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Historical and National Background of Slovak Filmmaking

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While the United States is usually seen as a new country and the European countries as ancient ones, the emergence and demise of countries and border shifts have been much more widespread, dramatic, and consequential in Central Europe, as well as in the rest of the continent, in the past century than anything in American experience during the same period. In extreme instances, by the time a person was eighty, he or she could have been a citizen of up to eight countries without ever leaving his or her hometown.

Slovakia in Europe, Real and Symbolic Geography

A major concept and understanding that has been absent in almost all writing about Central Europe in English is the term "Central Europe" itself. It is sometimes taken to be an old German invention designed to justify the expansionist concept of *Lebensraum*, or it is discussed as an invention of Czech émigré author Milan Kundera, especially in his essay "The Tragedy of Central Europe."¹ Yet, a character in the German film *The Edukators (Die Fetten Jahre sind vorbei*; dir. Heinz Weingartner, 2004) says at one point, quite matter-of-factly, "here in Central Europe." It is revealing that the English subtitles translated it merely as "here in Europe" for American audiences.

Stripped of any Kundera-esque connotations, *Central Europe* has long been a simple geographic concept, like the Midwest in the United States. Illinois is a Midwestern state, not an Eastern or a Western state, regardless of whether it votes blue or red. Theoretically, specialists could decide to call it an Atlantic state in symbolic geography in order to indicate that it voted blue in 2004, but that would have nothing to do with the real geography of the United States, and would sound rather odd to Midwesterners and to those who did not flunk geography. The same applies to Central Europe.

Without fanfare, from Switzerland to Slovakia and from Poland to Hungary, geography schoolbooks have been teaching children that their country is in Central Europe (going clockwise from the west: Germany, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Austria, Switzerland, and the Czech Republic in the middle). It was no different on both sides of the Iron Curtain during the

¹ *New York Review of Books* (26 April 1984): 33.

Communist period. The German Democratic Republic was “East Germany,” but it was in Central Europe. Polish, Slovak, Hungarian, Czech Communist propagandists and the media never made any attempt to redraw Europe’s geography, although they, too, employed symbolic geography when they spoke of the decaying West and the progressive East, because for local propagandists, just as for their fellow countrymen, the “east” was not “here” in Central Europe. It was in the Soviet Union. Their part of Europe was Central Europe under the Habsburgs, during democracy, under Nazism, under Communism, through the present.

American “Eastern European” specialists sometimes relate the instances of astonishment expressed by the locals when they said “here in Eastern Europe” while visiting Dresden, Prague, or Košice. The locals found it as gravely misinformed on the factual level as if a visiting European expert in American Studies said “here in New England” while giving a lecture at Bloomington, Indiana. Regardless of any emotional reactions evoked by symbolic associations with “east” and “west,” that simply is not what the Central European geography textbooks have taught the people there about where in Europe they are. The fact that Bloomington is not in the Southwest, does not bracket it with New England, and while Budapest is not in Western Europe, that does not place it in Eastern Europe. Like the United States, Europe has more geography than only the east and the west that seem to loom so large to observers from across the Atlantic.

Before 1918: Habsburg Monarchy, Kingdom of Hungary

When film first reached Central Europe, the territory of today’s Slovakia had been part of the Kingdom of Hungary for about 900 years. Its predominantly Slovak counties were in the north-western, mountainous part of the Kingdom. Often called informally the *Upper Country* (usually translated into English loosely as *Upper Hungary*), it was not a single administrative unit. The whole Kingdom, in turn, was a province of the large and powerful Habsburg monarchy, also called Austria or Austria-Hungary, ruled from Vienna (about 40 miles from Slovakia’s modern capital Bratislava). The first motion picture show in the Slovak region took place in Košice in December 1896, about a year after the Lumière brothers’ first-ever public picture show in Paris and six months after New York. The administration of the Kingdom had a high level of autonomy within the monarchy, so its laws and regulations, including those that governed film, could and often did differ from the rest of the monarchy.

Film

Filmmaking began in Slovakia even before it acquired its name formally — while it was part of the Habsburg monarchy (its present territory covered the predominantly Slovak north-western mountainous counties of the monarchy’s province called the Kingdom of Hungary). According to film historians, the first motion picture shows in the Slovak counties took place in Košice in December 1896. That was only a year after the Lumière brothers’ first-ever public picture show in Paris and just six months after New York. The early shows were organized by traveling

entrepreneurs, often in cafés or similar venues, but also under tents. People's visual perceptions of the world were being changed for ever, and those making and showing the films knew it. A show in Nitra in 1903 still touted the advent of the modern world, when it was advertised as "Hungary's 1st Scientific Electrical Theater Modeled on the Grand American Bioscope Awarded the Grand Prix at the World Fair in Paris."

At that time, linguistic barrier was not crucial to the distribution of films in the multi-lingual Kingdom. Silent movies were mostly self-explanatory and most people would have been able to understand the few captions in Hungarian or German (the two dominant languages in the Kingdom) or have them translated by other viewers. The shows consisted of several separate films, some colorized by hand, each of which were about two minutes long. For example, the first show in Košice was a series of 12 such very, very brief films with titles like "The Arrival of a Train," "The Czar Arrives in Paris," "The Training of the French Infantry," "Four Ladies Dancing the French Cancan" and "An Interrupted Date." Foreign films dominated Central Europe from the start. *The Arrival of a Train* was a "spectacle" film, similar to some of the uses of special effects today: the engine rushes towards the camera, scaring the audience not accustomed to viewing images of moving trains at that angle and such close quarters. The next two titles were similar to later newsreels, which were shown before the main feature, or to contemporary world news broadcasts and documentaries on, say, CNN or the Discovery Channel. The last two shorts — filmmakers soon found — were the kind of films that attracted the largest number of viewers: entertaining, funny, and with a rudimentary story. The proportion of such shorts grew steadily.

Elektro Bioskop, the first permanent movie theater in the Kingdom of Hungary, opened in a remodeled fencing hall in Bratislava (then called *Prešporok* in Slovak, *Pressburg* in German, *Istropolis* and *Posonium* in Latin, and *Pozsony* in Hungarian) in September 1905.² It had about 200 seats.³ Theaters, hotel halls, storage buildings, and other premises were remodeled in other towns, too, to become permanent movie theaters. In the absence of high quality sound and projection systems, the competition often relied on interior decoration to attract audiences, an advertisement for the Bratislava movie theatre *Fidelio* (later *Urania*, now *Hviezda*) made the following pitch: "427 upholstered seats in 3 colors, Alhambra-style walls decorated with Oriental landscapes, live and man-made flowers." The fact that the theater showed two new releases a week was relegated to the bottom of the ad.

Attendance at traditional theater performances dropped after the introduction of motion pictures. Theater directors appealed to the authorities to prohibit movie shows during the

² The first American theater built for motion pictures, the *Electric Theatre*, opened in downtown Los Angeles in April 1902, but folded after six months and was converted to a vaudeville hall.

³ The historical site is still in business. It opened in 1913 when the theater moved there from its original location at the site of the current Carlton Hotel. After a hiatus, an art movie theater was opened in the same hall in the 1970s. It is now called *Mladost'* (Youth), in Hviezdoslavovo Square approximately opposite the U.S. Embassy. It is part of the Europa Cinemas network sponsored partly by the Council of Europe's Eurimages fund, the European Union's Media Plus fund, and by other European and governmental bodies, especially French (including Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie). Their goal is to ensure that European production makes up at least 60% of the featured films.

staging time of regular plays. In 1901, the Ministry of the Interior (in charge of police and local government in Central Europe) issued a decree meeting their demands. The Deputy County Chief of Nitra went so far as to ban movie shows during the entire theater season, but the local movie-theater operators successfully appealed his decision. For a time, film producers thought they could benefit from a symbiosis of film and theater in “cinema-sketches”; actors would play on the stage, then the story would be picked up on the screen with the same actors, and the conclusion would be played by live actors again.

One such cinema-sketch, “The Košice Promenade on the Screen” (1909), depicted night-life in Košice: walking on Main Street in one’s Sunday best was a common pastime before the advent of TV and mass entertainment. It was among the few early motion pictures linked with Slovak territory. The limited production of cinema-sketches did not survive World War I and did not continue after the creation of Czecho-Slovakia (later renamed Czechoslovakia) in 1918.

Rather than cinema-sketches or story-based films, most of the early films whose production was linked to the Slovak area of the Kingdom were travel specials with titles like “The High Tatras,” “Skiing in Tatranská Lomnica,” “Traveling through the Váh Valley,” or “The Košice Institute of Corrections for Children,” “Testing the Police Dogs in Bratislava,” and a variety of news-shorts.

Movies proved successful. The number of movie theaters in the predominantly Slovak counties reached about 100 by the end of World War I, and two schools — the Mining Academy in Banská Štiavnica and a high school in Lučenec — had already used film as a teaching aid. Traveling entrepreneurs purchased a print of each film they screened. With the establishment of permanent movie theaters, film distributors appeared, as well as a kind of “film exchange” where copies of film were traded like on the stock market. The advent of copyright problems and foreign competition was heralded in 1913 in the Kingdom with the first published complaint about illegal importation of foreign films, especially from France. As elsewhere in Central Europe, French films dominated the market.

Legal power to regulate what movies were screened was invested in the hands of the local authorities by a law from 1901, which required traveling movie entrepreneurs to obtain permits for their shows. On the whole, a license was issued to anyone who applied for it. Local bans and complaints surfaced for a variety of reasons, including some that are familiar today: a city councilor at Košice worried that worthless caper movies had a bad influence on boys, while dramas about sex spoiled girls because such movies extinguished their sense of morality and made them vulnerable to unconscionable seducers. In 1912, a priest and principal of a Roman Catholic boys’ school in Nitra threatened his students with bad grades in behavior if they went to the movies, even if accompanied by their parents; his ban extended to traditional theater performances, as well. Censorship was also exercised by the authorities in Budapest, the capital of the Kingdom of Hungary, who had the power to ban individual titles from being shown anywhere in that province of the Habsburg monarchy, including the Slovak counties.

In line with the traditions of Central European monarchies, politics was one of the reasons for censorship. Among the banned titles were “King Ludwig II,” which depicted a story that was

too similar to the life and mysterious death of Ludwig II of Bavaria, and a film that was offensive to the prime minister of Hungary. However, the Kingdom did not follow suit when the rest of the Habsburg monarchy introduced formal film censorship in 1912. Included in its provisions was a requirement that licenses to open movie theaters be issued to individuals and institutions that would guarantee a respectable use of the profits, the intent of this provision was to support charities and various associations. Budapest adopted the law in April 1918, half a year before the defeat and collapse of Austria-Hungary and the founding of Czecho-Slovakia. The law empowered the censors to ban films offending patriotic interests, public order and morality, etc. Children under 16 were allowed to see only movies designated as suitable for them and only when accompanied by an adult.

**1918-1920: Czecho-Slovakia; 1920-1938: Czechoslovakia; 1938-1939:
Czecho-Slovakia (Czechoslovak Republic)**

After World War I, the Habsburg monarchy was divided. Its provinces of the Kingdom of Bohemia and Margraviate of Moravia, mostly inhabited by the Czechs and Czech-speaking Moravians, were joined to the mostly Slovak Upper Country, which was detached from the Kingdom of Hungary, to create Czecho-Slovakia, whose spelling was soon changed to Czechoslovakia. The country was centralist with the Parliament and Cabinet in Prague, in the Czech-speaking western area, which ran the regional governments, one of them in Slovakia. Its capital became the city called *Prešporok* in Slovak, *Pressburg* in German, *Istropolis* or *Posonium* in Latin, and *Pozsony* in Hungarian, and renamed *Bratislava* in 1919. Until World War II, Czechoslovakia also included the mostly Rusyn (Ruthenian) Sub-Carpathian Rus, east of Slovakia. Along with Slovakia, Moravia, and Bohemia, it was the country's fourth administrative unit, each of which was called a "Land."

Although many of the differences between the former laws of the Kingdom of Hungary, the Slovak's home, and the rest of the Habsburg monarchy where the Czechs lived lingered after the creation of Czecho-Slovakia, the whole country's legal system, including its statutes applicable to film, was gradually made more, although not completely, uniform. Throughout its existence, both before and after World War II, Czechoslovakia never had one official language. The army did not have a single language of command, either. From the start, Slovak was the language used and taught in Slovakia and Czech in Moravia and Bohemia, but both languages were equally legal in the whole country, including in the central government. Moreover, there was no inter-teaching of the two languages. That made Czechoslovakia different from other poly-lingual European countries, like Belgium and Switzerland where the school curriculum always contains classes in another official language of the country. The Slovak and Czech languages are quite close, perhaps more so than Norwegian and Swedish or Danish, and the Slovak and Czech population simply learned to understand, but not speak the other language of the country through exposure, mainly in the media.. That applied to film as well, although most films were made in Czech in Prague during this period. While the Slovaks and Czechs understood the other language, only those who moved to the other part of the country

sometimes learned to speak it as well. But Slovak actors in a Czech film normally spoke Czech and there were a few Czech actors who spoke Slovak in a Slovak-themed film.

Film

Despite a variety of problems, Czecho-Slovakia proved to be more democratic than the former Kingdom and the whole Habsburg monarchy. But the new freedom, which benefited other forms of Slovak culture, proved even more difficult for Slovak film than the post-communist period after 1989. The film industry developed in Prague, which had been an important German-Czech cultural center, a university town and capital of the German “Holy Roman” Empire’s Kingdom of Bohemia for centuries, attracting business and artistic talent. By comparison, Slovakia’s new capital and largest city Bratislava was much smaller; moreover, it was only forty miles from the Habsburg monarchy’s large, vibrant and influential capital of Vienna. Given that artists and entrepreneurs flocked to it from all over the monarchy, Vienna created a degree of artistic brain-drain in its immediate vicinity.

As with the Pittsburgh Agreement of 1918, which was a key document in the separation of the Slovak counties from the Habsburg monarchy, Slovak-Americans acquired an impact on Slovakia’s nascent film industry. Several of them founded the Tatra Film Corporation in Chicago, with the capital of about \$30,000 from U.S. investors. Among the founders were Ján Závodný (1890-1980),⁴ a Chicago lawyer and owner of the Casimir Movie Theater,⁵ and Jaroslav Siakel (1896-1997).⁶ The two of them had organized the Slovak Theater Company in 1919, whose first production was the play *Jánošík*. Tatra Film’s first and only film was *Jánošík*, as well.⁷

It fictionalized the exploits of Juraj Jánošík (1688-1713), a highwayman from Terchová, in the north-western Slovak County of Trenčín, who gave rise to Carpathian legends comparable to those about Robin Hood in England. His character became particularly popular with playwrights, novelists, and Romantic poets in the 19th century, who elevated him from a robber to a symbol of the peasants’ resistance to the feudal landlords and, rather anachronistically, of Slovak resistance to the efforts by the authorities of the Kingdom of Hungary in the 19th century to impose the Hungarian language and ethnicity on everyone in that multi-ethnic province of the Habsburg monarchy.

⁴ From Brezová pod Bradlom; later the producer of the film *Jánošík*, naturalized in Chicago in 1915. After immigration, Závodný was a part-time usher in the theater and also held other jobs.

⁵ Probably named after Casimir Pulaski, it was located at 4750 N. Milwaukee Ave., Chicago, IL, 60630. The theater opened at the beginning of 1915, it disappeared from listings in 1923 and reemerged in 1937 under the name the Jeff (probably for the nearby Jefferson Park). It closed in 1950 and became the Magic Carpet Shop in 1951.

⁶ From Blatnica, Turiec County; he immigrated to the U.S. in 1912. Although sources refer to him as Jaroslav, his Ellis Island immigration record from 22 Oct. 1912 lists him as Ludvik Siakel and he used the name Ludwig Jerry Siakel in English. He died in Western Springs, IL.

⁷ Based on this film, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) now registers Slovakia as the tenth national cinema in the world that began to produce feature-length films.

Tatra Film's Daniel Siakeľ (1886-1946)⁸ and his brother Jaroslav traveled to Slovakia to shoot the film in their native village of Blatnica, near Martin in Central Slovakia, where they also built sets, in the Manor of Turčianska Štiavnička, and in the vicinity.⁹ Both brothers had experience with film equipment and film processing technology, and some limited experience with filmmaking from working for the Selig Polyscope Company¹⁰ in Chicago (works on Slovak cinema mistakenly say that it was founded by the Siakeľ brothers). Most of the leading and supporting actors were professionals. One exception was Mária Fábryová (1900-1973)¹¹ in the leading role of Jánošík's lover Anička, who was a teacher and amateur actress from Martin. The leading role in *Jánošík* was given to Theodor Pištěk (1895-1960), a popular actor who starred in nine other films that year. The film was finished in the A-B studios in Prague.

The screenplay by Jozef Žák-Marušiak (1885-1979)¹² was to be based on a novel by Gustáv Maršall-Petrovský (1862-1916),¹³ a Slovak-American author and editor of the popular *American-Slovak Newspaper* (*Amerikánsko-Slovenské noviny*). His two-volume novel *Jánošík, Captain of Mountain Lads — His Tumultuous Life and Horrific Death* (*Jánošík, kapitán horských chlapcov — jeho búrlivý život a desná smrť*) was published in New York in 1894 and reissued several times. But Žák-Marušiak wrote only about a third of the screenplay before the team's departure for Slovakia, and the rest of it reached them only after the film was finished. Therefore, the film relied more on motifs from actual local legends, which also inspired Slovak Romantic poets in the 19th century. Moreover, the play *Jánošík*, which premiered in Brno in 1910 — and was written by Jiří Mahen (1882-1939), a Moravian playwright, poet and journalist — was well known and seems to have been a major source for the film's story. It was translated to Slovak by Martin Rázus (1888-1937)¹⁴ and published in 1920. *Jánošík* was shown to the film crew¹⁵ in November 1921 in the town of Vrútky, close to the village where it was

⁸ From Blatnica, Turiec County; he immigrated to the U.S. in 1905, naturalized in Chicago 1912.

⁹ In a refreshing turn of history, the use of the Manor as a set and for accommodation was provided to the film crew by Ladislav Révay related to Count Révay, the chief villain in the film, since the Révays still owned the Manor. The other locations were Mošovce, Necpaly, Šútovo (including the waterfall), Gaderská Valley, Horné and Dolné Jasenovo, Kláštor pod Znievom, and Sebeslavce, as well as the mountains of Ďumbier, and Kráľova hoľa.

¹⁰ Founded as the Mutoscope & Film Company in 1896. William Nichols Selig (1864-1948) closed his Chicago studios in 1915, but the company continued through 1918 near Los Angeles, where it had opened a branch in 1909.

¹¹ She sent a photograph of herself playing in *Rozmarýn* (Rosemary) by Ferko Urbánek (1859-1934) to her uncle in the U.S., and Siakeľ offered her the role in his film. (Her husband Pavol Novák became Mayor of Košice, her father-in-law's sister Ilona/Helena was married to one of the best-known Slovak poets Pavol Országh-Hviezdoslav.)

¹² From Lakšárska Nová Ves, he immigrated to the U.S. in 1911 and worked in *Národné noviny* published by the National Slovak Society in Pittsburgh, later in *Rovnosť*, Chicago, and at the Czechoslovak Embassy in Washington, Consulate in San Francisco, and Foreign Ministry in Prague before World War II. He died in Chicago.

¹³ Also spelled *Maršal*, he was born in Bački Petrovac in a predominantly Slovak region in Vojvodina, now in Serbia, immigrated in 1892. He also edited other influential Slovak-American periodicals including *Slovenský hlásnik* (later renamed *United Lutheran*), *Slovák v Amerike* (literally *Slovak in America*, but called *Slovak American*), and in the first Slovak newspaper in the U.S. *Slovenský denník* (*Slovak daily*). He died in Chicago.

¹⁴ Martin Rázus was a writer, Lutheran pastor, and the leader of the Slovak National Party.

¹⁵ The whole crew numbered 402 people.

filmed. It soon opened in Prague, then in Chicago in December,¹⁶ and a few weeks later in Žilina in Slovakia.¹⁷ The screenplay, however, relied less on the folk motif of “taking from the rich and giving to the poor” and greatly reinforced the suggestions in 19th-century Slovak Romantic poems about Jánošík that his heroic rebellion was directed against the overlords. The film fused feudal exploitation in the more distant past with the drive by the Hungarian-speaking government in Budapest in the 19th century to suppress the Kingdom’s other languages and cultures. The latter became particularly forceful during the last decades of the Kingdom’s existence and ultimately contributed to its demise. Unlike feudalism, this experience was still very fresh in people’s memories and was among the reasons Slovaks immigrated to the United States.

By comparison to Czech films preserved from the early Czecho-Slovak period, *Jánošík* showed the filmmakers’ experience with American movies — in camera work, in the use of parallel narratives, as well as in shots inspired by Westerns. It had two directors of photography each of whom used a different camera: Oldřich Beneš used a European camera, while Daniel Siakeľ (1881-1946) used a camera made by Andrej Šustek’s company in Chicago. In effect, the two cinematographers shot two parallel films — scenes were acted separately for each camera and the difference between the “Slovak” and “American” versions increased after separate editing. But the film’s handling of the ethnic motif may have been too didactic or the issues raised may have been too recent to be successfully mythologized as entertainment on the silver screen. *Jánošík* did not recover its costs and remained Tatra Film’s only production, as well as Slovakia’s first preserved silent movie.¹⁸

Until after World War II, attempts to set up film companies, occasionally with Slovak-American involvement, followed the same path: one film would be made and then the company folded because the film was not profitable and the company lacked sufficient capital to sustain it through a few flops. The situation did not change after the emergence of sound films. While about 30-50 sound films were made each year in Czechoslovakia between 1933-1938, fewer than one a year were Slovak. Czech films occasionally featured Slovak actors. Among them, with eleven musicals to his credit, was František Křištof Veselý (1903-1977),¹⁹ who achieved stardom in Czechoslovakia.

Documentaries fared better: partly because the costs were lower, and partly thanks to occasional government funding for shorts featuring its officials. For example, *Palm Sunday in Vajnory* (*Kvetná nedeľa vo Vajnoroch*, 1919) recorded a folkloric celebration of the holiday attended by Vavro Šrobár, Minister Plenipotentiary for Slovakia. A potentially steady source of

¹⁶ December 1; to be more specific, the premiere was in Cicero, IL, then with numerous Slovak-American population, at the Atlantic movie theater built in 1917 at 3934-3958 West 26th Street, now replaced by the Atlantic Mall at W. 26th St. and S. Pulaski Rd. Its first owner was Edward Browarsky.

¹⁷ On Jan. 3, 1922, at the Grand Bio Universum, now Dom umenia Fatra on J. Vuruma Street (also called Vurumova Street).

¹⁸ It was thought to have been lost, but it was discovered and restored from both versions by Ivan Rumanovský in Bratislava in 1975.

From Skalica; František Veselý added his stepfather’s name Křištof, a Budapest entrepreneur, to his own years after his father emigrated to the U.S.

funding opened up in 1935 when Prague decided that each newsreel commonly shown before the main feature had to devote at least 20% of its length to items about Czechoslovakia. But this source remained untapped by Slovak filmmakers: most of the reports came from Bohemia and Moravia.

Government or institutional funding and fascination with village life, however, proved to be a mix that worked for filmmakers in Slovakia on more than one occasion, through the present time. The first Slovak film to reach international acclaim relied on both. The potential of the Slovak countryside as a backdrop had already been discovered by non-native filmmakers, and at least two of their films have become classics of world cinema. The early German horror film *Nosferatu the Vampire* (*Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens*, dir. Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, 1922) was partly filmed at Orava Castle, in Vrátna Valley, at the Margita and Besná Váh narrows, and in the High Tatras, and Czech director Gustav Machatý chose Slovakia as a location for his daring exploration of sexuality *Ecstasy* (*Extase*, 1932). This second film propelled the career of Hedy Lamarr (born Hedwig Eva Maria Kiesler), who became a successful Hollywood star.

The *Matica slovenská* (mostly government-sponsored cultural, academic and archival institution) employed Karol Plicka (1894-1987) as its ethnographer, who was able to make documentary shorts from about 1926. He obtained funding from the President's Office in 1928 to produce an hour-long documentary about village life, *Through Mountains and Valleys* (*Po horách, po dolách*). It was awarded a Gold Medal at the International Exposition of Photographic Art in Florence and received an Honorable Mention at the International Venice Film Festival in 1932. The favorable reception of his production, along with more funding from both the *Matica slovenská* and the President's Office, enabled Plicka to make *The Earth Sings* (*Zem spieva*) in 1933, a romanticized semi-documentary panorama of selected folk customs throughout the four seasons. Unlike Slovak feature movies of that period, *The Earth Sings* struck a chord with audience and topped it with another award at the International Venice Film Festival as part of a collection of films from Czechoslovakia that included *Ecstasy* mentioned earlier.²⁰

But after this success, the *Matica slovenská* was unable to come up with sufficient funding, and Plicka's hopes of laying the foundation for Slovakia's viable film industry were thwarted. He went on to make an uninspired travel documentary in the United States *Visiting the Slovaks between New York and the Mississippi* (*Za Slovákmi od New Yorku po Mississippi*) in 1937 and then became professor in the first Department of Film in Czechoslovakia (probably the third such department in Europe) at the School of Industrial Arts in Bratislava in 1938.²¹ The Department's potential for Slovak cinema, however, was lost when the school was closed after Slovakia became a separate country during World War II. Plicka then resettled

²⁰ The other two were *Storm over the Tatras* (*Bouře nad Tatrami*, dir. Tomáš Trnka and Ferdinand Pujman, 1932), and *River* (*Řeka*, dir. Josef Rovenský, 1933).

²¹ Among the students in his first course were future directors Ján Kadár and Karol Krška, and film cartoonist Viktor Kubal. Kristína Aschenbrennerová, "Návraty: Katka." *Kinema* 20 June 2005, www.kinema.sk/clanok.asp?id=19392

permanently in Prague, Bohemia, which was incorporated into expanded Germany during World War II.

Czechoslovakia's only other Slovak-language blockbuster before World War II was a new *Jánošík* in 1935, funded from Prague and directed by Martin Frič (1902-1968). Indicative of the volume of Czech film production is the fact that Frič finished three other films during the same year, having previously directed 23. Frič and Plicka were two of the authors of the screenplay based on the same play by Mahen on which the first *Jánošík* had been based. Plicka also suggested a policeman and amateur actor, Paľo Bielik (1910-1983), from the village of Senica, now part of Banská Bystrica, for the leading role; Pištěk, the lead actor in the first *Jánošík*, appeared in the supporting role of the villain, Count Markušovský. The film combined idealized, as well as life-like images of villagers with effective action scenes and some humor to show their and Jánošík's resistance against landlords depicted as Hungarians. In spite of Budapest's protestations, it was screened at the International Venice Film Festival and was successfully released in Germany and other countries.

During World War II, Slovakia was a separate country allied with Berlin and was sandwiched between the enormously expanded Germany (which absorbed the Czech-speaking part of the former Czecho-Slovakia) and Hungary. It retained its legal system from the previous Czecho-Slovakia, but censorship regarding film became harsher under the authoritarian and totalitarian government, as it described its own rule. A massive, but eventually failed pro-democratic uprising in August-October 1944, which acquired the largest territorial control of all resistance movements in Central and Western Europe, became a frequent theme in Slovak filmmaking and other arts after the end of World War II, but was mostly shunned by the Czechs. When the deportation of the Jews to German extermination camps was picked up as a theme in *The Shop on Main Street* (*Obchod na korze*, dir. Jan Kadar and Elmar Klos, 1965), it earned Slovak and Czechoslovak film its first Oscar.

Film

During the existence of the Slovak Republic (1939-1945), movie theaters grew by more than 60%, but no feature films were made. All films released before 6 Oct. 1938 needed to obtain new permits if they were to be shown again beginning from January 1939 when Bratislava, still part of Czecho-Slovakia (whose original hyphenated name was restored in 1938), introduced its own censorship. The government sponsored the film company *Nástup* (Line-up),²² which produced short films and weekly like-named newsreels, mostly with news shots produced in Germany, initially by the studios in Prague as were Czechoslovak newsreels before, and then by the Vienna film studios. The authorities, which described their own rule as "authoritarian" and "totalitarian," mandated that a newsreel be shown before every feature film, and tightened censorship and ideological supervision of their production. The newsreel was customarily

²² Founded 7 Nov. 1939. Dušan Kováč, *Bratislava 1939-1945*. Bratislava: Albert Marenčin Vydavateľstvo PT, 2006. p. 116.

followed by a short film, a pattern that was adopted by the communist authorities after the war and survived through the collapse of communism. The government's alliance with Germany meant that it became Slovakia's main source of films even before the war changed world trade patterns. At the same time, the number of imported films dropped from about 400 a year in the former Czecho-Slovakia to less than 150 after independence. In 1940, Slovakia still imported 15 "cultural-educational" films from the U.S., and a few more from other countries than Germany, but afterwards, German feature films were supplemented by just about a dozen films from Italy and Romania, and several Czech oldies from before the war.²³ The film company *Nástup* was conscientious about training its employees, among whom was Paľo Bielik, the star of the second *Jánošík* and later a film director, and sent them regularly to several studios in Germany as interns — including to neighboring Vienna and formerly Czechoslovak Prague, which were now ruled from Berlin.

1945-1989: Czechoslovakia (Czechoslovak People's Republic, Czechoslovak Socialist Republic)

After World War II, the former Czechoslovakia was recreated without Sub-Carpathian Rus, which was incorporated into Ukraine in the expanded Soviet Union. From the start, Slovakia had its own parliament and government (called the Board of Commissioners) formed by the Democratic Party after the defeat of the Communists in the 1946 Slovak elections, in addition to the central government and parliament in Prague where the Communists and their allies won. By early 1948, the central government in Prague, and therefore the whole country, had been taken over by the Communists, but the parliament and government in Bratislava were retained. Legislation in Slovakia and the Czech-speaking lands was made uniform.

The Communist government "nationalized" — that is, took over — all but the tiniest companies, including the film studios. It saw film as an important medium to indoctrinate the population and — under strict ideological control — financed film production in the Slovak, as well as in the Czech part of the country. Directors, screenwriters, actors, and other people connected with film production became government employees like everyone else, with a steady salary regardless of how many films were produced and whether they earned any profits, since profit was called a "capitalist concept" and thrown out of Communist accounting. Although the authorities paid the salaried filmmakers more money for the films they made (separate contracts were signed for each film), from the American perspective this was closer to bonuses than anything known in Hollywood today. The "bonuses" were higher for films considered particularly effective at showing communist rule as beneficial to the population and had nothing or little to do with ticket sales.

The authorities mandated that the method used in all art be *socialist realism*. In general, its goal was to educate people about the benefits of Communism and, before it is reached,

²³ 66% of the releases between 1939 and 1945 were German, 13% Italian, 5% Czech. Dušan Kováč, *Bratislava 1939-1945*. Bratislava: Albert Marenčin Vydavateľstvo PT, 2006. p. 116.

socialism, which was what they called their existing political system. This was strictly enforced especially in fiction and film because these forms of art reached the widest audiences. The topics were to emphasize the need to work for the good of “the collective” — that is, Communist society. Topics focusing on the individual and his or her personal feelings and concerns were deemed harmful, as was depicting anything negative about society. Love was considered such a harmful topic, not only because it was personal and, therefore, did not educate the audience about the benefits of working on behalf of the collective, but also because it risked bringing sex into the story, a definite “no” in socialist realism. The official support of socialist-realist art and the transformation of filmmakers into salaried employees meant that a steady stream of feature films began to leave the newly established studios in Bratislava.

Eventually, the Communists transformed Czechoslovakia into a two-state federation with parallel parliaments and governments in the (as the states were called) Slovak Republic and Czech Republic, and with the federal government and parliament for the whole country in Prague. However, under the totalitarian communist regime, both the earlier separate parliament and government in Bratislava and the subsequent federal arrangement was a charade. The governments’ decisions, from the local through the federal level, were mandated by the centralized Communist Party, which also maintained a feigned Slovak subsidiary, and as a rule were approved by all the members of parliament whose election was a sham, too. The relaxation of Communist oversight over culture started in Slovakia in the 1960s and enabled, for example, Štefan Uher (1930-1993) to make *The Sun in a Net* (*Slnko v sieti*, 1963) because of the bi-national makeup of Czechoslovakia (both the Slovaks and Czechs were called “nations” and neither was seen as a minority, a status ascribed only to other ethnic and linguistic groups in the country).

Whereas Prague was the central political capital, it was only the center of ethnically and linguistically Czech culture, while the center of Slovak filmmaking and art was in Bratislava. At the same time, because Slovakia was away from the center of political power, it was less tightly controlled by the Communist Party. Thus, the earliest nonconformist literary works under Communism and Uher’s film were able to come out of Bratislava. The Prague authorities, too, soon began to give in to the pressures from below.

Film

Filmmaking changed dramatically after Czechoslovakia became communist in 1948. The official support of socialist-realist art and the transformation of filmmakers into salaried employees meant that a steady stream of feature films began to leave the newly established studios in Bratislava. Paľo Bielik, the former star of *Jánošík* who expanded his moviemaking experience in the newsreel studios during World War II, directed *Wolves’ Lairs* (*Vlčie diery*, 1948), one of the first two films finished after the communist takeover. It was the beginning of a succession of films about the 1944 pro-democratic uprising in Slovakia, but because it was made so early during the Communist Party’s drive to establish ideological dominance, the film still managed to include “negative” as well as “positive” characters among both the Slovak

insurgents and the German soldiers suppressing the uprising — something that did not get past the censors again for more than a decade. As a director, Bielík leaned away from the folkloric style of the films in which he starred, the style of *Wolves' Lairs* was inspired by early Italian neo-realism.

After two feature films in 1948 and another two in 1949, yearly output grew to 3-6 per year in the 1950s. “Negative” characters could not be central in the plots, and the film’s narrative had to prove them wrong. Central characters had to be “positive” from the start or be seen discovering Marxist-Leninist solutions to any problems they encountered, a model that still echoed decades later, for example in *A Thousand-Year Old Bee* (*Tisícročná včela*, dir. Juraj Jakubisko, 1983). Such problems had to be few and marginal, the general picture of society had to be happy. If the central characters were not written as Communists from the start, a “mentor” and Communist Party member would often be present to help them find the Marxist-Leninist way. Topics commonly dealt with World War II and the defeat of Nazi Germany, or with the imposition of communism — the “collectivization” of farms (that is, the abolishment of private ownership of most land larger than the immediate surroundings of one’s house and garden. Farmers were to be shown as opening their eyes to the fact that this policy was actually in their best interests. The communists proclaimed a classless society, which meant that everyone would eventually become a “worker.” The three recognized social groups were the laborers, the farmers, and the *intelligentsia* that is, white-collar workers and college-educated people, although the Communist Party officials working in offices, classified themselves as laborers. The *bourgeoisie*, (private entrepreneurs) disappeared by virtue of their property being confiscated, but the — now former — bourgeoisie was persecuted nevertheless. The *intelligentsia* was often suspected of harboring bourgeois ideas and persecuted, as well.

Since the bourgeoisie were the real “baddies,” often described as incapable of shedding their reactionary, anti-Communist skins, films about contemporary life generally focused on the villages and farmers. Marxism-Leninism saw in them the next best class after the laborers, on their way to become agricultural laborers. Their initial qualms about any benefits of collectivization provided some meager source of conflict for the plots. Films about the past often returned to the uprising in Slovakia during World War II, which was depicted — contrary to reality — as having been organized only by the Communists and aided by the Soviet Union.

Plots that concerned the communist period had to end on an optimistic note. Since former entrepreneurs always remained at least suspect, their joyful transformation into a group auxiliary to the working class was essentially unacceptable as a topic, which — in effect — also kept towns and cities out of most scripts. Even socialist-realist authors felt that a conflict drives a story, but they avoided settings that did not provide for politically acceptable conflicts. Socialist realism was strongly enforced during the first 10-15 years of communism.

Unlike neighboring Poland and Hungary, communist Czechoslovakia saw little of the ideological thaw triggered by Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalinism in February of 1956. The thaw did not reach Czechoslovakia until the early 1960s, during which time Bratislava produced 6-10 feature films per year. The first manifestations of the thaw in

literature and film came from Slovakia. After more than a decade of socialist-realist filmmaking, *The Sun in a Net* (*Slnko v sieti*) directed by Štefan Uher (1930-1993) in 1962 became a milestone in both Slovak and Czech filmmaking. It inspired a whole generation of film students at the Film Academy of Performing Arts (FAMU) in Prague, who soon followed with a series of films which attained a degree of international recognition as the “Czech New Wave.”

The Sun in a Net brought to the screen a number of hitherto unacceptable social and political themes: distant — perhaps uncaring — parents, a philandering husband, teenagers changing partners, an attempt at suicide, a poorly run collectivized farm, the expectation that a child attend summer “voluntary work camps” in order to make up for his parents belonging to the *intelligentsia*. Moreover, none of these issues were resolved in a “positive” manner. The ending was rather somber, if not depressing, with the barest hint of optimism found only in the last sentence and possibly on the film’s symbolic level, which was handled rather unevenly. It attempted a complex interplay of sunlight and darkness, sound and silence, vision and blindness, truth and lies, all centered around a solar eclipse.²⁴ Contemporary critics found the symbolism difficult to decipher, and much of it was probably lost on viewers. But the core story line — the ups and downs in the relationship of two teenagers — the realism and novelty of its urban setting, as well as the hints at some social and political taboos, were not lost on audiences and cannot have been lost on the censors. *The Sun in a Net* not only pushed the envelope, but it also established expanded opportunities for other artists and showed to the Slovaks and Czechs at large what the authorities could now be pushed to permit.

In addition to Uher’s efforts to get past the strict requirements of socialist realism, the director was inspired by some of the trends current in Western European cinema and culture in the 1950s. Among them was his focus on the symbolism of light and darkness, adherence to a low-key style, a hint of fashionable quasi-existentialism in Fajolo’s (Marián Bielik) dialogues with Bela (Jana Beláková), and an attempt at serious cinéma-vérité: in the beer-drinking scenes set in a tavern, the background soundtrack includes taped unscripted conversations of real villagers. Uher mostly chose inexperienced actors or non-actors. Only one of them, Lubo Roman (b. 1944, then a student of acting) in the supporting role of Peťo, began a successful acting career.²⁵ Actual music in the film included Western rock played on the radio. The film’s score was by Ilja Zeljenka, an avant-garde composer of concrete music.

While *The Sun in a Net* became a prologue to the minimalist, quasi-realist, and eventually more experimental Czech New Wave made by the film students in Prague, in Slovakia the film was followed by several increasingly more critical social commentaries by established filmmakers, by more films about contemporary urban life, and by increasingly intellectual and abstract films seen as Art. The first daring film among those that replaced socialist realism with social criticism was Peter Solan’s (b. 1929) *The Case of Barnabáš Kos* (*Prípád Barnabáš*

²⁴ Central Europe actually experienced a 95% solar eclipse on the morning of February 15, 1961, maximum in Bratislava at 8:49 AM.

²⁵ He later also became a government-paid theater administrator, and ultimately a politician — Member of Parliament, Minister of Culture, and in 2001, County Chief of Bratislava.

Kos, 1964), which poked fun at communist hierarchy. Among contemporary topics, a potential for an approachable and successful film was lost with *Nylon Moon* (*Nylonový mesiac*, 1965) directed by Eduard Grečner (b. 1931). Its story, as well as the title, came from a novel by Jaroslava Blažková (b. 1933) published in 1960, the first best-seller about contemporary life since the communist takeover. But there was entertainment in film, too, and none more popular than *Jánošík I* and *Jánošík II* (1963) directed by Paľo Bielik, the star in the previous film version of the story. Despite its title, *Jánošík II* was not a sequel in the usual sense: it was one 170-minute-long film split into two parts that spruced up the centuries-old legend and premiered together.

The first film to earn an Oscar for Slovakia and Czechoslovakia was *The Shop on Main Street* (*Obchod na korze*, 1965)²⁶ was co-directed by Slovak-Hungarian Ján Kadár (1918-1979) and Moravian Elmar Klos (1910-1993), who had directed films together since the 1950s. Their earlier film was the ground-breaking *Death is Called Engelchen* (Slovak: *Smrť sa volá Engelchen*, Czech: *Smrt si říká Engelchen*, 1963) based on a novel by Ladislav Mňačko (1919-1994), which diverged from the Communist interpretation of the 1944 uprising in Slovakia as having been infallibly glorious and showed some of its aspects that brought about human tragedy.

Along similar lines, *The Shop on Main Street* placed the politics of World War II in the background and focused on the dead-end street faced by many in Central Europe during the deportations of the Jews to German concentration camps. After the introduction of anti-Jewish laws in Slovakia, a simple carpenter, Tono Brtko (Jozef Kroner), is made the owner of a tiny button store, until then owned by an old, almost deaf Jewish woman, Rozália Lautmann (Ida Kamińska), who has no comprehension of contemporary political developments. After a crisis, the local Jewish community begins to pay Tono not to give up the ownership in order to prevent Rozália's store from being passed on to someone ruthless. A tender friendship develops between Tono and Rozália: she keeps selling buttons without realizing Tono's legal status and he becomes her man about house. When deportations begin, Rozália remains oblivious of real life, and Tono is faced with the choice between sending her off or possibly facing his own and his wife's death, if he is discovered trying to hide a person incapable of understanding why she should live in hiding. The film starred Slovak premier actor Jozef Kroner (1924-1998) and Polish actress Ida Kamińska (1899-1980) with a Slovak cast and was shot on location in the town of Sabinov in eastern Slovakia and on the soundstage in the Prague studios. The film presents its captivating, morally complex story in a straightforward style, with a sprinkling of symbolism and dream sequences. It was an indication of changes in the political climate that *The Shop on Main Street* was able to get away without the mandated focus on criticism of the Slovak authorities during World War II, previously an inevitable feature of socialist realist work about that period, as well as without highlighting a central, resolute pro-communist character.

²⁶ Academy Award for Best Foreign Film in 1966; Special Mention for Acting Performance, Cannes Film Festival 1965; New York Film Critics Circle Award for Best Foreign Film in 1966.

It has remained the most awarded and internationally successful Slovak film through the present day.

The late 1960s reflected the direction filmmaking might take with little censorship and steady funding. An increasing number of — especially younger — filmmakers took advantage of the situation to experiment without concern about a need to target a specific audience or about how large that audience might be. They enjoyed the same creative luxury as the writers or painters convinced of the significance of their work, who manage to earn their living elsewhere. In a democratic society, this is rarely the case in cinema because of the extraordinary amounts of money even a low-budget film requires. But during the occasional relaxation of control in communist countries while, at the same time, the principles of the system remained in place, filmmakers were given large funds to make films relatively free of prescription, as well as of a need to bring in profit.

An early avant-garde nonconformist film seen mostly by students in art theaters was Uher's *The Miraculous Virgin* (*Panna zázračnica*, 1966), soon followed by Juraj Jakubisko's (b. 1938) *Crucial Years* (also known as *Christ's Years*; *Kristove roky*, 1967), Elo Havetta's (b. 1938) *The Gala in the Botanical Garden* (*Slávnosť v botanickej záhrade*, 1969), and Dušan Hanák's (b. 1938) *322* (the code for cancer in medical records of diseases, 1969). During this brief period of the almost total collapse of communist control, Koliba Film Studio in Bratislava co-produced films with avant-garde filmmakers from abroad. Jerzy Skolimowski (b. 1938) from Poland, then significantly more repressive than Czechoslovakia, directed one story in *Dialogue 20-40-60* (*Dialóg 20-40-60*) along with Czech Zbyněk Brynych (1927-1995) and Slovak Peter Solan in 1968, Frenchman Alain Robbe-Grillet (b. 1922) directed two films including *The Man Who Lies* (Slovak: *Muž, ktorý luže*, French: *L'homme qui ment*; co-directed with Martin Hollý Jr., 1968) with a Slovak and French cast. And 1969 saw the release of Juraj Jakubisko's *Birds, Orphans and Fools* (*Vtáčkovia, siroty a blázni*), considered by most Slovak film critics the best Slovak film. Jakubisko's preferences in filmmaking bounce between experimentation, abstraction and ambitious intellectualism (as in this film) and less numerous crowd-pleasers.

Birds, Orphans and Fools had the briefest of theater runs not because of audiences, although it was unlikely to be a popular film, but because of the authorities. While conceived when communist control was at its lowest level in Czechoslovakia, it was completed well after the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968, by which time many of the mechanisms of authoritarian rule were at work again. *Birds, Orphans and Fools* takes place in an apparent historical vacuum in a desolate world with war raging somewhere outside the camera's frame and the director's focus. The two male and one female central characters, not unlike some of the hippies in the U.S.A. at that time, live in a decrepit apartment, go through a series of bizarre encounters and sexual experiences, discuss a range of topics. When their lives begin to appear closer to normalcy, one of them murders the girl and commits suicide. The film is deliberately experimental in its style, as well: it varies screen sizes, shots are taken at awkward angles with a hand-held or agitated camera, distortion lenses alter screen images, filmmakers' equipment remains in the frame, characters talk to the camera, the continuity of

time is undermined by a discontinuity of place. Adjectives like *surrealist* and *post-apocalyptic* are perhaps representative of the filmmakers' intent.

The 1970s witnessed a re-introduction of strict communist control in Czechoslovakia, a period that is called *normalization*. People were demoted at work or fired if they expressly supported the relaxation of the late 1960s or denounced the Soviet-led invasion in 1968, and their children often suffered, too. In an effort to avoid repercussions, many repudiated their past views when asked to do so by the Communist Party committees at work. Although persecution was somewhat milder in Slovakia than in the Czech-speaking areas of Czechoslovakia, it still had a stifling effect on art. Gone were the efforts from the 1960s to push the envelope of what was allowed. The population at large had learned its lesson: with the help of the Soviet Union, the communists were able to pull the whole country back from the unprecedented freedom of expression and the brink of a multi-party system in 1968 to a situation more reminiscent of the late 1950s, and those who resisted were made to pay. This lasted at least through the late 1970s, but Czechoslovakia, similar to East Germany, remained more repressive politically,, although with a better standard of living, than Communist Poland or Hungary, until the collapse of communism in 1989.

Although cinema was affected like the rest of society, the number of film releases grew. Slovakia produced 8-12 films per year throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Jakubisko still managed to finish *See You in Hell, Friends (Dovidenia v pekle, priatelia)* in 1970, but hardly anyone saw it. The film was banned and Jakubisko was not allowed to make another feature film until 1979. While the early 1970s are sometimes compared to the 1950s, the authorities did not seem to demand that Slovak filmmakers make socialist-realist films that were critical of the period of relaxation, the way films in the 1950s tried to discredit private enterprise and democracy, which were abolished in 1948. Only one film was made about 1968, *Fever (Horúčka)*, 1975) directed by Martin Hollý, Jr. (1931-2004) and based on a novella published two years earlier by Jozef Kot (b. 1936). In a country with freedom of expression, the film could have been received as just focusing on a relatively plausible plot from 1968 and forcing a particular point of view — there indeed were people who did not support the pro-democratic reforms or saw many flaws among the reformers. But under totalitarian control, which did not allow opposing points of view, there was no difference between the touting of the official view in film and repressive propaganda. Regardless, *Fever* shared the destiny of the overwhelming majority of Slovak and Czech films produced during the 40 years of communism: after a couple of weeks in mostly empty theaters, it was not seen again.

While the 1960s saw a desire to bring contemporary and urban themes to film, the 1970s began to solidify an inclination among a segment of the Slovak critics and filmmakers to emulate the centuries-old urban fashion in Europe of the “return to nature”: well educated intellectuals living in Bratislava made and applauded films with images of the countryside and villagers, whose lives appear to be more authentic than in towns. The trend-setter was the still admired hour-long documentary *Pictures of the Old World (Obrazy starého sveta)*, 1972) directed by Dušan Hanák who, treated with suspicion by the authorities because of his films from the

1960s, found an early refuge in a topic sufficiently removed from big politics to survive on the margins of official production and yet, sufficiently nonconformist and enamored with village life to please especially the chic audiences. Part of its additional attraction within the context of Communist Czechoslovakia rested on the fact that it offered snapshots from the lives of several highlanders, whose very existence belied the official claims of equal wealth for everyone. But *Pictures of the Old World* has a much more universal appeal and has received critical acclaim from Slovakia, Switzerland and France to Toronto and Los Angeles.

A singular accomplishment among the about 90 domestic feature films that briefly flickered in Slovak theaters in the 1970s was Dušan Hanák's *Rosy Dreams* (*Ružové sny*, 1976). Although its style was poetic, it was the first film in communist Central Europe with a de-romanticized portrayal of the Roma (Gypsies).²⁷ It dove into the cultural barriers between them and the non-Romani population — an issue that, twenty years later, proved to be one of the key problems of post-communist societies in Central Europe. Two teenagers — a young Slovak postman Jakub (Juraj Nvota) and a Romani girl Jolana (Iva Bittová) — fall in love. The film tells the viewers that it will not work out due to different cultural expectations each of the two has of their budding relationship. Its imaginative filmmaking and affecting, slightly sentimental story might have been easy to understand and appreciate by a wider audience, but *Rosy Dreams* was shown only in limited release at the order of the authorities. The most popular film in that decade was yet another variation on the legend of a highwayman, the farce *Pacho, the Highwayman of Hybe* (*Pacho, hybský zbojník*, 1975) directed by Martin Ťapák (b. 1926).

In 1980, the authorities shelved Hanák's *I Love, You Love* (*Ja milujem, ty miluješ*) because of its focus on marginal social groups and eroticism. When it was released shortly before the collapse of communism, it received the highest international recognition for a Slovak film since *The Shop on Main Street*, including the Silver Bear at the Berlin Film Festival.

However, the strict Communist control typical of the 1970s began slowly to relax, and the early 1980s brought two domestic blockbusters whose role in Slovak culture finally matched that of some of the films in the 1960s. In 1982 Uher directed *She Grazed Horses on Concrete* (also known as *A Ticket to Heaven; Pásla kone na betóne*). The title used the first words from an irreverent tune with just a few verses depicting a woman attempting to do impossible feats — the song continues "... she bathed in razor blades." The story is about a single mother, Johanka Ovšená (Milka Zimková), fending for herself in an east Slovak village and determined not to allow her teenage daughter Pavla (Veronika Jeníková) to follow in her footsteps. Partly a comedy and partly a candid portrayal of contemporary village life, it oscillates between humorous depictions of current social customs and ceremonies, and the more serious issues of a woman's capacity to hold her own in a small community and of abortion. Although co-written and directed by Uher, the film was largely the work of Milka Zimková (b. 1951), an author and

²⁷ The only other such film was made in the Communist Balkans — in Serbia, Yugoslavia, in 1967. It was directed by Aleksandar Petrović (1929-1994), a graduate of the Film Academy of Performing Arts (FAMU) in Prague, and called *Skupljači perja* (*Buyers of Feathers, or Feather Traders*). It was released under the title *I Even Met Happy Gypsies* in the U.S.

actress, who wrote the original story, worked with Uher on the script, and starred in the leading role. Among the film's novelties in the history of Slovak moviemaking was an extensive use of the East Slovak dialect in the film. Although Slovak has several highly recognizable regional accents, filmmakers — before and after this film — have actors speak the standard, neutral variety of Slovak common in the news media, regardless of where in Slovakia the story of their film takes place.

A success comparable to the handful of foreign blockbusters permitted by the communist authorities each year was Juraj Jakubisko's *A Thousand-Year Old Bee* (*Tisícročná včela*, 1983). It is a 162-minute-long saga of the life of a farmer's family covering three generations from the late 1800s through the early 1900s. It picked up on and reinforced a myth recurrent in Slovak cinema for several decades, in films from both popular and artsy filmmakers: villagers are mostly good, while those who live in or move to town and become entrepreneurial — perhaps the filmmakers' bow to Communist authorities — turn out to be cold and corrupt. It was the first Slovak film with a comprehensive narrative that a large number of viewers was ready to adopt as a myth of their national, as well as local and family past, because it echoed similar narratives they had encountered in literature and history classes at school. Moreover, it was a comforting past. The title was a parable, overplayed in the film with brief expensive special effects — an elephantine honey-bee created in the Bavaria studios in Munich. Those sequences hammered in the symbolic thread in the storyline. They could be richer and more content, the film gave the viewers to understand, were it not for the cumulative effects of past injustice: the fruit of their hard-working ancestors' labor was periodically taken away from them for a thousand years, like honey from the bees. But as long as they stayed in the villages, they were an honest, sometimes whimsical bunch doing as well as they could. It helped that several popular actors starred in the film, including Jozef Kroner (Tono in *The Shop on Main Street*). *A Thousand-Year Old Bee* received a Golden Phoenix for art and cinematography from the Cultural Center of the City of Venice (1983), awarded in tandem with the prestigious International Venice Film Festival.

1989-1992: Czech and Slovak Federal Republic

After the collapse of Communism, the laws governing the country's federal system began to be applied for real. The word "Federal" in the country's new name was merely a lexical adjustment to drop the proscribed "Socialist" (meaning "Communist"); the country had already been a federation for two decades and Slovakia, as part of Czechoslovakia, had had its own special government since 1945. With the advent of democracy it became obvious that many of the statutes drafted and adopted by the communists only for appearance's sake were not practicable, which had been immaterial and never tested in the past because the parliaments and governments merely rubberstamped what the Communists Party ordered them to. The democratic federal parliament reached a prolonged stalemate, during which the two state legislatures negotiated and announced well in advance a peaceful split of the country into Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

1993: Slovakia (Slovak Republic)

The political and procedural separation of Slovakia and the Czech Republic bore no resemblance to the explosive breakups of the Soviet Union or Yugoslavia. What helped the Czech and Slovak Federation avoid a tempestuous separation was the generally low perception of domination by the other group under Communism, when the repressive regime, composed of both the Czechs and Slovaks, was defined politically rather than ethnically. In addition, there was a general awareness that the creation of a joint Czecho-Slovakia in 1918 had helped the Slovaks and Czechs to maintain their languages and identities, whose future had appeared uncertain in the Habsburg monarchy. What also helped to maintain mutual amicability was that — unlike in the other demised Communist federations — there has never been any ethnic Slovak–Czech spillover across the 1,000-year old border that divides them, no cross-border minorities contiguous with the other ethnic area. Due to their linguistic proximity, those Slovaks and Czechs who migrated across it always trans-ethnicized within a generation.

Opinion polls showed that although the Slovaks and Czechs were not ready actively to pursue the maintenance of a united country as the moment for the split was approaching, most said then, and repeated 12 years later, that they would have preferred their Slovak–Czech country to remain together, although they differed substantially in what they expected of its future political arrangement. The Slovaks were much more in favor of raising the self-governance of the two federal states, while many more Czechs favored higher centralism and even a complete abolition of the federal arrangement. It is probable that the marked bifurcation of political opinion between Slovakia and the Czech-speaking part would have caused ongoing problems had the two states remained under one government. The formal split, scheduled and announced months in advance for the midnight between 1992 and 1993, created no tensions between the two nations. Since Slovak and Czech independence, opinion polls have consistently identified Czechs as the most favorite foreigners among the Slovaks and the other way round. Slovak and Czech filmmakers have completed several joint projects, actors from both countries appeared in each other's films and spoke the lines in their own or the other language depending on the screenplay; for example, Juraj Jakubisko, one of the Slovak directors best known abroad, has made Prague his home.

Film

After decades of government-funded and censored production, Bratislava still produced twelve films in 1990, the year after the collapse of communism. With no censorship, but also hardly any funding, the number of feature films ranged between one and three for most of the 1990s. Slovakia's theaters were flooded with foreign, especially American, films and while the population might have been ready for a domestic production addressing them specifically, perhaps along the lines of *A Thousand-Year Old Bee*, there was not enough money for a film on that scale and maybe even less interest on the part of filmmakers. With a single exception, the films made in the 1990s generally follow one of two thematic lines. The most successful film

was *A Fountain for Susan 2* (*Fontána pre Zuzanu 2*, 1993) directed by Dušan Rapoš (b. 1953) as a sequel to his more sedate *A Fountain for Susan* (*Fontána pre Zuzanu*, 1985), still limited by Communist censorship. He released *A Fountain for Susan 3* in 1999. Both films fall into the group of films that have contemporary themes and are obviously interested in generating ticket sales. They rely on sex and crime to achieve that end. Although it lagged behind major foreign blockbusters, *A Fountain for Susan 2* sold 380,000 tickets in a country with 5.4 million inhabitants, which was comparable to a film that grossed over \$130 million in the U.S. in 1993; by comparison, *Titanic* (dir. James Cameron) sold about 550,000 tickets in Slovakia and *The Matrix* (dir. Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1999) 130,000.²⁸

Another film with a contemporary theme was indicative of how times had changed after the collapse of communism. *Rivers of Babylon* (the original title is in English) directed by Vladimír Balco (b. 1949) in 1998 was based on the first post-communist bestseller of the same title published in 1991 by Peter Pišťánek (b. 1960). Sequels of the novel had lower sales, because the novelty of the topic — Bratislava's underworld — and the expressive presentation had worn off, and because they had to compete with the growing number of translated foreign pulp fiction. However, the filmmakers picked up on a particular aspect of the sequels — vitriolic political commentary. The story of the rise of a cunning, ruthless boiler-room stoker and wheeler-dealer to political power was seen as a parable of the government in Bratislava at that time. Only about eight years earlier, the release of such a strongly critical film would have been either unthinkable or a major event attracting huge crowds. Yet, *Rivers of Babylon* sold 50,000 tickets and met with lukewarm reception abroad.

The other thematic line in Slovak cinema in the 1990s was the “return to nature.” Its main protagonist was director Martin Šulík (b. 1962) whose films generally attracted fewer viewers at home than *Rivers of Babylon*, but are favored by critics and have attained a degree of viewers' acclaim at film festivals organized by European cities. His most successful film *The Garden* (*Záhrada*, 1995), his earlier film *Tenderness* (*Neha*, 1991), as well as the subsequent *Orbis Pictus* (original title in Latin, 1997) and *Landscape* (also: *A Small [Piece of] Country; Krajinka*, 2000) are intellectualized continuations of the theme of the desirability of a return to, journey through, or life in a rural setting. *Landscape* is the most accessible of Šulík's films. Although it may be based on memories, as the opening sequence suggests, the discrete stories are not made to gel into a cohesive sequence for the audience. But each is readable on its own. *The Garden*, the first Slovak film to be released abroad after the collapse of communism, and especially *Orbis Pictus*, break with traditional story-telling and show the main characters — a rather passive adult man living with his father in *The Garden* and a young girl released from a boarding school, perhaps for abandoned teenagers, in *Orbis Pictus* — finding education in nature and disappointment in urban settings.

With surreal scenes, philosophizing scripts, and a dedication to expressive whim, Šulík's films re-package the theme of national rural bliss, recurrent in Slovak culture and education,

²⁸ Film producer Marian Urban, personal interview July 12, 2000; ticket sales may go underreported in post-communist countries, but the relative ranking of individual films is probably not affected by that.

in a form palatable for trendy audiences. The theme has had an incessant, powerful attraction for a segment of directors since the beginnings of filmmaking in Slovakia, whether they have leaned towards the popular and mythologizing approach — from *The Earth Sings* 1933, through the decades of films about Jánošík and similar productions, to *The Thousand-Year Old Bee* — or whether they take the approach aimed at art theaters, traceable to *The Organ (Organ)* directed by Štefan Uher in 1964. Due to the general drop in film production and to Martin Šulík's capacity to attract funding, films for art theaters became more prevalent in the 1990s than in the earlier decades.

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