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## Context for Nietzsche's Death of God

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*Abstract: A common graffiti about Nietzsche, death, and God turns up in Slovakia fashioned in The T-shirt to add context to its reductive representation in popular culture. Takes on faith and country in a transatlantic dialogue leave God aside to establish man as the dividing agent.*

As *The T-Shirt* addresses faith, God, and fanaticism, it visually appears to call on their representation in urban mythology popularized through the 1960s' graffiti (already recorded in Blau, 1964: 20) about God having the last word on his own or philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's death, while at its structural level it exposes the theme of Nietzsche's oft-quoted single sentence in its context, "*Gott ist tot! Gott bleibt tot! Und wir haben ihn getötet!*" / "God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him!" (1882: 154), which, rather than denying the possibility of God's existence, blames humankind for the deed.

The short film starts by setting up faith with gospel-inspired singing on the soundtrack under the opening credits, carried over to shots of a driver, Mark Pollack (Andrej Kováč), in a moving Jeep, which plays with the possibility of reading the sound as diegetic, coming through his radio. Although that option is not corroborated by sound editing – the tune is not processed to resemble car audio and is kept at a constant volume regardless of the placement of the camera vis-à-vis the inside of the car – the theme of faith is immediately reinforced on the screen with a shallow-focus close-up of a small metal Christian cross swinging off the driver's rear-view mirror, its relevance hammered in by having the cross flicker in rays of sun alternating with shadows as the car passes trees and followed with another like-themed close-up, that of the miscapitalized one-word *GodBlessAmerica* pasted on the dashboard over the picture of an American soldier, revealed during the screenplay's high drama later to be Mark's brother killed in Afghanistan merely a month earlier. All that faith is American, the opening passage appears to convey next through yet another close-up of an (inauthentic) license plate from the state of Texas, stereotyped in North America as in the United States' Bible Belt, which lingers on the screen for four seconds as Mark stops outside a tiny convenience store in a Slovak village (filmed on location in the Czech Republic). But the Czech accent of the singer (Zuzana Stírká) of the soundtrack's English lyrics has already hinted at the potential that the equation may be undermined.

Even before the driver gets out of his Jeep, a make long embedded in European popular culture through the might and filmic images of the U.S. Army, America is crossbred with Slovakia in a slow track of the store's counter in front of the sales assistant, Tomáš Dubček (Marián Mitaš), with his personal items on it – from an (inauthentic) edition of the Slovak translation of *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot (the English subtitles fail to render that, although the dialogue picks up on it later), to the bat in the assistant's hands as he practices batting swings while watching a baseball game on a small TV in front of him, all against the background of a diegetic running commentary on the game in American English. The dialogue then blends faith across cultures some more by revealing that the driver from Houston speaks fluent, unaccented Slovak, because his mother is from Slovakia.

The two cultures meet in what initially appears to be a single transatlantic faith – they like each other. Mark, the Texan, is half-Slovak and counters Tomáš's whining about the apparent waste land where Tomáš lives by calling Slovakia beautiful. Tomáš, the Slovak, keeps the U.S. flag next to the Slovak one on the wall behind him, professes his love of baseball, switches to English for a few lines. The two agree on perhaps playing a game together should Tomáš show up in Houston. Repeated over-shoulders show something else the Texan likes. Tomáš is costumed in a half-opened jacket that allows Mark to see part of his T-shirt underneath with the words *God is* on his right breast. With his faith, country, and sport amply present, Mark feels so close to the man on the other side of the counter that he confesses his desire to come more often.

Those first three to four minutes have set up the context and *mise-en-scène* for the contrastive separation that takes up the remaining two-thirds of *The T-Shirt*, the store counter between the two men that first linked them with scattered props illustrating Tomáš's love of things American quickly becomes a battlement between two takes on faith. Putting God aside till the denouement, the screenplay places Mark on the fanatic side of faith and also cancels the earlier cross-cultural fashioning of the character. When he catches the sight of the complete inscription on Tomáš's T-shirt, *God is dead. Nietzsche.*, he demands that Tomáš take down the American flag, although not the Slovak one, because “the majority of Americans believe in God and the flag at the same time,” so Tomáš, annunciating God's death on his T-shirt, must not stand under it. Mark's character is written as showing no such concern for the majority, albeit somewhat smaller, of Slovaks who believe in God and their flag equally hanging above Tomáš, nor for anything Slovak from this point on, while the dialogue separates the United States and Slovakia along the lines of the two takes on faith several more times.

The film's contrastive treatment of Mark's and Tomáš's faiths rests mainly in dialogue. Mark's is verbally polite, territorially expansive, and physically aggressive. The screenplay (Fazeli credits Alžbeta “Biba” Bohinská for “beautifully” editing his original script, Raskin 2008: 33) makes the Texan impose his faith and force decisions about a symbol of his country while expressly disregarding that he is on another culture's territory. Eventually (a second near-goof in the screenplay, the possibility that a real-life American tourist – Mark is identified as merely visiting in early dialogue – could pass airport security with a gun or buy one on arrival in Europe is even more remote than that he would have his Jeep flown in from Texas rather than rent a car

locally), Mark even pulls out a revolver to defend his honor when Tomáš calls him “a prick” (subtitled as *fucking asshole*) and then also points it at an accidental bystander. By comparison, Tomáš is verbally arrogant, eventually offensive, and over-and-above casual about Mark's injury apparently being “not serious” while the latter, Tomáš having hit him in the head with his baseball bat, lies on the floor, unconscious and hemorrhaging from his mouth. At the same time, though, Tomáš's lines establish him as professing the freedom of faith, as defending his actual home turf from Mark's life-threatening incursion, and using violence to knock Mark out only in order to defend himself and another Slovak.

While *The T-Shirt* started with blending and undermining some transatlantic stereotypes, it soon shifted to reestablishing a tangible link between territory and takes on faith. But although its last two thirds may have seemed to also build towards counterposing fanatic faith with secularism (in addition to “God is dead” on the visible front of Tomáš's T-shirt, the collocation that goes with the character's first name in English and even more commonly in Slovak is *unbelieving Thomas*), the film reserves a surprise twist till the end for viewers not familiar with the 1960s' graffiti playing around with Nietzsche and God and its subsequent commercial exploitation in ready-to-wear clothing. Perhaps feeling too hot after the confrontation, Tomáš takes off his jacket, lets comatose Mark bleed on the floor, and as he is stepping out of the store to smoke a cigarette and wait for the ambulance, the camera shows the hackneyed inscription on the back of his T-shirt, “No, Nietzsche is dead. God.” Tomáš's stance too, then, is that of a person of God.

*The T-Shirt* concludes with both takes on faith portrayed as lacking. Andrej Kováč's acting augments Mark's fanaticism with greater agitation and vocal range, while Marián Mitaš's Tomáš is substantially understated. But like the fanatic Texan threatened to harm the moderate Slovak explicitly, the Slovak also endangers the Texan's life when after legitimately harming him in self-defense, the screenplay writes Tomáš as a man who will describe as “not serious” the injury of a person remaining unconscious and with a non-trivial quantity of blood coming out through his mouth after a blow to his skull with a baseball bat, as a man who will leave him unattended in order to smoke a cigarette. Fazeli thus wraps up his short film with bringing in the broader context of Nietzsche's death of God. Without questioning or confirming the existence of God, *The T-Shirt* shows men from both sides of the Atlantic as well as both sides of the fanatic vs. *laissez-faire* battlement divide, not God, as prone to cause the death of another man or leave him in harm's way regardless of their actual takes on faith.

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