third Power* [Nemoc tretej moci. 2011]; *From Fico to Fico* [Od Fica do Fica. 2012]). Pavel Branko, who coined the notion *Generation '90*, describes the movement not in an academic paper but in an essay, emphasizing characteristics such as subjective approach and strong directorial presence, as well as the transformation of technical conditions (Branko 2004, 22–24).

Žofia Bosáková gives an insightful overview both of the reception history of the notion *Generácia 90*, and of critical works dealing with Pavel Branko's text (Bosáková 2016, 385– 396). Although the generational nature of the movement has been accepted by most critics, "90" is considered problematic due to the fact that it was not clear whether Branko's essay refers to the debut of a group of authors, or rather a decade under transformation. Branko's flexible use of the terms *documentary* and *authenticity* is also debated. In a paper published in 2008 under the title *A Better Beginning: 15 Years of Slovak Documentary Film (Lepší začiatok. 15 rokov slovenského dokumentárneho filmu)*, Martin Kaňuch weighs the film-historical place of the politically committed *Voice 98* (Hlas 98. Marek Kuboš, 1998). He points out that this and similar documentaries, focusing on contemporary social questions or offering subjective histories typically include methods used by fiction films (Bosáková 2016, 388). Tomáš Hučko, focusing on social aspects, discusses the amalgamation of documentarist observation with the authors' creative intervention, and highlights fictional elements in the films (Bosáková 2016, 391). In his large-scale monograph, Martin Palúch considers authorship as the key feature of the films, due to their subjective approaches (Palúch 2015). Even though this subject matter has not dominated critical discourse, the recognition of the combination of fiction film with documentary characteristics has been present throughout the Slovak reception history of the term *Generation '90*.

The directors mentioned above created a heterogenous trend that I refer to as 'New Slovak Documentarism'. While Pavel Branko applies the concept Generation '90 to documentary filmmakers of the same age, I use the concept of New Slovak Documentarism in a broader sense, both in time and form. Necessarily, Branko was just able to outline the formation of a new cinematic trend in 2004; looking back today, we have a new perspective for viewing films made then and since that time. Therefore, on the one hand, the concept "New Slovak Documentarism" goes beyond specific generations, and it includes younger filmmakers or those who began their careers as directors later, for example, Mira Fornay, Mátyás Prikler, Iveta Grófová, Mária Rumanová, or Ivan Ostrochovský. The term, thus, represents a looser group of authors compared to a generation. On the other hand, contrary to Branko's approach, it encompasses both documentaries and works released as feature films, which explains why I use the term 'documentarism' instead of the narrower 'documentary'. The common ground for New Slovak Documentarism is social commitment and the fact that the authors combine documentarist and fictional methods in their films.

It is a question whether New Slovak Documentarism is an era, a film movement, or a school. Although it started as a generation, it later expanded to include younger authors and does not represent a unified group, either in style or in genre. Kerekes, for example, makes films filled with irony and uses an outline plan before shooting. His works are entirely different compared to Piussi's investigative video-journalism and political commitment. The group does not have a common manifesto either. Still, sketch films directed by diverse authors can remind us of the programmatic omnibus films of European modernism of the 1960s. In this sense *Slovakia 2.0* (Slovensko 2.0. Ondrej Rudavský, Martin Šulík, Viera Čákanyová, Zuzana Liová, Mišo Suchý, Juraj

Herz, Miro Jelok, Peter Krištúfek, Iveta Grófová, Peter Kerekes, 2014) and *Velvet Terrorists* (Zamatoví teroristi. Peter Kerekes, Ivan Ostrochovský, Pavol Pekarčík, 2013) are comparable to *RoGoPaG* (Jean-Luc Godard, Ugo Gregoretti, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Roberto Rossellini, 1963) or *Pearls of the Deep* (Perličky na dně. Jiří Menzel, Jan Němec, Evald Schorm, Věra Chytilová, Jaromil Jireš, 1963). I use the term New Slovak Documentarism to refer to a loosely connected group of authors, not as a generation or school.

New Slovak Documentarism either plays with the rules of documentary film in a postmodern way (*66 seasons* [66 sezón. Peter Kerekes, 2003]), or combines non-fiction and feature film elements (*Fine, Thanks* [Ďakujem, dobre. Mátyás Prikler, 2013]). We can also detect the tendency that documentary filmmakers become feature film directors (Jaroslav Vojtek, Marko Škop). The first phase of New Slovak Documentarism got inspired from traditions of the Slovak New Wave of the sixties and seventies, especially films of Dušan Hanák (*322*. [1969]; *Pictures of the Old World* [Obrazy starého sveta. 1972]), while it also anticipated more recent trends combining feature film with documentary and minimalist practice.

From fictional documentary to docufiction

New Slovak Documentarism, in my view, has influenced the dominant features of contemporary Slovak film. I prefer using the broader notion of 'documentarism' to 'documentary' when referring to these works because, as mentioned above, it is not only that documentaries apply fictional elements of feature films, but also the other way round: documentary filmmakers later turn to making feature films with non-fictional components. This particular combination, launched by Generation '90, is embedded in a broader international context, both in time and space.

As I have argued elsewhere on the transnationality of Slovak cinema, it would be necessary to introduce a comparative approach to the study of Central European film. A perspective considering regional, transnational, and post-colonial frameworks beyond paying attention to national peculiarities, is currently lacking (Gerencsér 2017, 37–38). Such an approach is justified not only by the fact that Central Europe is a fundamentally multi-ethnic region with similar historical tragedies, where state borders have constantly been redrawn, and hyphenated / accentuated identities proliferate, but also because we can detect parallel or opposing tendencies, gaps, or modes of self-representation. By comparing national film histories, we could understand the motives of our own particular culture more deeply. The aims and methods of New Slovak Documentarism can be paralleled with the Polish 'Black Series' (*czarna seria*), the micro-realism of the Czech New Wave, the Hungarian Budapest School, the Romanian New Wave, but, more broadly, Italian neorealism, the *cinéma vérité* movement, free cinema movement, or the Danish Dogme 95, as well as Ulrich Seidl's and Michael Haneke's low-key styles. In the following, I will focus on two Central European connections, using the framework of comparative film analysis.



Fine, Thanks

Let me point out first, that the amalgamation of fictional and factual ingredients in contemporary Slovak cinema is remarkably analogous to the novelty in Hungarian film history of the 1970s: a sociological sensibility referred to as ‘fictional documentary’ in scholarly literature, also known as the ‘Budapest School’. [8] In canonical films of the Budapest School, the intention to document reality is combined with fictional characteristics (narrative structure, dramatization, planned situations), and the moralistic approach characterizing feature films of the 60s is replaced by an analytical–descriptive principle focusing on the common man. No strict script was used, rather improvisation in front of the camera by self-playing characters and amateur actors (*The Prize Trip* [Jutalomutazás. István Dárday and Györgyi Szalai, 1974]; *Gyuri Cséplő* [Cséplő Gyuri. Pál Schiffer, 1978]). In Slovak cinema this combination can be observed, for example, in the case of Peter Kerekes’s *66 seasons*, in which a beach in Košice becomes a place of remembrance, and the main character is the director’s grandmother. In the light of post-colonial theories, Jana Dudková understands the film as a metaphor for the history of the region (Dudková 2013, 83–84). There are other metaphorical associations: food becomes a metaphor in Kerekes’ film entitled *Cooking History* (Ako sa varia dejiny. 2008), thoroughly examined by Mária Ferencuhová (Ferencuhová 2014, 29–34). As I have listed elsewhere, the hybridity of Kerekes’s films stems from the alienating effects combining reflexive documentary, the re-enactment of the past, the (pseudo-)infantile interviewing method, associative montage, and grotesque humor (Gerencsér 2019). His works also unveil documentary filmmaking, for example, *66 seasons* is highly self-reflexive *à la* Dziga Vertov. It presents the process of filmmaking itself, by highlighting the lack of planning, leaving the microphone visible in frames, and including the director’s instructions, that is, elements that are usually removed from the final cut. The partially (re)constructed documentary *The Devín Massacre* (The Devinsky masaker. Gejza Dezorz, 2011) also mixes non-fictional parts with fictional ones. Just as Béla Tarr’s characteristic feature film style (long take, slow camera movement, frozen narrative) emerged from his Hungarian fictional documentaries, such as *Family Nest* (Családi tűzfészek. 1977) and *The Outsider* (Szabadgyalog. 1980) made in the framework of the Budapest School, in contemporary Slovak cinema Marko Škop’s multiethnic, report-like documentaries (*Other worlds* [Iné svety. 2006]; *Osadné*. [2009]) continued into minimalistic feature films (*Eva Nová* [2015]; *Let There Be Light* [Nech je svetlo. 2019]). Similarly, in his feature film (*Children* [Deti. 2014]) Jaroslav Vojtek utilized his earlier documentarist explorations of people living on the margins of society (*Here We*

Are [My zdes. 2005]); *The Border* [Hranica. 2009]; *The Gypsy Vote* [Cigáni idú do volieb. 2012]).

Hotel Dawn

In addition to the stylistic-formal elements and their thematic similarity, the Budapest School and New Slovak Documentarism are also brought together by the analogy of their social function. Both trends aim to offer a political-social reflection lacking from the national film production of the time. While the Budapest School formulated their objectives programmatically in a 1969 manifesto entitled *Szociológiai filmcsoportot! (We Want a Sociological Film Group!)*, New Slovak Documentarism embraced the social sensitivity advocated by the cultural debates of the 1990s. It is ironic that while modern social problems remained almost invisible in Slovak film culture in the first decade after the Velvet Revolution, as Katarína Mišíková observes, social drama (*socialná dráma*) has become the most unified genre of contemporary Slovak cinema (Mišíková 2015, 29–36), which is, I add, a complete turnaround. These movies face pressing social issues, such as racism and violence (*My Dog Killer* [Môj pes Killer. Mira Fornay, 2013]; *Let There Be Light*), prejudices against the Roma minority (*Gypsy* [Cigán. Martin Šulík, 2011]); *The Gypsy Vote*; *Goat* [Koza. Ivan Ostrochovský, 2015]), alcoholism (*Eva Nová*), the issue of sexual abuse accelerated by the #metoo movement (*Filthy* [Špina. Tereza Nvotová, 2017]), as well as the multiple linguistic–cultural–economic fringe experience (*Here We Are*; *The Border*; *Hotel Dawn* [Hotel Úsvit. Mária Rumanová, 2017]).

The second connection with Central European cinema is to the Romanian New Wave. At the beginning, the Romanian New Wave also turned its own disadvantage to an advantage. The lack of financial support and the technical–infrastructural conditions contributed to the signature aesthetics of the films: rare use of non-diegetic music, minimalist tools, long takes, and hand-held camera. The monetary disadvantage was counterbalanced by inventive ideas, striking dialogues, and high-quality acting. The pioneer realizations of *Generácia 90*, in my opinion, lead to a similar development in Slovak film, turning the shortcomings of the national support system to their virtue. Since the documentary requires a relatively low budget, it emerged first from these circumstances, followed by documentarist fiction film, which in turn became the dominant profile of contemporary Slovak cinema. This connection disproves in itself the claim that the Audiovisual Fund, set up in 2009, was a turning point, because processes leading to international success in the 2010s had already been going on in the background prior to 2009. New Slovak Documentarism shares the institutional and cultural characteristics of the Romanian New Wave (low-budget, documentary-likeness, natural acting, natural locations). Also, contrary to the frequently restricted readings of Western film criticism, these Romanian and Slovak movies are not merely annunciations of the frustrations, historical traumas, and current miseries of Central European nations. Beyond specific spatial and temporal features, these films provide more general human lessons: *66 seasons* is not only about the survival strategies of a multi-ethnic region along the cataclysms of the 20th century, but also about the function of mnemotechnics, as well as passing and forgiveness; *Blind loves* (Slepé lásky. Juraj Lehotský, 2008) is not just about social inequality, but also love, solidarity, and universal reconciliation; *Goat* is not only about sport as an

opportunity for a Roma man to advance, but also perseverance and resumption.

In what follows, I will provide a brief outline of the ways in which the Slovak documentary method is applied in feature films, using two films as examples: *My Dog Killer* and *Eva Nová*.

My Dog Killer

My Dog Killer, directed by Mira Fornay focuses on how a young boy, lacking an intimate family, becomes a skinhead and is finally turned into a killer by his pit bull dog. Although the plot's baseline is grotesque (Marek, the skinhead faces the fact that his stepbrother is a Roma), the story ends up in tragedy. The film is thematically related to the work of the Hungarian film director, Bence Fliegauf's *Just the Wind* (Csak a szél. 2012), based on real events, dealing with the event of racist murders of Roma in Hungary in 2009. The movie was the absolute opposite of Fliegauf's oeuvre. Fornay's storyline is fictional, while Fliegauf's is based on actual events. The latter depicts the murder against the Roma from the Roma's perspective, Fornay portrays the event from a skinhead's point of view, focusing on the causes of the murder rather than the victims. Both films follow their protagonists with hand-held cameras, adding a further feel of documentarist authenticity to the pictures. Due to the films' low budget, both are minimalistic, leaving out spectacular sets and epic action. Like Fliegauf, Fornay also assigned the leading role to an amateur, a non-actor (Adam Mihál), increasing the sense of reality and credibility. The sustained, contemplative, and motionless opening in *My Dog, Killer* predicts the gloomy mood of the whole film. Real spaces – the housing estate, the run-down pub, graffiti on the subway, the depressing colors of the rural vineyard – are also descriptive sociographic sights, recalling Romanian New Wave cinema.

The Slovak director's film examines the question of racism, how it develops and why someone becomes a skinhead. It investigates, through tiny mosaic pieces, how seemingly insignificant actions lead to the actual murder of a Roma. Although the Roma stepbrother Lukáš is torn apart by Killer, the pitbull, it is Marek who is responsible for the act, because his playing with violence involves the possibility of a crime. We do not have to become monsters to be evil, it is enough to flirt with racism. Fornay's film is similar to a documentary, showing how routine actions lead to terrible consequences, demonstrating the consequences of 'thoughtlessness', as discussed by Hannah Arendt in 'The Banality of Evil'. [9]



My Dog Killer

Marko Škop started his career with documentaries, and in *Eva Nová* he also adapts the documentary form to fiction film. Škop studied journalism and documentary filmmaking at university, palpable in his report-like documentaries, which can be characterized by the anthropological method of fieldwork and the participation of the author. *Eva Nová* is a film about the vicissitudes of an aging actress, who is just released from alcohol rehab and is trying to reintegrate into outdoor life. The director analyses the question of whether there is possibility to return to a prelapsarian state from exile, namely back into an acting career and family harmony.

Eva Nová

The documentary heritage can be grasped in the lack of cinematic tools: the film takes place in natural locations in Sabinov and Petržalka (Bratislava, District 5.), it does not use music (the only exception is when the main character, Eva Nová listens to Karel Gott's chanson titled *C'est la vie*, as a kind of career farewell song), employs mostly close-up shots, and the dialogues are unartificial. The narrow, isolated spaces shown by the motionless camera remind us of the rigid style of Michael Haneke and Ulrich Seidl. However, Škop combines the documentary method of micro-realistic observations with fictional components stemming from feature films. The plot has a clear dramaturgical arc with a structured overture (the protagonist is just leaving the rehabilitation institute) and a closure (Eva Nová, the alcoholic mother, and her son, Ďoďo are wryly reconciled). The powerful pictorial compositions acting as visual metaphors step away from the documentarist heritage. One example is when we see the wrinkled face of the actress staring directly at the camera, along with her youthful face on a poster on the wall, crossing and counterpointing her success in the past and her desolation in the present. The final scene also uses a strong visual symbol, showing the mother and her son swimming together in a garden pool, restoring family harmony on the surface, and resulting in a seemingly happy ending, save the bottle of alcohol floating on top of the water. The title itself is symbolic, because 'Eva Nová', the proper name of the diva in the leading role, means 'New Eva' in Slovak, adding biblical connotations to the plot. The reference to the Old Testament elevates the story of the aging actress to a mythological level, since the film reconfigures the woman's alcoholism as the Fall in Paradise, and her neglect as an

actress is a kind of expulsion from the biblical Garden of Eden. So their own garden becomes a biblical metaphor for the wild Garden of Eden, where the return is impossible. These metaphors, as well as the fact that Škop, in contrast to Fornay, gave the lead role to a celebrated professional Slovak actress (Emília Vášáryová), distance the film from documentarism – although, in many respects, the actress's career and the character of her role are very close.

Both *My Dog Killer* and *Eva Nová* share minimalist aesthetics but, as it has been revealed, they develop the combination of documentary and fictional methods into opposite directions.



Eva Nová

Roma representations and Central European postcolonialism

A special trend within New Slovak Documentarism introduced by Generation '90 is the representation of the Roma minority. In the following, I would like to demonstrate that with topics such as the Roma question, New Slovak Documentarism overcame the 'belatedness' and 'anachronism' mentioned by Jana Dudková, and enabled a dialogue between Slovak cinema and contemporary international currents.

The history of Slovak cinema abounds in the depiction of the Roma. Dušan Hanák's lyrical-romantic film, *Pink Dreams* (Ružové sny. 1977) was internationally a pioneer in openly paying attention to the prejudices, fueled by stereotypes, against this minority group. The heterogeneous context and extensive tradition of the Slovak 'Roma film' is indicated by a whole range of films: *Deserters and Pilgrims* (Zbehovia a pútnici. 1968) by Juraj Jakubisko is a philosophical allegory, *Goat* a sports film, *Gypsy* by Martin Šulík as well as *All My Children* (Všetky moje deti. 2013) by Ladislav Kaboš focus on Roma life using a hyperrealistic approach, *Roma House* (Rómsky dom. Marko Škop, 2001), *Made in Ash* (Až do mesta Aš. Iveta Grófová, 2012) and *Hotel Dawn* are sociological descriptions, and finally *A Hole in the Head* (Diera v hlave. Robert Kirchhoff, 2017) negotiates the Roma Holocaust. My view is that theories of postcolonialism, although used primarily in discourses on the 'Third World', offer excellent perspectives to explain these films. Works of Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Homi K. Bhabha, or R. Siva Kumar can be applied to Central European countries and peoples that have been oppressing ethnic minorities and individual cultures throughout their histories. In fact, the Bulgarian critic Alexander Kiossev has

already applied such an approach. Agreeing with Anikó Imre, who also calls for the introduction of postcolonial theories to understand the cinematic region discussed, I feel there is no doubt “*that the postsocialist region is postcolonial*” (Imre 2014, 113). Below I explore the alternative possibilities of ‘minor cinema’^[10] and postcolonial approaches in two films.



Bells of Happiness

Bells of Happiness (Zvonky štastia. 2012) made by the duo Jana Bučka and Marek Šulík does not carry on the traditional Roma representation, as it crosses the Roma theme with fan culture. *Bells of Happiness* presents the culture and the multiply disadvantaged position of the Roma beyond cultural otherness, social prejudice or racial stigma. Rather than assuming a sociographic or ethnographic approach, the film touches on a number of issues, ranging from the desire for social and economic emancipation through the problems of popular culture, subculture, multiculturalism, the creation of a virtual reality, to trans-gender expression. According to the storyline, the two socially disadvantaged Roma, Mariena and Roman, are fans of the Czech singer Karel Gott and the Slovak Darina Rolincová, and their old-fashioned pop song entitled as *Zvonky štastia* (*Zvonky štěstí* in Czech), originally performed in 1984. The admirers, watching one of the talent shows, decide to re-shoot the music video and send it to the singers. The verses of the song were originally performed alternately in Czech and Slovak language, in line with the cultural propaganda of the official ideology of Czechoslovakism, and the main characters of the film muse whether the song should be sung in Czech, Slovak or Roma. The fact that Mariena and Roman obsessively clip images of the two singers from tabloids indicates their almost religious worship of the singers. Sacred relics in their house mix well with Karel Gott's posters covered by flies – which ironically recalls the flyspecks on the portrait of the emperor Franz Joseph of Austro-Hungary in the famous novel *Švejk* written by Jaroslav Hašek. Their hopeless life situation is counterbalanced in an imaginary way, their desires are realised in fantasy, thus the film couples the sociography of Roma representation with issues of passionate hoarding, enthusiasm, and the search for identity.

Bells of Happiness

A fan culture with an extreme fascination for its celebrities and a penchant for dressing up as them makes the social drama of *Bells of Happiness* a multi-layered one. The documentarist approach to

filmmaking and the use of a hand-held camera evoke sociographic methodology and goals, while the familiar involvement of the filmmakers into the particular community implies an anthropological 'participant observation'. Contrasting deep poverty and a room dimly lit by candlelight with the spotlight of two star singers, the film explores scarcity in a special way through pop culture, going beyond the usual questions.



The Gypsy Vote

Similarly to the work of Šulík and Bučka, Jaroslav Vojtek's film *The Gypsy Vote* focuses on the Roma in Slovakia and their political representation, and it also differs from the traditional depictions. The film is humorous (or tragicomic) in some ways, but successfully avoids to turn the 'carnavalesque' mode in the Bakhtinian sense to a farce – a style associated with Emir Kusturica's films. Gypsy (anti-)heroes are neither depicted disdainfully, nor idealized in the film. By integrating fictional and non-fictional modes, Vojtek's film follows the election campaign of Vlado Sendrei, a renowned Slovak Roma musician, who wants to become the first Roma politician in Slovakia. Sendrei actually ran in the Slovak elections in 2009, and in this sense the film is related to the documentary tradition. However, starting from the process of nomination through the political campaign to losing the election, the dramaturgical curve is structured according to the narrative schemes of a feature film. The camera – occasionally strongly reminiscent of British *kitchen sink* realism – becomes a participant in the events and captures the subject matter analytically rather than judgmentally.

The use of contrasting registers, the combination of comic and tragic elements, which is embedded in a long tradition of Czech/Slovak films, is not necessarily to be interpreted merely in terms of the extent to which they perpetuate stereotypical representations or convey negative images of the Roma. Instead of continuously keeping in mind the binary logic of positive and negative images depicting Roma in films, I find it more productive to adopt insights of postcolonial theory in the discourse – just as the discipline of anthropology itself repatriated from 'exotic' locations to the Western world. Gayatri C. Spivak's classic question on the unrepresentable (*Can the subaltern speak?*) and the transitional forms of the colonizer and the colonized, cultural diversity outlined by Homi K. Bhabha, as well as theories of hybridity could provide frameworks for a postcolonial interpretation of the depiction of Roma in Central Europe – a notion underrepresented in contemporary Roma film discourses. I consider that hybridity and fluid

identities developed by cultural colonization are the basic problems highlighted by *The Gypsy Vote*.

The Gypsy Vote

It is significant in a postcolonial context that the film's characters, constructing their Roma identities, are constantly confronted with issues of multiculturalism and cultural heterogeneity. Vlado Sendrei positions himself as a Roma in the public sphere and enters the political world in order to grant political representation to the Roma in Slovakia through his mandate. However, in contrast to ethnic-based political practice, the candidate and his staff constantly stumble upon the uncertainty of definition, and the ambiguities of the Roma identity: who can be regarded a Roma, and based on what characteristics? As a result of the exchange between the colonizer and the colonized, hybrid identities were born, resisting clear-cut categories. Accordingly, the designation 'Roma community' refers to a heterogeneous group, divided in itself, and the slogan 'the Roma representation' itself becomes a colonial concept, producing new kinds of subordinated, oppressed, sub-minority identities. The film presents an example of implicit self-colonisation and shows the absurdity of all kinds of stereotypes in the scene where the Roma campaign team goes on the campaign trail in yellow T-shirts, and it is said that yellow is inappropriate because it is "not a gypsy colour" (this can be interpreted as internalised racism). The conversations in the minibus shed light on the ambivalence of the implied identity politics, and the multiple identities of Romani people in Slovakia. Ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity and the instability of identity are exemplified in grotesque dialogues in which, among others, a member of the Roma campaign staff is asked reproachfully whether he is a Roma or Slovak after all. His witty response is the following: "*I am a Slovak Roma, but I speak Hungarian*". The humour and absurdity of the situation is amplified by montages that suggest distinct feature-film solutions. While the debate on identity is ongoing, the dialogues are interrupted by cuts showing billboards placed along the way, with slogans of the Slovak far-right party, propagating its desire for linguistic uniformity: *Pozsony? Nie, Bratislava! (Pozsony? No, Bratislava!)*.^[11]

Consequently, while both the far-right and the Roma identity politics aspire to homogeneity at the level of political ideology, in fact, linguistic-cultural hybridization has ruled out the possibility of fixed identity at the practical level of everyday life. Heterogeneity replaced the fiction of homogeneity, and multiple and hybrid identities emerged as a result of linguistic, ethnic and cultural mixture, requiring the introduction of postcolonial (film) theories to the discourse about Central Europe.

Slovak New Wave 2.0?

The significance of the New Slovak Documentarism launched by Generation '90 can be grasped in the fact that it put Slovak cinema on the international film map again, and brought a boom comparable to the "Slovak New Wave" of the 1960s-1970s. Throughout its history, Slovak cinema has always struggled with discontinuity; the Slovak New Wave was also stymied by the Soviet

military invasion of 1968 and the subsequent ‘normalisation’ of Gustáv Husák. After interrupted oeuvres, movements, isolated practices, and perpetual restarts, only in the last twenty years has there been a sustained opportunity for organic growth for the first time. As a result, the ‘velvet regeneration’ of New Slovak Documentarism produced works as strong as those of the first Slovak New Wave. Thus, it is not an exaggeration to label it as ‘Second Slovak New Wave’. The internal antecedents of New Slovak Documentarism, among others, include Dušan Hanák’s films combining documentary and feature film, or Štefan Uher’s amateur actors. The prominent directors, Hanák and the ethnographic film author Martin Slivka, who began their careers in the 1960s, became professors of the artists of Generation ’90 at the university in Bratislava. In their case, there is continuity between the two Slovak new waves even at a personal level. Slovak film has undergone an almost complete turnaround: while in the 1990s critics criticised the national film for its escapism and lack of social sensitivity, today the leading genre is “social drama”. Moreover, film has become part of political activism in the works of Zuzanna Piussi and especially Mariana Čengel-Solčanská (*Kidnapping* [Únos. 2017]); *Scumbag* [Sviňa. 2020]). The latter author has taken fictional documentary to a new level, not just reflecting on, but also influencing recent public affairs.

[The Hungarian version of this article is published in this same thematic issue]

Jegyzetek

1. This paper is a reconsideration and significantly extended version of my short essay published earlier (Gerencsér 2018, 38–41).
2. Václav Klaus was the president of the Czech Republic from 2003 to 2013.
3. We should not forget that film production was a state monopoly in Czechoslovakia after the collapse of communism until 1993, which meant that private productions were (theoretically) illegal, that is, the change had not yet taken place even from an institutional point of view before that time.
4. About the movement in comprehensive detail, see: Pop 2014.
5. The quotation is my translation to English. (Original, in Slovak: Kováč, Dušan: *Dejiny Slovenska*. Praha: Nakladatelství Lidové Noviny, 1998.)
6. About the principles of the Fund, see its web site in English: <http://www.avf.sk/english.aspx>
7. We should avoid confusing the notions of Czechoslovak New Wave Cinema and Slovak New Wave. It is under heavy discussion whether Slovak New Wave can be considered an independent movement or to what extent, and whether the concept is comparable to the Czechoslovak and French New Wave. Still, the term is used in both Slovak and international academic discussions. In their huge overview on Slovak film history, Jelena Paštéková and Václav Macek identify the Slovak New Wave in the works of the new-minded, generational auteur filmmakers (Juraj Jakubisko, Dušan Hanák, Elo Havetta) who began to establish a separate movement in the late 1960s, but this was broken by the 1968 Soviet invasion and subsequent ‘normalization’ (Macek and Paštéková 2016, 484–485). In this sense, the Slovak New Wave is interrogated as a distinct phenomenon by Jonathan L. Owen, who sees the *raison d’être* of the term in the strengthening of international relations of Slovak cinema, the role of folklore, and avant-garde tendencies (Owen 2011, 129–130). Moreover, the growing autonomy of Slovak filmmaking in this period, mainly under the institutional management of Albert Marenčin, openly encouraged Slovak film to get rid of the colonizing effect of the Czechs, the ‘elder brother’, which, among others, resulted in the cooperation of

Slovak film artists with Alain Robbe-Grillet (Owen 2013, 63–77).

8. In summary, see: Gelencsér 2002, 244–263. In a broader framework: Gelencsér 2013.
9. I have discussed the logical connection of anti-Semitism and anti-Roma regarding *My dog Killer* and *Shop on Main Street* (Obchod na korze. Kadár, Ján and Klos, Elmar, 1965), the Academy Award winner (Czechoslovak Holocaust film, see (in Slovak): Gerencsér 2017).
10. The concept of ‘minor cinema’ was introduced into the discourse by Tom Gunning (Gunning 1989–1990, 2–5).
11. *Pozsony* is the Hungarian name of Bratislava, capital of Slovakia. Historically, it was a multi-ethnic city (with German, Hungarian, Slovak, and Jewish inhabitants) and the capital of the Kingdom of Hungary for a long time. It was made part of Czechoslovakia in 1919 (formally in 1920) and renamed as Bratislava.

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