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Berlinale
Edition 2022



SLOVAK FILM INSTITUTE AND SLOVAK FILM COMMISSION JOIN FORCES TO PROMOTE SLOVAKIA AT INTERNATIONAL FILM MARKETS.

EUROPEAN FILM MARKET,
BERLINALE



MARCHÉ DU FILM,
FESTIVAL DE CANNES



editorial



Berlinale Edition 2022 is the first special festival edition of *Film.sk* this year. Even as the European Film Market moves to online space, the Berlinale festival will still happen in its physical form, and so we prepared this annual update for you.

The edition showcases *What's Slovak in Berlin?* on its very first pages. The preview of 2021 in Slovak documentary, fiction, and animated film follows.

We boosted the issue with more interviews, in which our creators Barбора Sliepková, Peter Kerekes, Marian Urban, and Diana Cam Van Nguyen shared their personal insights into many aspects of filmmaking. In the news section, you will find notices of 8 upcoming Slovak films.

What are they up to? is a platform where a number of filmmakers shortly talk about their current projects, as well as their future plans.

The final part provides an overview of new releases (DVD and Blu-ray) which were successfully restored by the SFI. And lastly, the ranking of TOP 20 Slovak films made during the course of one entire century (1921 – 2021) awaits you.

Let's hope that the summer festivals *Cannes* and *Karlovy Vary* will hold their 2022 dates and hopefully happen in their usual physical form. In the meantime, we will be preparing these special editions for you. ◀

— Veronika Krejčová / executive editor —

HISTORY AND THE PRESENT OF THE SLOVAK FILM INSTITUTE

The Slovak Film Institute (SFI) is the sole state-funded memory and archive institution operating in the area of audiovision in Slovakia. The National Film Archive and the National Cinematographic Centre are the SFI's basic organisational units. The SFI is a member of the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAP), European Film Promotion (since 2006); it operates as a service workplace for the European Audiovisual Observatory (EAO) and the Council of Europe cinema support fund – Eurimages. Creative Europe Desk Slovensko is also part of the Slovak Film Institute.

The Film Institute in Bratislava was established on 1st April 1963. The film archive, which was established in 1958, also became part of the Institute. In 1970, the SFI was presented with a copy of the first Slovak feature film *Jánošík* (dir. Jaroslav Siakel, 1921) which was later restored and provided with a soundtrack.

By the end of 1976, the Film Club of the Central Office of Slovak Film was opened in Bratislava. Cinema Lumière, opened in 2011 and operated by the SFI, is located on its premises at the present day.

In January 1991, the National Cinematographic Centre was established as an independent public contributory organisation managed by the Ministry of Culture. By delimitation, the SFI acquired producer rights to the archived Slovak films made before 1991.

The Institute played a part in the preparation of the extensive publication entitled *History of Slovak Cinema* (Dejiny slovenskej kinematografie, 1997; updated issue 2016). In 2002, the SFI published its first DVD; since then, it has published dozens of other DVDs, which are now available with everything else related to films at the SFI's online shop *Klapka.sk*, opened in 2008. In 2002, the SFI started to implement the long-term integrated audiovisual information system project SK CINEMA.

In 2006, the Government adopted the draft Project of the Systematic Restoration of Audiovisual Cultural Heritage with the objective of rescuing cinematographic and audiovisual works and gradually making them accessible to the public. This is the SFI's long-term priority project.

In the years 2011 to 2015, the SFI, in cooperation with Radio and Television Slovakia, implemented the national project Digital Audiovision. During the project, 61,650 cultural objects were digitised. The project is sustainable over a long period and continues to reach its goal – digitisation of the audiovisual heritage of the Slovak Republic. The SFI's digitisation workplace has become a permanent part of its professional workplaces.

Film.sk, the only printed film monthly in Slovakia, has been published by the SFI since 2000. During the 21 years of its existence, it has undergone other format and conceptual changes, but the goals remain to provide a wide range of information and opinions from the domestic audiovisual environment, capable of appealing to film experts and the wider public alike. The website *www.filmsk.sk* has supported its printed version since 2001. ◀

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The Spring – Punkchart films

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Matúš Kvasnička

Editor-in-chief of **Film.sk** and publicist. In 2003, he joined and later managed (2012 – 2019) the culture desk of nationwide daily newspaper **Pravda**.

Jaroslava Jelchová

Editor of **Film.sk**. She is a lecturer of the Film Cabinet for Children, an educational project of the Association of Slovak Film Clubs.

Mária Ferenčuhová

Editor of **Film.sk**. Former lecturer at the Film and Television Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts (VŠMU), where she also worked as a vice-rector (2004 – 2007). Author of the scientific monograph **Odložený čas** (Time Delayed), co-author and editor of two more books on film.

Eva Šošková

Eva works at the Department of Audio-visual Studies at VŠMU, focusing on animated film. She participated in the preparation of the retrospective of Czechoslovak animated films for the Film-museum in Vienna. Every year, she reviews the past year's Slovak animated films on various platforms.

Martin Ciel

Film theoretician and critic. He worked at the Art Research Centre of the Slovak Academy of Sciences and at the SFI, he has been teaching at VŠMU since 1998. He focuses on film semiotics and contemporary film theories. His texts have been published in various professional journals and collections, including foreign ones. He is the author and co-author of numerous books.

Martin Šmatlák

Film critic, author of countless reviews and expert studies. He has been focusing on questions of audiovisual legislation for a long time. He was the director of the SFI (1991 – 1993) and also worked in senior management of the Slovak Television channel, the Ministry of Culture, and TV JOJ. He has been teaching at VŠMU (as professor since 2014). He has been directing the Slovak Audiovisual Fund since its establishment in 2009.

Jena Opoldusová

She was a correspondent of the Czechoslovak Television studio in Bratislava, and she made and hosted a cultural magazine on the Slovak Radio. She wrote for daily newspapers *Národná obroda* and *Pravda*, where she focused on topics related to visual art, films, and theatre.

Simona Nôtová

Film publicist. The founding chief editor of the magazine **Film.sk** she managed from 2000 to 2012. She now works as the press secretary of the SFI.

Miro Nôta

He photographed for multiple daily newspapers and also did photography and picture supervision of numerous books. Currently, he works as a freelancer and collaborates with monthly magazines **Forbes**, **Film.sk**, and many other periodicals. He focuses on portraits and documentary photography. He has had a few group and individual exhibitions of his works.

The Spring at the Berlinale Co-Production Market

Ivan Ostrochovský, the producer and screenwriter of *107 Mothers* (2021) – Peter Kerekes' film situated at a Ukrainian women's prison that won awards at Venice, Chicago, Les Arcs, and Cairo – is working on another female story. Together with his co-screenwriter Marek Leščák, they placed *The Spring* into the 1980s socialist Czechoslovakia and focused on illegal sterilisations of Roma women and operation of abortion committees. The film will be presented at the Berlinale Co-Production Market.

“Abortion committees may be the saddest example of the communist regime invading the privacy of women in Czechoslovakia,” Ostrochovský, who is directing the film, said to *Film.sk*. *The Spring* has already received support from the Slovak Audiovisual Fund and the Czech Film Fund. “The ongoing pandemic has shown us how fragile our rights and values are, and how contradictory they can be,” Ostrochovský remarked in his author's note for the Slovak Audiovisual Fund. The fact that it enabled the state to interfere in our privacy disturbed Ostrochovský more than the pandemic itself. In *The Spring*, he wants to shine a light on an era when laws and regulations controlled our most private areas. At the same time, the film aims to reflect that many recall this time period with a romantic sentiment.

As is usually the case, establishment of the abortion committees might have been motivated by a good intention. “The committees were established because the state wanted to reduce the large number of abortions. The committee was supposed to find the reasons why women decided for abortion, and to help them,” we learn from the project's notes. However, the number of abortions only increased. Women had to be brought to account and answer the commission's most intimate inquiries. According to Ostrochovský, the noble intention degenerated into the commissions as a repugnant controlling tool of the state that delegated its power to the district apparatchiks who, oftentimes, personally knew the women that had to stand before them. “Tens of thousands of women had to face these committees.

Until this day, no one wants to talk about it,” the notes further read. Eastern European countries that are able to identify with the film's topic are its potential co-producers. “The story wants to depict the prejudice against any form of otherness, which is deeply rooted in Slovakia.”

Ivan Ostrochovský has already introduced himself in Berlin – in 2014, as co-director of the documentary comedy *Velvet Terrorists* (2013) that won the Tagesspiegel Readers' Jury Award there. The Berlinale also presented his films *Koza* (2015) and *Servants* (2020).

The Berlinale Co-Production Market, where he will present his novelty film *The Spring*, has been taking place since 2004. Out of all the projects that have searched for supportive co-production partners there, over 330 films have made it to the finish line, meaning to the viewer. Many of those premiered at big-name film festivals and won awards. One of the most recent examples would be *Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn* (2021) by Romanian director Radu Jude. The film won the Berlinale's Golden Bear last year. *Quo vadis, Aida?* (2020) by Bosnian director Jasmila Žbanić and *Flee* (2021), the awarded animated documentary by Danish director Jonas Poher Rasmussen, also participated in the past editions of the Berlinale Co-Production Market. Regarding Slovak films, Mira Fornay's *My Dog Killer* (2013) also participated and searched for partners there, in 2010. Three years later, the film won the main category of the Rotterdam film festival and received the Tiger Award. ◀

Suzie in the Garden in Generation Kplus

Short animated film *Suzie in the Garden* is directed by Czech screenwriter and animator Lucie Sunková, who sees *Suzie* as a dialogue with childhood. Czech (MAUR film) and Slovak (Super film) co-production will have its world premiere at Berlinale Generation Kplus competition.



Michal Blaško Is a Berlinale Talent, Suspicion to Be Presented

“While the Berlinale sections showcase films in all their facets (...), our focus is creative people and how they see the world through a different lens,” the Berlinale Talents programme description reads. This year, Slovakia will be represented by Michal Blaško, a young director finishing his fiction debut *Victim*. He will also present his miniseries *Suspicion* at the Berlinale Series 2022.

“We are currently finishing the post-production of my feature debut *Victim*, and I am also shooting the last two episodes of the crime series *Major Case Squad*. In the meantime, I started preparing two more feature projects I will be directing – *Guilt and Cowgirl*,” said Blaško to *Film.sk*.

The development programme Berlinale Talents has been taking place since 2003. It consists of workshops, lectures, discussions with renowned film makers, and of course, screenings. Last year was the first time it took place virtually. 3000 filmmakers from all around the world applied, 200 were selected. Slovakia was represented by Barbora Berezňáková and Matúš Krajňák.

This edition's Slovak representative, Michal Blaško, has already stirred up interest a few years ago with *Atlantis, 2003* (2017), his bachelor film made at VŠMU that was selected for the Cinéfondation student competition of the Cannes Film Festival. Later, he was searching for support of his fiction debut *Victim* at the Cinéfondation – L'Atelier programme. The film won the Works in Progress TRT Award at Karlovy Vary last year.

Victim is the story of a Ukrainian single mom Irina that lives in a small Czech town with her son. “Via an intimate portrait of Irina, I would like to expose the society Irina became a temporary mascot to, the society she ultimately caricatures. Authenticity and civility are the characterising elements in the narration of our story. That is why I and the DoP Adam Mach decided for the most authentic, dynamic, and yet aesthetically appealing form of narration in which we as viewers relate to Irina, and as the story progresses, we will be getting to know her son,” the director said about the upcoming debut he worked on with screenwriter Jakub Medvecký. In the film, Irina stands up for her son who was allegedly brutally beaten by some Roma people. She demands justice and feels that her community really supports her. Is her son telling the truth, though?

The Czech Television's three-part mini series *Suspicion*, directed by Blaško, also works with the motif of suspicion being immediately mistaken for guilt. The series is co-produced by ARTE television and nutprodukce of Jakub Viktorín, a Slovak producer who is also producing Blaško's feature debut. The auditions took almost a year, Czech actress Klára Melíšková will play the leading role. “Even at the auditions, Klára was sitting in front of us with her poker face and we really could not tell whether she was an innocent woman or a murderer. We knew that if she could do this to the viewers throughout the entire series, we would have hit the jackpot because they would be constantly reassessing whether they liked or did not like her,” said Blaško when presenting the mini series at the Karlovy Vary festival last year, where the first part of the trilogy premiered exclusively in the last weeks of summer. Melíšková portrays a nurse whose life turns upside down when she is accused of killing a patient. Even though it is merely a suspicion at the moment, everyone pretty much takes for granted that she actually did it. Just because she is grumpy in temper and her approach to patients lacks empathy.

The screenplay was written by Štěpán Hulík, the author of successful mini series for HBO Europe awarded with Czech Lion Awards – *Wasteland* (2016, dir. Ivan Zachariáš, Alice Nellis), or *Burning Bush* (2013, dir. Agnieszka Holland) focusing on the self-immolation of Jan Palach. “Unlike Jan Palach's deed, this story's strength lies in its ability to be generalised, not in its uniqueness,” said Štěpán Hulík about *Suspicion*. “Questions of the truth, lies, blends of those two, and whether the line between them has not become completely blurred yet, are highly topical,” he added. ◀



Silvia Panáková, an Emerging Producer

The only European programme of its kind focused on documentary film producers - that's Emerging Producers. The flagship of the industry programme of Jihlava International Documentary Film Festival offers an October workshop in Jihlava and then, a second workshop in Berlin in February. Slovak producer Silvia Panáková will be attending.

Even if we ignore her TV beginnings that led her to study production at VŠMU in Bratislava, Silvia Panáková has been producing films for nearly two decades. With her company Arina, she collaborated on numerous successful Czech-Slovak co-productions such as the biographical drama *Jan Palach* (2018, dir. Robert Sedláček), or the sports drama *Fair Play* (2014, dir. Andrea Sedláčková), and she also has the dance film *Backstage* (2018, dir. Andrea Sedláčková) under her belt. Producing *Piargy* (2022, dir. I. Trajtkov) was a big, complicated challenge (read more on page 32). So far, her last finished film is the documentary *Unseen* (2020, dir. Maia Martiniak), dealing with the topic of postpartum trauma. It took eight years to get the film to the viewers.

As she said herself, the films Panáková partakes in have to appeal to her, either with their vision, themes, or the author's charisma. She likes collaborating with female directors - most recently, she has been making a documentary about open relationships and polyamory with Diana Fabiánová *The Boundaries of Fidelity*. With this project, they participated in the Ex Oriente Film programme specialising on Central and Eastern European documentaries last year. It also brought them the Golden Funnel award for the most progress made. "We won the award as the project that has progressed the most during the course of the programme. The director deserves much of the credit for that, as she was the one who followed the tutors' recommendations, altered the concept of the film and narrowed it down. Instead of the intended stories of a number of people, she focused on her own story. The tutors appreciated the fact that she decided to put her own skin in the game," the producer said. This encouragement came at a time when they were considering whether they should even continue with it.

Just as the aforementioned *The Boundaries of Fidelity*, the fiction project by Stanislav Párnický titled *Alone Among Strangers* is also being developed. The former Slovak Minister of Culture through many years, Marek Maďarič, wrote the screenplay which is based on the book by Kathryn Winter. The story combines history with the present and the fate of a Jewish girl during the war with her life many years later.

The other two Panáková's projects in progress are in the post-production phase. One of them is a portrait of the famous Czech musician Michael Kocáb who joined politics after the Velvet Revolution. Kocáb managed to broker the withdrawal of the Soviet army from Czechoslovakia, which was invaded in 1968. The film is directed by the well-known documentarist Olga Sommerová, who is also a politician herself. The fiction Czech-Iranian-Slovak co-production *The Absence* (dir. Ali Mosaffa) also returns to a communist Prague - an Iranian is looking for traces left in the Czech metropolis by his father in his youth.

The tenth edition of Emerging Producers will host 18 producers. Seventeen of them come from European countries and one spot belongs to the hosting country, which is currently South Korea, represented by the producer and director Jin Jeon. ◀



— text: Matúš Kvasnička, Jaroslava Jelchová
— photo: Silvia Panáková archive —

— text: Mária Ferenčuhová —
photo: Guča, Toxpro, Arsy-Versy, Hitchiker Cinema, sarkany —

Worldwide Ambitions of Slovak Documentaries

Despite the second year of the pandemic not being favorable to film distribution for cinemas, twelve documentaries by Slovak filmmakers managed to get into cinemas, at least for a short while. This time, the number of documentaries made by women was double the amount of those made by men. Five of the films are debuts, which is even rarer.

The reasons for why so many quality auteur documents shot by female filmmakers belonging to the young or the middle generation met in the cinema in 2021, and to what extent it was precisely because of the scanty production of live action films (made mostly by men) that let them shine, would certainly deserve a separate analysis. But at the same time, one cannot fail to notice that these women have a strong and credible voice, and some of the topics they brought up were not the usual for Slovak documentary films. Numerous films of theirs stepped out of the small Slovak or Central European territory with confidence and became global, at least in geographical terms, which I also find noteworthy.

personal, introverted film. Viera Čákanyová approached it as an audiovisual journal of her own Antarctic loneliness, interrupted only by semi-fictional chats with AI *ann_w* and track-ins of parasitic (mental) images of people swarming in China. With her second feature film, Čákanyová proves to be the most original Slovak documentary filmmaker, not only because of her choice of topics, but primarily because of her take on them where she specifically aims to deconstruct the anthropocentric perspective.

Lucia Kašová's debut, *The Sailor*, also indirectly ruminates on climate change. It's a portrait of Paul Erling Johnson, a freedom-loving sailor and yacht designer

neglected health care services, is systematically hurting many women in labour. For these, giving birth becomes a grievous experience that often affects not just the relationships with their children, but also their future sex lives. Unlike Zuzana Límová's *Before I Met You*, Maia Martiniak did not frame *Unseen* as an indictment. Instead, she tries to show how to deal with the trauma. And primarily, she brings examples of good practice, mostly from Denmark. These demonstrate that obstetrics in Slovakia does not stand or fall on individuals, as these usually have the will, willingness, and empathy, but rather on the desperately inadequate spatial conditions of Slovak hospitals and the lack of qualified staff,

and yet with no memory. Sliepková avoids social issues such as inequality among citizens, the frequent problem of financially unaffordable housing, but she does not develop the potential of lines as barriers in the lives of the citizens. Black-and-white shots are seeping with topics of the incoming climate crisis, the automobile hegemony, or the difficulty of enforcing a positive change. And the two protagonists' stories insinuate loneliness and the troubled building of relationships in the anonymity of urban space. Conceptually, these lines do not cross, but montage and sound dramaturgy blend them in a well-functioning poetic unit.



The Sailor —



Lines —

thy. This applies especially to *White on White* by Viera Čákanyová and *The Sailor* by Lucia Kašová, but to some extent also to *Unseen* by Maia Martiniak.

Care for the Planet and Sympathy for Others

Viera Čákanyová shot her second film in Antarctica as part two of an (un)planned triptych about the future of the world, mainly human civilization in the times of the climate crisis. In the radical preceding *FREM* (2019), she simulated an (autistic, dare I say) perspective of artificial intelligence on the planet Earth, and humans as an active element were, at least seemingly, pushed out of focus of the camera and the story right to the periphery. Now, *White on White* is a purely

spending the rest of his life on a small Caribbean island. The everyday rhythm of the octogenarian with slow careful moves who's looking back upon his life sets the tempo of the film and strengthens its meditative character, helping Kašová to achieve a pure cinematographic style. At the same time, the film is narrated in a very traditional way (mostly via voiceover of the protagonist complemented by interactions at a shop, or with boat repairmen). Intentionally – maybe with an excessive amount of respect for the old man – areas of potential conflict or personal trauma are avoided.

Contrarily, Maia Martiniak's *Unseen* moves the problem of traumatised to the forefront, pointing out that obstetrics in Slovakia, part of underfunded and

be that nurses or doulas that may keep women company throughout the entire labour. The film *Unseen* might not be bringing a new breakthrough in style or concept, but its directness and sensitivity are captivating. Capturing well-managed labours (and I find the unfortunately oh-so-common Slovak induced labour that ends up in a C-section, however with the baby then being put on the mother's chest, to be one of them) can be truly therapeutic and healing for some female viewers.

Barbora Sliepková's debut *Lines* is also radiating tenderness and care. Aesthetically, her film is a convincing tribute to urban symphonies from one hundred years ago, it displays Bratislava as a city with a changing skyline, permanently redrawing, rebuilding, reminiscing,

History, Tradition, and Silenced Voices Too

Reflection of the past has long been one of the substantial sources of inspiration to Slovak documentary films. To some extent, this point of view applies to two out of five documentary debuts of the female directors plus the feature debut of Jakub Julény who already has a mid-length television film under his belt. Mária Pinčíková's *On Your Marks!* is probably most defiant of such characterisation, as it focuses primarily on the preparations for the complex coordinated mass gymnastic performance of the Sokol movement gathering at a stadium. Archival footage at the beginning gives more importance to the topics of tradition and historical memory which the film also touches on, including the

questions of group discipline in a democracy and individualism, sometimes of extreme dimensions.

— In Vera Lacková's debut *How I Became a Partisan*, on the other hand, the topic of history is fundamental. The author is not only searching for non-existent historiography of the Roma antifascist resistance movement, but also for a method to communicate this history. Her film combines references to the oral tradition of passing down memories with positivistic backtracking of historical sources and metaphorical/metonymic substitution of missing visuals with real ones, albeit borrowed from a different context. Lacková is examining, setting the tone of the aesthetic form while also showing sys-

persecution, while also touching on betrayal, compromise, and forgiveness.

— Films *Architect of Brutal Poetry* by Ladislav Kaboš and *Everest, the Hard Way* by Pavol Barabáš also remember and revive the voices of those that cannot speak for themselves anymore. Both present a rather conservative line among the subset of last year's documentaries – the more or less television-film-like qualities in the case of Barabáš, and in the other, the acting stylisation with the old fashioned voiceover portraying the remarkable architect Hans Broos, a Carpathian German from Slovakia who gained notoriety in Brazil.

onymised characters of the mansion's female residents (orphans, or the court ladies that are going through re-education) that remain speechless for the entire length of the film.

— Miro Remo also captures the present in *At Full Throttle*, bringing a highly dynamic portrayal of life, although a bit more bitter one. The protagonist Jaroslav has just been through a traumatic divorce, he hasn't reached full independence from his mother, and his biggest passion is racing cars of his girlfriend, Jitka. The most chilling part of the story of an ordinary human is the ending: in the closing minutes of the film, Miro Remo insinuates how failure and frustration, balanced

the film manages to spark up conversation. The way its creators transferred the distribution from closing cinemas to their own online platform Kino 363, where it was accompanied by numerous debates with guests who have a lot to say about the topic, is a proof of it.

A Small Step for Cinemas, a Giant Leap for Documentary Film

— In a way, the pandemic has filtered the number of documentary films that reached cinemas: some premiered just online, others went directly for television broadcast. As a result, the vast majority of pictures that made their way to the cinema were really worthy of



King Bee —



At Full Throttle —

temic racism with its roots running deep in Slovak society.

— Silence and long-term quietness partly define *The Commune*, the film where Jakub Julény presents the dissidents of Košice as the secret police keeps a close eye on them and deliberately erodes their bunch. It concentrates particularly on the NACE group centered around Marcel Strýko, an amateur philosopher, poet, visual artist, and musician broken only by the post-revolutionary politics. *The Commune* reopens old wounds, but Julény does not pressure the protagonists into confrontation, nor does he question the sentiment or the conciliatory pathos some of them recall the past with. In the first place, *The Commune* is a portrait of friendships that resist or perish under the pressure of the police and

The Present, Bright or Bitter

— *King Bee* by Vladislava Sárkány, a fairytale-like comedic portrait of the model municipality Spišský Hrhov and its mayor/monarch Vladimír Ledecký, portrays complex reality in a refined but functional way. The director went for the creative "make-believe" approach (a pretended kingdom, film, self-presentation) which helped her easily, yet thoroughly uncover the ways of the local royalty, but also the community work, its transformations and even its darker aspects, shortcomings, and flaws. Apart from the solid protagonists, the director used metaphors and comparisons to paint a credible picture of the municipality: a diligent, highly organised beehive and the disconcertingly wistful an-

only by tiny, insufficient glimmers of joy, can result in a radicalized society, all in the spirit of uneasy gregariousness.

— Zuzana Piussi's *Ordeal* is the one leaving the most bitter impression. The director picked up the threads of her earlier film *Disease of the Third Power* (2011) and is pointing out the problems of the Slovak judicial system, the persisting unenforceability of law, procedural delays, and even blatant miscarriages of justice that make all the hope for rehabilitating judicial reforms disappear. Piussi based the film on two cases of evident injustice and the attitudes of members of the judicial council, primarily the female ones. *Ordeal* might not be bringing any new or unfragmented information, but

the silver screen; these not only have the ambition, but also the right topics, the format, the visual conception, the creative rendering. This is also the reason why I did not cover films made by non-Slovak directors (even if they were made in co-production with Slovak companies), and dedicated a few more lines to the ambitious female Slovak authors. Last year's production of documentary films was exceptional and numerous of the films are worthy to come back to in the future. ◀

— text: Martin Ciel — photo: Punkchart films,
Garfield film, Wandal production —

Possibilities of Depicting Reality and the Limits of Fiction Films

Currently, Slovakia has around 5 450 000 inhabitants, the well-functioning Slovak Audiovisual Fund, truly many production companies, about 150 cinemas and 50 film clubs, circa 40 film festivals and showcases, more or less 10 film magazines and portals of varying quality, one separate film and television faculty, and 100 years of cinematic tradition. In 2021, all of that generated four cinema premieres of Slovak feature fiction films.

107 Mothers —

As far as I know, there are no quantitative models examining the direct relation and proportionality between the stated facts, so I cannot say whether four films are a lot or not enough in this country, and in this situation. But speaking of quality, it was a successful year for the Slovak cinema. All of the films differ from each other to a great extent, it is therefore impossible to spot any dominating trends or tendencies in this small sample. Even though all of the four films have some things in common: an interest in reality, more stylised in some cases and more realistic in others, the intention to capture its correlations. They all identify and represent the boundaries of the understanding of the possible ways to interpret reality. That is, the idea of commenting on reality with fiction films. (One remark: Unfortunately, this year, just as any other year, in fact, experimental fiction film is absent, but, among other factors, it is the result of the 100-year-long realistic tradition. There weren't many Andalusian dogs running around.)

Playing with the Viewer

Martin Šulík made *The Man with Hare Ears*. It is certainly not his worst film, but also not his best. The film à thèse is a calculated intellectual game, a riddle, essentially. As if it counted on the viewer to discover all the hidden connections and this revelation would bring them the pleasant satisfaction of having become a worthy partner to the creators. It's not only the film affecting the viewer – the viewer also affects the film. Balancing this seesaw is not easy, but the authors of *The Man with Hare Ears* accomplished it. Not even the use of "surreal" elements in a strictly realistic rendition can disturb the unifying poetics of the artwork, as it is sufficiently motivated by the world of dreams or imagination, let's say. However, it is all made in a somewhat boring, literal way without any major innovations or formal embellishments Šulík so brilliantly exhibited in his earlier films. In the end, the interesting intellectual construct commenting on reality without any strong emotions feels cold, which would not be a problem in and of itself, but the film is not philosophically striking enough to gain significance in epitomising the state of affairs.

Telepop

Peter Bebjak's *The Auschwitz Report* is a different kind of puzzle. It is the only historical film of this year's collection, inspired by actual events. Unlike Bebjak's previous film *The Line* (let's be merciful and not even mention *The Rift*), this one actually works. *The Line* crumbled to pieces that were dramatic, attractive to the viewer, and at times, cliché. These pieces did not aid cohesion and the whole film seemed to be adhering to some fictional wishes of a mainstream viewer. But *The Auschwitz Report* is solid. Sure, it is a mainstream film with a relatively big budget, but it is virtually unique. Once Upon a Time, there was Czechoslovak Army Art Ensemble and they invented excellent phrase "telepop". It is appropriate

description of *The Auschwitz Report*, as this motion picture stands out from the rest of commercially oriented genre films about concentration camps and escaping them. So is there anything more than professional quality craftwork? Filmmakers managed to avoid any pathos. They were clever enough to choose ending with no drama. The film is shot in an attractive, thrilling, and realistically convincing manner; it works with emotions but does not succumb to the average viewer's taste. Only the closing montage sequence with its appeal relating to current-day reality feels a bit off.

Time for a More Flexible Terminology

Peter Kerekes' *107 Mothers* is the cherry on top of the 2021 premieres. I consider Kerekes' *66 Seasons* to be one of the best documentaries made after 1989, and to me, it seems that *107 Mothers* is a natural progression of his authorial journey. The central motif is the fate of a female prison guard officer, and real stories of the inmates are the side motif. The dramaturgically flawless



The Man with Hare Ears —

story with a noteworthy formal depiction is only decipherable in hints. The filmmakers narrate it uncompromisingly, clearly have it all fully under control and fulfill their authorial vision with non-actresses (well, alright, there are two actresses) and the para-documentary point of view with an incredible use of details. The images (the DoP Martin Kollar) of situations saturated with semiotic structures are often so beautifully plain they reach an interesting symbolism due to the montage. This is one of those authentic civilist films that broaden the conscience of correlations. Via camera, it can show the viewer things they could never see or feel. Paradoxically, it is seemingly simple precisely because of its intricate inner complexity.

In the post-revolutionary period, this para-documentary poetics was first used by Ivana Grófová in her fiction film *Made in Ash*. In a sense, it was an innovative and original follow up on the 1960s on her part. Zuzana

Liová, Mátýás Prikler, Jaroslav Vojtek, Juraj Lehotský, Mira Fornay with her *My Dog Killer*, and Ivan Ostrochovský and his *Koza* continued with it. Once and for all, *107 Mothers* proves that Slovak cinema can walk that walk. Although, if a documentary is a record (or a reconstruction) of an event that really happened, a creative transformation of reality, does it mean that *107 Mothers* is a fiction film? Or, isn't it about time to substitute the traditional terminology with something a bit more flexible?

social relations of today within the genre's framework. In the case of *Perfect Strangers*, it is a purely commercially oriented variation that has abandoned any effort to interpret reality in an interesting way, but is at least playing with it towards the end. In one apartment, seven people play a dishonest game of pretending honesty. Cell phones play an important role and it is even funny, occasionally. There is no use in comparing this film to the original. The ambition of *Perfect Strangers* was to become popular among viewers in our region, and according to the box office, it accomplished just that.



Perfect Strangers —

Instapop

I completely understand that at this point, our readers may sigh at the fact that the dissected sample contains no blockbusters of mass popularity among viewers (ideally genre films, undemanding action films, or comedies) to balance out the autumn spleen of films *d'auteur* oriented towards the depressing everyday reality. The answer to that may be: let Hollywood produce such films. It is partially wrong, though, as every healthy cinema should have the potential to produce popular genres, too. And here we have Zuzana Marianková's debut *Perfect Strangers*, a recycled version of the fool-proof model of the Italian tragicomedy from 2016. The model intended to present an engaging portrait of the

What we have here is a number of approaches. *The Man with Hare Ears* – a constructive principle that creates a model of reality in order to comment on it. *The Auschwitz Report* – a direct, typically descriptive approach to reality. *107 Mothers* – observational approach. As for *Perfect Strangers*, it is an intertextual variation, an intermediated testimony about something which tries to pass off as reality.

All in all, nothing to be ashamed about. No forgering, just one case of plagiarism, but properly admitted. Not bad. ◀

The Pandemic — Second Round

In 2021, we could see two Slovak majority animated short films and two Slovak minority co-production films in the cinemas – one full-length and one short. Fest Anča and Áčko Student Film Festival presented 11 short local films made in 2021, and a new series of animated bedtime stories was broadcast on television, so we can assume that animated films in Slovakia have remained at their traditional pre-pandemic levels of quantity and diversity in production platforms.

— Mixing student and professional production in a reflective appraisal piece or at Slovak film festivals and showcases is not the local norm, and the situation abroad is very much alike. Short format is financially affordable for schools and their students (and isn't too time-consuming). At the same time, the students can seek support from various funds and find professional co-producers. This results in many original films, such as the Oscar-nominated *Daughter* (2019) from the Czech Republic. The door to the world of the best animated films is wide open for student creations, although their quality varies significantly. Nonetheless, it's an indicator of trends and the evolution of Slovak animation, which is why it must be included in the appraising review.

— The biggest local animated film project of last year is arguably the minority co-production *My Sunny*

divide in her own nuclear family of Vietnamese migrants. In her animated documentary film, the author, born into the Western world, tries to understand the traditional values of her father that caused their family breakup.

— Our third film in the cinemas last year was also made by a woman, but the animated documentary film about identity is not bound to gender roles. The film *Once There Was a Sea...*, directed by Joanna Kožuch and made in a Slovak majority production of Peter Badač's company BFILM, uses the environmental catastrophe at the Aral Sea to illustrate how the physical space a person lives in shapes the formation of one's sense of self.

The fourth cinema film tries to explain the topic of the Roma and non-Roma identity and the cultural gap in a kid-friendly way – *My Heart* by Dávid and Ivan Popovič does so via a typically Popovič-like play of imagination



Once There Was a Sea... —

Maad by Czech animator Michaela Pavlátová. The film won multiple awards (Annecy, Guadalajara, Bucheon Film Festival, and a Golden Globe nomination) and its Slovak co-producer, BFILM, is already renowned in the world of animated film. For the first time, the post-revolutionary wave of animated films made by women has crossed the full length boundary. But primarily, the topic of relationships between partners and among family members presented from a woman's perspective raises the issues of culture gaps and building personal bridges in relation to the search for one's own identity. The second successful minority project of last year, *Love, Dad* co-produced by the Slovak nutprodukcia, deals with the same themes. The short film by Diana Cam Van Nguyen, a student at FAMU (the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague), tackles the cultural

and associations that accompanies a simple story of two classmates. The local premiere of *Even Mice Belong in Heaven* (2021), a big international production with Slovak participation, was postponed to this year.

— Due to the pandemic measures, Fest Anča International Animation Festival in Žilina took place also online for the first time. Its main theme, Traditions, is also connected to identities that are formed by following or renouncing traditions. The festival's visuals went hand in hand with the theme, alluding to TV bedtime stories, or famous animated characters Filmárik and Filmuška. Several generations of Czechs and Slovaks had their national identity shaped by television animation, while kids today do not feel as connected to it, partly because of the access to foreign animation production, but the format of TV bedtime stories has been revitalised and

contemporary Slovak animation has entered the international mosaic of what kids are watching nowadays. The third season of *The Websters*, a series following the adventures of 3D animated spiders, directed by Katariána Kerekesová, premiered at the end of 2021.

— Fest Anča presented two sections of Slovak films, one of them competitive. Only student films represented Slovak animation in Žilina, including films from primary art schools and high schools. Eva Matejovičová, the winning Slovak student at FAMU, decided to follow the international trend of animated documentaries and made *Sanctuary* (2021), a motion picture about animal adoption. The Slovak music video to Prezident Lourajder's song *Destiny*, directed by Matej Mihályi, won the international competition of music videos. The theme of traditions is also present in it. The film frames join visual artwork and pieces of technology from different eras, but all of the famous portraits and statues feature the face (or rather, the mask) of a young man from the present. The music and his clothes represent hip hop culture, so tradition is confronted with a contemporary point of view that was initiated by the pandemic-caused isolation and wandering around one's own house (physically and mentally). The song's lyrics speak of the hopelessness of today that stems from the development of the modern Western civilisation with all of its environmental, psychological, and social consequences. The director Matej Mihályi collaborated on the music video with Michaela Mihályi and David Štumpf, the Slovak student duo at FAMU that made the winning film of Fest Anča's previous edition, *Sh_t Happens*. Štumpf's new film *Home Sweet Home* received a special mention in Žilina.

— Other competitive and non-competitive Slovak films dealt with topics of ecology, humanism (in the relation to animals, too), ageing, domestic violence, alternative history, gender stereotypes, quarantine, craft, gratitude, or the inability to communicate. The films varied greatly in quality. In most cases, films were either lacking in animation (amateurly economical and mechanical movement) and their visual rendition was unoriginal, or the animation was interesting but the themes and narration were banal or incomprehensible.

— Áčko Student Film Festival took place in October, and therefore, presented some films that did not make it in time for Fest Anča. Animated motion pictures heavily influenced by film genres dominated the festival. The title and the shot composition of *Za hrst' omrvíniék* (meaning A Fistful of Crumbs, directed by Juraj Mucha) allude to the tradition of westerns, but aside from the title and a few conventionalities, it has nothing in common with Sergio Leone's *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964). The award for visual effects went to *The Gods* (directed by Lukáš Jankovčín and Tomáš Hotový), a motion capture trailer to a non-existent fantasy film. The *mise-en-scène* is truly spectacular, the movement of the figures reveals the artificiality of the fictive world. The mystery film genre is the blueprint for *Mathias* (directed by Imrich Kútik), an animation about the need for forgiveness in a family. The effort to make the narration more special by using chapter structure and a mosaic-like storyline deserves praise. The hor-

ror film *The Knife* (directed by Timotej Lukovič) became the best animated film of Áčko. By adherence to the basic narrative conventions of the horror genre, it cultivates suspense and curiosity, but a more expressive style would be needed in order for the film to evoke fear. But the multitude of *The Knife's* layers presents an added value – apart from the baseline level designed to evoke fear and repulsion, the intention is to also develop the relationships and the nature of the mutual love between the mother and the daughter. With her love, the mother gives her daughter the power to flood the world with life, and the daughter gives her mother the courage and strength to face evil.

— After the second pandemic year, it seems reasonable to wonder whether animation reflects this new way of life. It was mostly professional projects which started before the pandemic that got into the cinemas, so student



Love, Dad —

creations became a litmus test of the situation, as these are conformed to a shorter rhythm of terms and years. We see almost no explicit manifestations of the pandemic, but on an emotional level, feelings of disillusion, fear, a sense of a threat, or an unavoidable change are noticeable. However, this might also be related to the environmental crisis that has been going on for a longer time, as well as the crisis of democracy. Many young people of today have incorporated these into their general feeling of life. The traditions that we look back on through the prism of today's catastrophic state of affairs appear to be blind. But the rejection or absence of traditions robs us of a firm ground beneath our feet, a sense of existence. That is why building new traditions is fitting, although it may be an unbearable load for young people.

— However, the pandemic has also had some positive impact; for instance, the Slovak National Gallery's digital education project titled *Art Warm-Up* animated by Ové Pictures and Kriss Sagan, or the Fest Anča Cinema distribution model that brings predominantly European films straight to kindergartens and schools in order to cultivate kids into competent viewers, all with the use of educational guides that complement screening sections and explain the film language to kids, but mostly, teach them to critically think and understand the complex world that surrounds us. ◀

— text: Matúš Kvasnička
— photo: Hitchhiker Cinema —

When the Intentions Are Clear, It Gets Reflected in the Result

Characterizing *Lines* as “a poem about the reality of modern city life” might seem vague, but it perfectly describes this film by the director Barbora Sliepková. Her urban symphony embodied in a film won the main award for the most notable international documentary at last year’s Ji.hlava IDFF, as well as two more awards for the best debut film and the best sound design.

Lines is your feature debut. What did you feel when you found out it won at the Ji.hlava Festival?

They called me at night to tell me we won, and my heart skipped three beats, one for each award. When we were driving to Jihlava, I was very nervous about the audience’s reaction. After the screening, I was relieved everything had gone well. It is a great honor for me to have won these awards. It is hard for me to describe as I have been going to the festival as a visitor ever since I found my passion for film. As we were receiving the awards, I had flashbacks to all that I had experienced there, Viktor Kossakovsky’s masterclass, being at the screening of the director Laila Pakalniņa’s film *The Chimney* and lying there in a crowded screening room under the screen with my classmates, everyone in awe... I felt both a great sense of satisfaction and responsibility in face of the thought that I might make another film.

Will you?

I took a considerably long break before the premiere of *Lines*. I was stuck and waiting for “it” to happen. The film was completed, but without a premiere, the process felt incomplete. Now that it happened, my motivation to work has returned, and I started working on multiple projects. One of them is about dreams. Dreams intrigue me. When I sleep, I always dream about something. I have been reading a lot about the topic and have recently been to a seminar on dream interpretation in psychotherapy led by the psychiatrist Jozef Hašto. Now,

I am looking for a key to transform it all into a film. If everything works out, the first project on this topic is going to be a radio feature. I like the idea of only using the audio format, without any visual input, to cover the topic of dreams. I might find the right way of visual interpretation later. Besides that, I have been approached by Lucia Kašová to cooperate with her and Viera Čákanová on filming one of the three shorts for a project whose working title is *Ecological Disasters*. It talks about the three most dangerous toxic waste dumps in Slovakia. We each have “our own” dump and rather than reports, we want to make essays on ecology.

Have you visited the dump you were assigned?

I will cover the dump in Predajná (translator’s note: a village in central Slovakia) that the mayor calls ‘black eyes’. These are two acid tar lagoons. Acid tar is a byproduct of oil processing. It is a horrible place, yet it has a kind of strange allure to it. It sits on a hill among birch trees with woods and beautiful nature all around. The lagoons themselves are also beautiful until you smell them. They are calm with only small ripples running on the surface. Every now and then, something bubbles up as the lagoons’ content continues seeping through. They are filled with garbage. Who knows what people throw in there... I even saw a farm animal thrown inside with only legs sticking out. It is a brutal place. The first idea shaped out to be something *Stalker*-like, so we will see what it ultimately becomes.



What was the first idea behind *Lines*?

During an exercise at school, the director Lenka Moravčíková-Chovanec explained to us that when looking for a topic, we have to be fast. She gave us fifteen minutes to run outside the Academy of Performing Arts' building and shoot a photo report on a particular topic that we could think of at that moment. I got intrigued by the topic of borders, certain demarcations, and delimitations—cars parked over parking spot lines, a freshly installed private parking space sign, a heavy gate beside a thin little door... I then added some quotes defining private and public space to the project. I also started reading about different types of public and private spaces and urbanism. I also got interested in the space of prison and the legal definitions connected to that. I siphoned all this into *Lines*.

The story of *Lines* follows multiple characters. The main protagonist, however, is the city of Bratislava. How did it inspire you?

The original idea came from the stories told by the people I like. Dramaturge Ingrid Mayerová advised me to not write about an abstract city but my city – Bratislava. A city where different layers of time exist next to each other. The post-socialist Bratislava of the 1990s carries the traces of the 1980s inside of it, together with other periods that exist together and create the city's visual. Bratislava is an open-air museum of sorts. It keeps these periods side to side and alive, making them visible and discernible.

I think the slogan that calls Bratislava “a city of thick lines” is really interesting...

It was the original slogan I came up with, but others persuaded me it was not good.

It does, however, reflect what you have talked about just now, that Bratislava can be viewed as a kind of museum where different historical periods are mixed together.

It is a city of contrasts. The documentary also shows the ways Bratislava has not learned from previous experience and the changes it underwent. Our producer Barbara Janišová Feglová summarized it well when she compared Bratislava to a woman who got together with someone, then someone else, broke up with both of them, and got into a relationship with someone completely new, only to discover that they are abusive... When we first brought the idea to Barbora, she encouraged us to start developing it.

The number of protagonists seems to have grown during production.

I wrote many characters for the film, or rather archetypes, such as a student, a commuter, a loner, and so on. I had certain people in mind that intrigued me in some way, and ultimately, they appeared in the film. But they were completely different characters than I originally wrote. The final cast was coming together for a longer period of time. Bit by bit, we edited *Lines* but there was still something significant missing from it. And so,

I looked for somebody who would become a common link. There is this kind of people, fruit flies, as I call them, who you can meet sitting in a café and commenting on everything that happens around them. But I could not find anyone like that.

You found this common link in Daniel and the way he sees and comments on what goes on in the city. Were some of his scenes staged?

We have already approached Danny with the idea that we might stage some of his performances. I needed to get some particular scenes in the film. I considered writing a number of them but in the end, it was not necessary. The only “staging” required was putting him in a situation, an environment. That is a usual practice and we agreed on that. He understood the topic we wanted to present. All his statements in the movie are authentic and come from his mind. It is not a role that I would write for him.

***Lines* was in production for five years. What did you struggle with the most during this process?**

Learning to talk about what I am filming and why. I also tried to learn a bit more about working with a film crew and working on a professional film set, even though we did not always have the whole crew present. Very often it was just me, the camera operator, sound technician, camera assistant, or a similar crew. Five years is a long time, naturally, and so many personal decisions were made, and I went through a lot of haircuts.

***Lines* is a collection of multiple microstories, yet they appear to be very compact. To make a film flow this seamlessly must require a lot of work...**

You cannot make this kind of film alone. I worked with brilliant people, and it was great that I could have them around. One of them was the editor Máté Csúport. When he sees or feels that something does not work, he says it immediately. With some shots, I even had to explain to him why I wanted to have them in the film. Ingrid Mayerová's dramaturgical input also helped a lot, just as the dok.incubator workshop. Another important person was Barbara who forced me to explain everything. It was her work method. She kept asking me: Why? Why are these characters there? Why is that Čupka character there? The answer that it worked for me that way was not enough. I always had to verbalize everything. This way, I was able to clarify my intentions for myself. When the intentions are clear, it gets reflected in the result.

***Lines* also works with the city's rhythm which at the beginning of the pandemic slowed down significantly. How did you feel when the streets became desolate overnight, as though we were in some sort of post-apocalyptic sci-fi?**

At that time, I lived in the center of Bratislava, right next to Michael's Gate. The impact that the pandemic had on the city center was frightening. You could see the difference from miles away. It was at the

time of big personal changes in my life when I moved houses and I kept video diaries. When I watched them during the pandemic, it felt like two completely different worlds. The Old Town was empty, and you could see who goes there and who lives there. There was only me and one of the neighbors in my apartment building. All the other apartments are short-term rentals for tourists. The same happened to other apartment buildings in the Old Town. Suddenly, I was alone there. Many thoughts crossed my mind at that time. I was thinking a lot. I real-

Church, monks who gather there at midnight, I quickly walked back home.

We do not see the pandemic in *Lines*. Have you considered including some part of this dreadful metamorphosis of the city in the film?

Ingrid Mayerová advised me to write about everything and then record it. And so, I took notes and kept recording. Later on, we thought about the way we could incorporate Covid, but I did not know how to in-



„I got intrigued by the topic of borders, certain demarcations, and delimitations.”

ised that I live in a 16th-century building with so much happening there over centuries.

Do you have a scary story for us?

Once, when I was returning from a grocery store, I noticed a man walking a few feet ahead of me with a camera on a selfie stick. I looked at what he was recording and found out he was a guide doing a virtual city tour. I slowly followed him for a while, but when he started talking about the ghost of the Franciscan

clude this strange period in the way that would work with the rest of the material. In the end, I am glad that *Lines* does not deal with Covid at all and that there is almost no mention of the pandemic, except for maybe one shot where Danny has a mask on. ◀



— text: Mária Ferenčuhová —
photo: Miro Nôta —

Searching for Magical Moments

Slovak cinema was experiencing a difficult time in the 1990s. After the year 2000, director Peter Kerekes significantly contributed to its revival with his feature-length documentary films. After almost 20 years, his signature style has evolved and transformed, as manifested in his new film *107 Mothers*, which premiered at the Venice IFF, where it won the Orizzonti Award for the Best Screenplay. Since then, *107 Mothers* has been collecting awards all around the globe.

When *66 Seasons* came out in 2003, you were the first filmmaker from the young Slovak generation to make a documentary feature that was released in cinemas. How do you perceive your beginnings today?

Throwing myself into working on the film *66 Seasons*, which I produced as a self-employed person with a budget of 2.5 million Slovak crowns, was a pure irresponsibility on my part. From a financial point of view, it was almost insane to plunge into such a project. Until then, the only documentary feature that was released in cinemas after the establishment of the independent Slovakia was Dušan Hanák's *Paper Heads* (1995). However, we started filming with such a punk commitment that it had a happy ending after all. The film was screened at festivals as well as distributed internationally. In fact, nothing has changed since then: With *107 Mothers*, we embarked on a large project without significant financial backing once more. In addition, we actually spent all the funds earmarked for development on filming. Again, it was irresponsible because we were shooting without a relevant screenplay, we changed the subject twice during the filming, and the only thing that kept us going was the punk enthusiasm: We knew that somewhere in the material the film was hidden, we just had to get to it.

Before *107 Mothers*, you co-directed *Velvet Terrorists* (2013) with Ivan Ostrochovský and Pavol Pekarčík. What did the collaboration with Ivan, the producer of *107 Mothers*, mean to you?

For me, the most interesting part was to start considering the film in a different way. To observe the present rather than telling stories from the past, as in *66 Seasons* or *Cooking History* (2009). The unpredictability of the direction in which the film is heading piques my curiosity, and we have already outlined *107 Mothers* to search for magical moments that arise from the protagonists' interactions.

What is the ratio of your directing-producing "forces", since Ivan Ostrochovský also directs, and you also produce?

With *Velvet Terrorists* and *107 Mothers*, there was a completely different relationship between me and Ivan. He invited me to cooperate on *Terrorists*. So, it was a sort of commission, albeit a looser one. Ivan and Pavol Pekarčík asked me to assist with the structure. Luckily, they did not accept my proposition. At work, we follow a single clue – it is such an instant self-reflection – to be able to recognise the vivacity. For this, we have one very important filmmaker in the crew, Martin Kollar, who is our DoP. He epitomises the litmus test of whether what we do is genuine or it is just about maintaining a structure.

How does it manifest itself?

As soon as he starts adding smoke in the background or wondering if something should be burning in the back, I know that he does not enjoy what is going on in front of the camera. The other way around, when it is compelling, it doesn't really matter that there are just two medium close-ups in which the protagonists merely talk, Martin keeps rolling because he recognises the quality.

The topic of *107 Mothers* was originally very broad – the censorship: in art and public space or regarding letter communication in prisons. How did you narrow it down?

At the beginning, there was a large documentary mosaic of various censors. One part of it consisted of prison guards who censor love letters. This took us to Odessa, where we met Irina Alexandrovna. And she fascinated me. Representing such a full-blooded and interesting character, I knew right away that she would be at the heart of the film. Suddenly, other things gradually began to fade away. At once, it started to turn from a documentary into a hybrid film, built around Irina. I realised that she was always at her best only in interactions. In



such a way, the individual aspects of her personality can be revealed – acting nice towards someone, but she rebukes the other, and afterwards, it turns out how lonely she is. It drew my attention since Irina leads a very organised life yet remains on her own. On the other hand, she is confronted with women who have three children, each from a different man, whose lives are disorganised, but still – they have the children. Even though they quite burdened them: The kids are growing up in the nick because of the mothers committing a crime, however, they still want to give them a chance, though a small one, that their children will be happy one day. Irina did not give anyone such an opportunity – and I just liked it. You can live a “happy”, organised life, but you might be alone, and you can lead a life full of problems, however, you do have at least someone, something.

How did you feel regarding such a female topic?

————— We started filming in a men’s prison. We had 22 filming days with men, practically, the whole film was done. It made an excellent teaser, which the men complemented with one-liners, but I did not gain any deeper insight. When I looked at the interviews made in the men’s prison, almost nothing could be used in the film. On the other hand, we would be able to make an interesting film out of women’s prison based only on research interviews.

Why was it so?

————— Apparently, it was all me. Those men certainly have very interesting inner worlds, fears, dreams, ideas, however, I could not get it out of them, while women opened their hearts to me. A big plus was that nothing was based on a presumption. Curiosity was the driving force behind the film. For example, take a question about the limits of love. I was most interested in women who killed their husbands out of jealousy and the very contradiction of it – you love someone so badly that you would rather kill them than lose their love or share it with another person.

Here, however, heat of passion can interfere, sometimes even pathologies. Were you able to stay impartial?

————— There was no need for labels, I only wished to talk to them. Yet, one cannot just walk into prison and say: “Hello, I’m Peter Kerekes, could you please tell me why you killed your husband?” But if you have a film crew, you have an excuse. So, in the film, we requested Irina to ask, even though those are my words: “Why did such an educated and intelligent woman end up in prison?” At once, the older lady explains in front of the camera: “Love.” Then, almost proudly, she elaborates that she killed her husband’s mistress with two blows to the head. Not one blow. Two. Afterwards, she turned herself in. As I see it, that is what defined the relationship of those women towards me. I was truly just curious. Not asking for anything, not bossing them around to say this or that, I only listened.

Did you lack women in the crew? The concept of the film is, perhaps a little stereotypically, female-focused, but the prison institution is, again stereotypically, male. Stereotypes are challenged by the prisoners themselves, especially Irina, who – dressed in a uniform as well as in a bathing suit or a bathrobe – mixes up the gender roles a bit.

————— We realised that we were a male crew, but it did not bother us much, we were not itching to hire a female camera operator just to have a woman among us. It is not about a gender perspective. The fundamental question concerns everyone: Who is really interested in our lives? Who cares what we truly think, without pursuing their own interests or judging us? It was a huge luxury for me to be able to sit with the protagonists and just talk to them. It has facilitated creating a space for stratification and trust. However, there is nothing strange about that – one opens up when feeling others’ interest.

How did you make the final cut?

————— We were choosing from a huge amount of material and from several storylines. Some had to be scratched, such as the prison wedding one. A friend of the protagonist, the imprisoned mother, was to marry. We filmed visits, censoring of the love letters, even a wedding night with erotic scenes, but it was not included in the film in the end because it would distract us from the main storyline, which is about finding a foster home for the main character’s son. We were noticing something, a situation, some scene, and we shot it straight away. That is how we worked. In this manner, for example, the scene of the beginning of the school year, where prisoners are dressed in school uniforms, made it into the film – it is such a post-Soviet tradition. Not only a visually interesting motif, it also constitutes a strong symbol that showed the mother and her child in a different light, especially in the context of the prison.

You made historical films, even slightly experimental ones, as well as a series on counterfactual history.

What about making a mockumentary?

————— I am not interested in imitation. I am curious about how people express themselves in a film, not what imitates reality.

What about a feature with quite a fixed screenplay, not just an outline?

————— Lately, I adapted the text of Dušan Šimek *Marathon of Juan Zabala* (Maratón Juana Zabalú) with Juraj Raýman. The film will be a historical epic, therefore, a storyboard and precise schedule is a must. It represents something completely different again, new, but that is what makes me excited about directing. ◀

— text: Jena Opoldusová —
photo: Miro Nôta —

A Film's Success Is a Very Strange and Volatile Value

The screenwriter, director, dramaturge, but mainly producer for the last (nearly) three decades, Marian Urban, presides over SAPA – Slovak Audiovisual Producers' Association since 2000. Most recently, he worked on the Slovak-Czech film *Kryštof* (2021) by Zdeněk Jiráský.

The 1950s. A young novice, people escaping to the West, the elimination of monasteries... What parts of the drama *Kryštof* can speak to this day's contemporaries?

Nothing in our lives nor our history repeats itself literally, identically (surely no one would want to experience the '50s in the shoes of the persecuted). But if you look closely, you'll see that only the background, the scenery, costumes, props, and faces change. A boy on the cusp of adulthood finds himself at a wrong place at a wrong time, running from the inexplicably hostile relationships in his alienated family, from the grim, even frightening signs of the presence of violence in society. He is searching for a way out, for his place in the world. That is one of the essential situations young people go through at all times, even today. And people's ability to get used to any kind of violence, to accept any injustice and intolerance, to betray and turn in the closest ones, to loot and kill on command, all of that is still present. It can come naturally to many people and even entire nations, especially when they start to fear for their own existence. People of all eras can adapt and come to terms with the utmost nefariousness – and justify it.

Do you think about a film's potential to become popular during production?

Rarely. I don't participate in this brainwashing of the young and older generations with creating computer games, fast-food entertainment, and films that essentially do the same, only by better means – more artistically, if you wish. The possibilities for film distribution we have at hand nowadays, and I mean mostly the possibilities of financing, allow you to make a film without business motives (financial profit) at the core of it. This may seem heretical but rather than a film's potential success among viewers, I have long been thinking about its quality and value instead during production. Cultural value, that is. Although, of course, every creator makes films in order to reach as many viewers as possible. So, once a film is made, the only thing that interests me is getting it to viewers, and the viewers themselves.

Some years ago, the directing/screenwriting tandem of Weinreb & Kazda wasn't really a household name. But their debut *I, Olga Hepnarova* did very well in the Czech Republic and at international festivals. Were there any early promises of success?

What surprised me was that the script was placed into a historical setting, while certain historical links were strictly suppressed. It was a model existential story with a theme that resonated with viewers across all continents, as it turned out. But these were groups of people we label as minority, of different orientation, simply people that have nothing to do with the mainstream, neither in real life nor onscreen. The tenacious interest and unrelenting faith in the quality of every version of the script and every cut of the film on the side of the French distributor and later also the co-producer was the only thing that might have possibly foreshadowed its future success.

A film's success is a very strange and volatile value. It's easy with consumerist motion pictures: these are all about the money. But for culturally ambitious projects differing from the mainstream, success has to stand the test of time. Only time will tell. To put it simply, just seeing some sense in making your next film, right after you've finished making one, can be considered a success...

Have you learnt what works in convincing co-producers from France, Switzerland, Germany, or other countries besides the Czech Republic?

In my line of work, it has always been about talent. Specifically about earlier works, mostly that of the director, and by all means, the new script, the project I'm pitching. But on a few occasions, with authors that had no prior relevant outputs, the script alone was sufficient. And, of course, I've found out about a plethora of other convincing ingredients, but there's probably no space for that in this interview.



The Igric Award, the Sun in a Net Award, the Czech Lion Award, an Oscar nomination... Can awards make sponsors less hesitant with their money?

————— We don't live in a country where people could be convinced to put their private money into projects with no estimated financial returns. To them, praise from those who prefer non-mainstream and art films is no guarantee. Sponsors give support to different kinds of films. With a few individual exceptions, Slovak sponsors are mostly commercial television broadcasters. They seek projects that will be successful on their TV channels or in their heads. Sure, the American or European academy awards are something else entirely, but has anyone in here won one in the last 30 years? Even I was only nominated with *Želary* (2003)... Sponsors are fond of their money and only fund pictures with sound calculated for commercial success. But awards raise your chances of getting public funding for a well-prepared project. That's the aim of the majority of independent producers whose films win most of the national and festival awards and other prestigious prizes. Although, who wouldn't hug an enlightened patron?

„Creation isn't and cannot be about enforcing one's power, ego, authority, or opinion.“

Can a Slovak film be made without any collaboration with the Czech Republic?

————— In the last thirteen years, a few friends of mine, a couple of sensible politicians, and I have managed to set the local system so that it is finally possible to make and distribute independent projects financed purely by Slovak funds. It's not just documentaries, but also fiction films. Some of them received critical praise and even drew in relevant amounts of viewers. Certainly, such budgets usually run under half a million euros or keep close to that number, only very rarely do they exceed a million euros. The co-production support means more credibility for the project, even though it's usually no guarantee of quality or success. But a quality Slovak-Czech project has more potential to find co-financing and stir the interest in its distribution, at least in Europe. It's great that Slovak films have co-producers not only from the Czech Republic, but from all Europe.

You've worked as a dramaturge, a screenwriter, a director, and in the end, you stuck with producing. What is it that you like about it so much?

————— I didn't stick with producing, I just do it while I'm working on many much more interesting and entertaining things simultaneously. I see one sole advantage in my position as an independent producer: the practi-

cally unlimited freedom in choosing what I want to make, with who, and how. But there's a downside to it – in Slovakia, it is virtually impossible to make a living with independent work of creation. It means working for other people, according to their preferences, and you can continually lose all of your creative freedom without even noticing.

Producers raise money. Do they always have the last word?

————— I don't understand why I should be spending my time and energy using my skills to raise money. If a producer can initiate or come up with the right project at the right time, they can obtain money from the right places. If not, it wasn't the right project. But if they get the money, they have absolute control of it, as well as the last word, of course. It is their call only to decide when and how to use this power. Naturally, a producer can make decisions concerning everything. But we should differentiate between the legal person – the maker of an audiovisual artwork who negotiates financing and signs contracts with the authors – and the natural person who is a co-creator of the film. A producer that participa-

tes in the realisation of activities related to filmmaking would have to be stupid to use the power they possess and their right to have the last word in situations where it isn't absolutely necessary for the project's survival. Creation isn't and cannot be about enforcing one's power, ego, authority, or opinion. Only idiots and directors with little talent do that, because they do not understand that if they want to be the sole creator, they should be writing books, painting, composing music, or have at least some minimal legal and economic awareness, plus talent. There are very few of such kind here. And then there are situations where the producer has to have the last word, because they are the ones who answer to the finance holders, regardless of whether it's private investments or fund money.

Success at festivals abroad does not generate financial profit. Does it at least help films get into international distribution?

————— Each success at a festival means some money. It's usually a very small amount, but many small things may add up to an interesting financial effect and other non-financial bonuses. It's nearly impossible to find Slovak films distributed in cinemas abroad. Fortunately, there are many alternative options apart from the classic distribution and that's where almost every film I've collaborated on can be found. ◀



— text: Zuzana Sotáková —
photo: nutprodukcia/Oliver Staša —

Animated Films Help Each Other Out

She took years-old letters from her father and responded with a short animated film titled *Love, Dad* (2021). The Czech director Diana Cam Van Nguyen won countless awards for the film, including trophies from the London Film Festival and AFI Fest in Los Angeles which qualified the film to be shortlisted for the Oscars in the category of short animated films.

The visuals and theme of *Love, Dad* stem from letters, which is probably why you chose paper collage as the animation method.

————— Yes. I draw from real letters my father used to write me from prison. I was searching for an appropriate technique and visual imagery that would be fitting, which brought me to collage. The element I use to express emotions is the “performing” of paper that occupies the entire space of the film. During the exposition, the paper is clean, smooth, in mint condition. But as the film progresses, papers get crumpled and torn until pieces break off completely – this represents the change in the relationship between the father and his daughter. By the end, the papers are put back together, but one can see they were once damaged – the white edges of the tears are visible scars.

What do you think is behind the recent global successes of Czech and Slovak animation?

————— I think that short animated films made in the last few years do not fall behind the international student production. Also, I really see how the success of one animated film helps another one of the same nature.

Do you plan to continue making short animated and experimental films after graduation? Is that an option in the local environment?

————— I want to take a break from short animated films. For now, I feel I've given it all I have in terms of themes and visual imagery. Now, I am writing a screenplay for a fiction feature film with Slovak screenwriter Veronika Vozárová. ◀

— text: Jaroslava Jelchová —
photo: ARYTMIA —

Happiness Is in the Small Things

Director Juraj Lehotský attracted attention with *Blind Loves*, a documentary which was awarded at the Cannes Film Festival. His feature films *Miracle* and *Nina* were also successful on festival circuits. Third in line, *Plastic Symphony*, originally entitled *Applause* builds on the aesthetics of his previous films, presents authentic visuals and emphasises real-world observation. According to Lehotský, however, a shift occurs, so in addition to human values, the value of art as such is also discussed.

— “The desire to reach the pinnacle and become great is one of the story topics. The film plays with the idea of human greatness and smallness as well as seeks answers to questions: In what lies the greatness of a person? Does it constitute grandiose applause, likes on social networks, recognition, respect and glory... Or is it something else?” director Juraj Lehotský elaborates for *Film.sk*. He collaborated on the screenplay with Timotej Krížka, who is also the DoP on *Plastic Symphony*. “We live in a time when we are all competing. So here arises the question of what is still considered art and what is only an instrument designated to achieve recognition and fame. Even applause has lost its meaning and no longer shows respect for some thing that enriches us. I believe everyone should find the meaning of their life, and the word ‘success’ should be cast aside. The joy of improving our surroundings should come to the fore,” Lehotský explains the initial motivations.

— The protagonist is a young talented cellist Matúš, frustrated by unfulfilled ambitions. His promising career is interrupted by the disease of his adoptive mother. After her death, he remains to live with his stepbrother Dávid, who, despite a congenital disability, rejoices and lives life to the fullest. As a matter of fact, it is talented Matúš who appears to be the person with a disability next to him, unable to lead a full life. Even when he gradually begins to achieve his ambitions and success, it seems to be in vain. Dávid’s life, in its simplicity, seems much richer. The director continued to engage both professional and non-professional actors. In the role of Matúš, he cast Polish actor Bartosz Bielenia, the European rising star who played the lead in *Corpus Christi* (dir. Jan Komasa). For *Plastic Symphony*, he learned to speak Slovak and German and to play the cello as well. Czech non-actor Vojtěch Zdražil was cast as his brother Dávid, German actor Sabin Tambrea plays the role of Albert, Matúš’s schoolmate from the arts

academy in Berlin, while Slovak actress Judit Bárdos was cast as his friend Lenka.

— “A thirty-year-old man, his future in his own hands. An entity on the brink of real life, idealistic, brimming with physical energy, motivation, talent and believing in one’s own abilities, however, lacking an empirical basis, strong social relationships and a purpose,” film producer Michaela Jelenek explains one of the layers of the story and adds that its strength lies in the universality of the subject and “a sensitive portrayal of the emotional world of characters who have something in common with each of us.”

— By the same token, the music in the film speaks the language which is also universal, not only in depicting the main character’s world. It was composed by Aleš Březina. “The story is about suffering as well as fulfilment and understanding the mind of an artist. When writing the screenplay, we relied on the composer’s experience in order to offer the most authentic and truthful setting possible. Aleš Březina was part of the process of writing the screenplay – he composed Matúš’ music piece, and its development is highlighted throughout the story,” explains the director.

— Among those who further collaborated on the film are Jan Gogola Sr. (dramaturge), Juraj Fábry (architect), Alexandra Grusková (costume designer), Pavol Jelenek (production manager) and Rado Dúbravský (editor). “Again, we have grown personally, it was a new experience, gained in more difficult conditions. Regarding the given period of the pandemic, shooting was quite challenging, and it is a miracle that we managed to make the film. We were lucky, and it is the merit and contribution of all the people who collaborated on it,” says the director. “From my point of view, the film should enable the viewers, people in general, to discover a new facet to their personality, to point them in the right direction or make them grow so they could wrap their head around some things and possibly be happier,” Lehotský concludes. ◀

— text: Jaroslava Jelchová —
photo: MPhilms —

The Power to Replace Reality With the Pretense of Truth

Director Mátyás Prikler debuted with his feature film *Fine, Thanks* in 2013, and one of the film’s main stories was already presented within the Cinéfondation Selection at the Cannes Film Festival in 2010. Prikler’s second feature *Power* explores the functioning of politics and deals with its influential figures as well as the mechanisms of power. The filmmakers are playing with the genre of political thriller, however, nature was at play too – not quite complying with their wishes, so the shooting had to be put off twice.

— “The topic of power and helplessness along with their forms in contemporary society has fascinated me and director Mátyás Prikler for a long time. We have been searching for a story that would be the starting point for a film adaptation. In this manner, it introduces a prominent politician who accidentally kills a man during a hunting trip and discusses dilemmas of power, helplessness of the powerful and power of the helpless,” says producer Zora Jaurová for *Film.sk*. Together with Mátyás Prikler, she produced the film in the company MPhilms. “Our film is consciously playing with the genre of political thriller, and its protagonist is minister Berger, who is currently running for a major international post. However, as is usual in this genre, the real protagonist is the inconspicuous agent Steiner. Through the interplay of various circumstances, he finds himself in the role of a director and has the opportunity to influence several stories,” explains the producer.

— Agent Steiner’s role is to cover up the whole hunting case so that even hesitant participants would be convinced that it is for the best. The final version of the truth, what the world will accept, depends on him. He is creating an alternative story that may seem eventually more realistic than reality itself. Thus, in addition to the mechanisms of power, the film also reveals the true identities of politicians who hide behind public masks and deals with the topic of truth. “Steiner is the ‘director’ of the whole operation, and his work bears resemblance to the filmmaking process. Arriving at the village to recce the location, he familiarises himself with the surroundings and, so to speak, starts casting – he finds a suitable candidate who takes all the blame,” Prikler describes in the film’s explication for the Audiovisual Fund. He cast Hungarian director and actor Szabolcs Hajdu in the role of Steiner. The cast of the film reflects the Slovak-Hungarian-Czech co-production. Following characters are portrayed by Mihály Kormos, Jan Kačer, Miroslav Krobot, Attila Mokos, Éva Bándor

and Ingrid Timková, while co-producers of the film are the Hungarian company Proton Cinema, the Czech company Negativ, and Radio and Television Slovakia.

— “Marek Leščák is the author of the original screenplay, and he has been collaborating with Mátyás Prikler for a long time. Hungarian DoP Gergely Pálos, who has been working with well-known Swedish director Roy Anderson on several occasions, contributed significantly to the final visual outcome,” explains producer Zora Jaurová. “Michal Lošonský and Anna Nyitrai designed an artistic component of the film which was shot in a muted black-and-white colour range with a hint of the timeless void of the present day,” adds Jaurová.

— The filmmakers describe *Power* as a winter film that can be shot two to three months a year because it takes place in a snowy country. This, for various reasons, complicated the process, and the whole shooting had to be set back for a year twice. “We have been working on this film for a really long time. Although we have done several other film projects alongside, it was probably the most complex experience with a large international film production for us, from the initial idea through a lot of creative work and the development of rather demanding production strategy (the film is funded by nine different sources) all the way to filming during the pandemic,” says the producer. “The film is grounded and devised without any artistic compromises. Despite the production complications, I am very happy that we did not opt for the easy way out, even though it meant difficult production decisions several times,” describes Jaurová. “Today, as we finish the film, I am fully aware that the result is not proportional only to the time and energy we put into it. Above all, it reflects the fact that we made the film with a team of people with whom we are in tune, both creatively and also as friends,” she concludes. ◀

— text: Mária Ferencuhová —
photo: Mayo Hirc/Arina —

Slovak Lyricised Prose on the Big Screen

One of the most anticipated Slovak fiction films is the adaptation of *Piargy*: a novella by František Švantner, author of lyricised prose. Eponymous historical film is based on specific poetics, and the subjective view of one of the characters provides the realistic story with a spellbinding, fantastic or even magical atmosphere.

— The novella *Piargy* depicts the tragedy of a settlement in a mountain valley, which gets destroyed by an avalanche, shortly before the outbreak of World War II. Natural catastrophe is preceded by emotional dramas and flare-ups that mark the interrelations of the inhabitants. Only two of them survive the disaster, young Johanka and her husband Klement. The author shares a narrative role with them, creating a complex narrative structure.

— Director Ivo Trajkov and scriptwriter Jana Skořepová chose one of three perspectives from which the literary story is told – the perspective of the survivor Johanka. By doing so, the overall narrative is lifted to a more ambiguous and magical plane. “It is a very subjective view of someone who is in a great shock and could not witness everything that was going on. Therefore, fantasy relatively complements some actualities,” director Ivo Trajkov addresses the adaptation. To some extent, the novella almost calls for genre adaptation – whether due to the unique style and language of Švantner, horror elements, love and even animalistic motifs or due to the description of a natural disaster. Nevertheless, the creators adapted the story primarily in accordance with the Slovak film tradition. “I don’t see *Piargy* as a multi-genre film. Even if certain non-traditional artistic or mythical elements occur in the film, the director adhered very clearly and firmly to Švantner’s story, which is pure in its genre. It is certainly not an art film, a horror film or a mystification of the past. The story is set in a Slovak village surrounded by mountains, and it features clear actions of the characters and the logical outcome of the story,” explains film producer Erik Panák from the company Arina. According to him, the international and Slovak audiences will experience primarily

“Slovak lyricised prose, which is converted into a more ‘digestible’ film form but still exceptional thanks to the unique rendition of the story linked to Slovak traditions.”

— The film adaptation corresponds to a wave of rediscovering folklore, manifested simultaneously in visual arts, design, music and literature in Slovakia for several years now. “Our folklore is a precious heritage that must be maintained for generations to come. It contains pleasure, beauty, traditions and enables identification. We chose this path, however, because it is precisely what I miss in the films. Ivo Trajkov is a Czech filmmaker, a native of North Macedonia. His inner energy and sense of visual aspect, along with Peter Bencsik’s camera, certainly did not overshadow the folklore elements of the film, quite the opposite. The magical moments are emphasised, yet the story itself does not become suppressed.” Erik Panák considers the central motif of love triangle and human passions to be universal and topical even today, although the creators adapted it in a historicising way. At the same time, the film carries a powerful message: “From my point of view, it is an appeal to the viewers about the importance of one of the most difficult internal choices or abilities of man – to live in truth, in relation to other people but especially oneself.”

— Švantner’s novella is built upon the contrast of pure and sinful, orderly and impulsive. The filmmakers conveyed the opposites also through a distinctly black and white visual.

— Attila Mokos, Lucia Klein Svoboda, Judit Bárdos, Daniel Fischer, Jana Geišbergová Olhová and Jana Kvantiková will star in the Slovak-Czech-North Macedonian co-production. ◀

— text: Jaroslava Jelchová —
photo: Kolsa Films SK —

Making Life Meaningful

Denis Dobrovoda’s feature debut *The Cathedral* delivers the portrait of a man who dedicated his life to building a temple in a small Spanish village called Mejordada del Campo. He died last year in November. He was ninety-six years old.

— “The story of Justo Gallego Martínez, the Spanish builder of the cathedral in Mejordada del Campo, is the film’s central theme. It raises questions about the meaning of life and the courage to live absolutely *au contraire* to society, and at the same time, it is the story of a fascinating building,” Denis Dobrovoda, the director who also produced the film (Kolsa Films SK) and participated in the screenwriting process, explains to *Film.sk*. Dobrovoda wrote the script together with Scottish journalist Matthew Bremner.

— After his expulsion from a monastery, the Spanish monk Justo Gallego decided to devote his life to God by building a cathedral. He did so without any knowledge of architecture or construction, but also without a building permit, using waste or recycled materials. “The people of Mejordada del Campo, back then just a small village in the vicinity of Madrid, long thought he had gone crazy in the monastery because all of a sudden, he started digging a large hole in a field. Besides, everyone knew he had not even finished elementary school due to the civil war. Financial reasons forced him to use waste as building material, which was raising further doubts. Nevertheless, he worked six days a week for decades and local people started to believe he might actually manage to build the cathedral,” says Dobrovoda.

— “Four years passed from our first meeting with Justo Gallego to the end of post-production. For me, as a filmmaker, it was an enormous experience. As debutants, we received zero institutional support (be that financing or know-how) in the first years. Later, we received support from the American ScreenCraft Film Fund Grant Programme, and we were selected for *dok.incubator* which helped us immensely,” the director clarifies and adds that the realisation of the film was made a bit more complicated by the fact that the protagonist

disliked the publicity caused by the cathedral. Anyhow, bit by bit, he opened up to the filmmakers.

— “The time spent with Justo was precious. His life was so different from everything you normally encounter, it inevitably made us take a look in the mirror. I will never forget his answers to questions about the meaning of life and our approach to the time we have left,” describes Dobrovoda. “I very fondly recall the first days when we were helping him with the construction, seeing him work with such energy even though he was over ninety years old. Also, he had a particular sense of humour people around him did not understand much, but he made me laugh very often. Anyone expecting him to be a bore that only recites the Bible would be wrong. He had a fascinating personality – just as his cathedral,” the director adds.

— When he started working on the documentary, Martínez was ninety-two years old. “The cathedral was listed as an unauthorised building and it was at risk of being demolished. No one knew what level of quality it was built with, and Justo was still working on it. We aimed to capture the last chapter of his story, but during shooting, we met many people who filmed him throughout his life, so we decided to incorporate that material into our work in order to create a more complex mosaic of his life,” Dobrovoda discloses. Martínez died last year in November. His cathedral still stands. “Maybe only because Mejordada del Campo has no other tourist attractions, but the fate of the cathedral remains uncertain,” the director thinks. Even if it survived the legalization process, he thinks it is rather unlikely to gather the funds needed to finish it and make the necessary modifications to guarantee its safety. ◀

— text: Jaroslava Jelchová —
photo: CinePunkt —

War as a Game and Amusement

Paula Reiselová's feature debut *Oh My War!* follows up on her graduation film made with producer Tereza Tokárová. It was the end of both of their studies at the Film and Television Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava. In the film, they pose the question why people are so attracted to war.

— “We try to take a look at the collective unawareness of our society where war is deeply rooted. We examine the place it occupies in a peaceful society where it does not provoke fear, it is merely playing the past, something that can keep you occupied in your free time, in a society where almost no one really dies,” explains the director Paula Reiselová for Film.sk.

— “I have been carrying this topic inside of me for a long time,” she says. “Among old photographs, I found one that probably captures the moment I started feeling the presence of war in our ordinary (safe) peace times. I am about nine, ten years old, posing on a tank with a smile. What a strange feeling, to be standing on something made primarily to kill, and yet, feel no fear. I intended to bring this paradox into the film. I think this one is my most personal film yet,” says the documentarist.

— “From the first version of the script, we agreed with Tereza Tokárová, who also did the film's dramaturgy, that we wanted to keep making films after graduation. Since then, we have come a long way, shot a lot of material and made it into numerous short films which we then used for analysing and perfecting our next steps. Thanks to our participation at dok. incubator where we were given the opportunity to consult professionals from various countries, we finally decided to make it into a feature film,” declares Reiselová in the director's note for the Slovak Audiovisual Fund. The film is produced by the CinePunkt company.

— “The film does not operate with any tangible central characters, the anonymous crowd is a collective protagonist. We were mostly shooting public events where we tried to blend in with the crowd to evoke the feeling that viewers themselves became participants in the cycle of the established traditions we

created in this time of peace,” says Reiselová, adding that the public events supposed to commemorate tragic historical events seem like celebrations families and children usually attend. A generation of war veterans with authentic memories is disappearing and to most people war only presents some sort of amusement, or a strategic game.

— “In a way, it was liberating to work without a concrete protagonist, to be hidden in an anonymous crowd and capture situations that happened inadvertently. Each filming day was a surprise. I was fascinated by the fact that we had embarked on a journey without knowing where exactly it would lead us,” Reiselová remembers and characterises her film as observational/essayist.

— “We worked on the film in a small crew and we had each other's backs in pivotal moments. When one of us could not take it anymore or started having doubts about whether we would manage to finish the film (this happened mostly to me, and frequently), the others brought in a fresh breath of motivation. I have fond memories of the moments when I felt I was part of a team of people that were not only skilful, but primarily, ones that do not give up easily,” the director describes. Apart from the producer Tereza Tokárová, DoP Andrej Dlabáč, editor Marek Bihůň, and sound engineer Igor Jedinák also participated in the making of the film. “Due to the limited amount of funds we had, it was hard to make compromises without hurting the film's final form. Luckily, I could count on the rest of the crew in that case, too,” the documentarist concludes. ◀

— text: Mária Ferenčuhová —
photo: Filmpark production —

The Last Film of Ivan Palúch Swims Against the Current of Time

In 1969, Slovak actor Ivan Palúch made three appearances in the programme of the Festival de Cannes, two of them in the competition – alongside Annie Girardot in *I Even Met Happy Gypsies* directed by Aleksandar Petrović and *Man on Horseback* by Volker Schlöndorff – and one in the non-competitive section, in the film *Marketa Lazarová* directed by František Vlácil. Martin Palúch, his son, made a compilation film d'auteur depicting the story of his life, titled *Countdown – The Last Film of Ivan Palúch*.

— As a film theoretician, Martin Palúch has been doing academic research of Slovak non-fiction cinema for a long time. In the last years, he has been specialising in research of compilation films, documentary essays, and experimental films made from archival/found footage. In his feature debut *Countdown – The Last Film of Ivan Palúch*, this interest was joined by a strongly personal plane that motivated the film and yet, thematically, did not play any part in it. “Unfortunately, the decision to process the life story of my father into a film only came after his death in 2015,” says Martin Palúch for Film.sk. “The compilation film form seemed to me the best fitting for portraying the whole story. I have realised that my father's filmography is so connected to his personal life that the characters and situations he depicted in films corresponded with what he was going through. The compilation form was the most effective for narrating the events of his life via snippets from fiction films he appeared in.”

— *Countdown* does not have a classic chronological structure typical for many compilation films, as Martin Palúch is literally composing the story against the current of time. “The idea to narrate the story backwards surfaced right at the beginning. I wanted to break the conventions of biographical portraits by making my father become younger as the film progressed from the start to the end. I inverted the point of view, showing consequences first and uncovering the causes only later.” Due to the political pressure of normalisation, Ivan Palúch only played minor characters in films, fairy tales, or television production of the 1970s and '80s. The film captures this in a refined way, because it anticipates his stellar years of 1962 – 1969 when Palúch acted primarily abroad, portraying characters that are less known to the local viewer.

— Even Martin Palúch only discovered and got hold of some of the foreign materials during the film's preparation. He intensely collaborated on it with the editor, Peter Harum. “I assembled the film's skeleton, made a selection of the scenes and then, for the longest time, together we searched for the final form that would be understandable and make it appealing,” says Palúch. “It was a demanding process, partly because we first had to edit the film from previews, and only then we could start dealing with their quality and licensing.” The editing phase was preceded by a long research period with the help of numerous foreign investigators. “They went through old press, institutions, archives. We reached out to production companies, searched for heirs of copyrights – we called, we sent emails, we communicated via our friends. Acquiring copies and obtaining rights to use them took us about two years and spanned Europe, as well as the USA. The material needed to be digitalised, occasionally even cleaned, which certainly left its mark on the budget,” said the producer Peter Nevedal to Film.sk.

— The painstaking preparations were fruitful, though. Television film *Ivan Palúch: An Actor's Life* is a by-product of the abundantly documented compilation film d'auteur. It differs from the cinematic film: “*Ivan Palúch: An Actor's Life* is a classic television portrait we made in a short time, while the cinematic film took no less than four years. Given its atypical narration form, it could not be shortened to the standard television format, which is why we made two films that have absolutely nothing in common in terms of the narrative style, as well as the extent of foreign footage used,” concludes Martin Palúch. ◀

— text: Jaroslava Jelchová —
photo: BFILM —

Enter the World of Fantasy

Peter Budinský's feature animated debut *Journey to Yourland* has been in the works for ten years. The main character is a little boy whose imagination takes him to a magical land of fantasy.

— “Our film tells the story of a boy named Ricky whose mother moves the two of them to a new neighborhood. There, he finds a mysterious glowing rock that takes him to an unknown world called Yourland. Not only is it a world filled with the most marvelous things a child can imagine, but also countless dangers that Ricky must face,” says the film's producer Barbora Budinská, who represents the platoon animation studio and has been involved with Budinský's project since the beginning. Budinská recollects that “it was back in 2011 when the first sketches, versions of the screenplay, and visions for the movie started to come together.” Later, Peter Badač's production company BFILM entered the project and became the film's main producer.

— “Yourland represents Ricky's inner world,” describes director Peter Budinský in his author's note for the Slovak Audiovisual Fund. In his view, the film is about exploring our own feelings, our strong and weak points, and our ability to come to terms with them. This inner world contrasts reality that “starts out bleak and burdened by an onerous problem. Still, the film shows that all problems can be overcome. All it takes is to find the right path,” reveals the author who is new to animation for children and welcomes the possibilities it offers to animators and artists.

— “Yourland is a 3D animated film that children can see in cinemas. In our case, however, the artistic concept and partly the animation technology were inspired by the visuals of stop-motion puppet animation, which has a strong tradition in our country. It was also technologically exceptional to use software traditionally used in the production of video games in the process of filmmaking,” describe the authors who, in the different phases of the project, persistently

looked for a combination of suitable technologies in order to create the desired visual. Budinský specifies that “cooperating with our colleagues in Belgium brought a new perspective into this search and together we found a fitting solution to connecting traditional animation technologies and visuals with the modern 3D CGI world,” and adds that “utilising the Unity gaming engine in the production of an animated film is not at all common, as ours is the first full-length film in the world to be made this way.”

— Several renowned studios, such as the Belgian company Stacka, the post-production studio The Fringe, and Czech studios Kredenc and Alkay, were involved in this Slovak-Belgian-Czech co-production. Since the project has always been planned to include overlaps into other media, the technological process used in its making can facilitate the production of a video game or a mobile app.

— The author of the original idea and the first draft of the screenplay is Patrik Pašš Jr., the English dialogues were written by Phil Parker. Several artists from Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Ireland collaborated on the art concept.

— “The most invaluable experience was going through all the stages of development, production, and post-production, communicating with team members, sharing visions and ideas with them, and in some cases, coming to terms with some things being impossible,” concludes Budinský. ◀

— text: Jaroslava Jelchová —
photo: Fool Moon —

The Fibres That Connect

The stories of the Webster family of spiders from the elevator machine room continue in the form of an animated series, as well as an anthology film titled *The Websters 3*, where they encounter a human being.

Katarína Kerekesová is its creator, screenwriter, director, and producer.

— “Webs, typical for spiders, are not only an image of the communication technologies of today, but also a metaphor for relationships, processes, families, friends...” says Katarína Kerekesová, the project's author, in one of the author's notes for the Slovak Audiovisual Fund. She started working on *The Websters* in 2013, first episodes aired in 2017. Since then, the spider family has expanded, they have their own school, supermarket, even their history. “Their world grows not only in the chronometry of the present, it spreads over into the past and even into metaphysical worlds,” Kerekesová clarifies. The new episodes reflect societal issues which the creators want to explain in a kid-friendly manner, while also keeping the adult viewers in mind.

— The main protagonist, a little spider girl named Lili, meets a human girl in the new episodes. “We built all of the episodes on the parallels between the world of humans and that of spiders, but we have not connected them yet. The story of a giant human gal which resembles Lili very much, despite their disproportionality, brings in the necessary slowdown of rhythm. She is the window to the microworld of spiders. When we focus on a detail, when we quieten down and observe, all of a sudden, we can uncover the fear of little Lili which gradually transforms into interest and understanding, and then into friendship,” Kerekesová describes. “The relationship between the small and the big, the repulsive and the acceptable, the unknown and the known feels familiar, because it is the story of tolerance and acceptance of otherness, and there will never be enough of those,” the author adds.

— The *Websters* combine 3D animation of spider characters with real environments. The new episodes also contain live-action scenes. “Combining reality with

puppets or other animated elements always tempted me as a director. I have been employing it since my bachelor graduation film *Lovers Without Clothes*,” Kerekesová remarks. Her company Fool Moon is the film's main producer. It is co-produced by Radio and Television Slovakia, plus Czech companies PFX, the Czech Television, and 13ka which was also a contributing author to the film. “We have been collaborating with Anna Vášová since the beginning of the project. She provides us valuable dramaturgical feedback, and currently, she also co-authors the screenplay of the new episodes,” Kerekesová declares. A couple of screenwriters work on the project, just like the visual concept is the result of a team of animators and their work. The company PFX takes care of animation and post-production of the live-action bits of the feature film. “This partnership meant a professionalisation of our production team, mostly in terms of project management,” mentions Kerekesová, adding that the collaboration is a promising start for future projects and the development of animation production in the Central European region. Aside from the content itself, she sees the stable production process, the growing team and its professionalisation as the project's benefits. At the same time, she claims *The Websters* are her family: “As an author, I have put love into the stories, my love of my own kids, parents, brothers. All with the utmost sincerity a fairy tale for kids can handle,” Kerekesová concludes. ◀

What are they up to?



Jakub Viktorín

[producer]

The Berlinale Series section will present the television mini series **Suspicion** written by Štěpán Hulík and directed by Michal Blaško, which I helped to produce. We are currently finishing the post-production of Michal's feature debut **Victim**, intensely shooting the animated puppet film **Tony, Shelly and The Spirit** and the fiction **Mr. and Mrs. Stodola**, while also preparing other projects that are currently in pre-production or in development – **Caravan** by Zuzana Kirchnerová, **Cowgirl** and **Guilt** directed by Michal Blaško, and Slovak documentary films **I'm Not Everything I Want To Be** by Klára Tasovská, a Slovak minority, and **Velvet Generation** by Ivana Hucíková.



Barbara Janišová Feglová

[producer]

I revel in the success of **Lines**. I got used to complications and I've come to terms with deadlines being postponed endlessly. I'm enjoying finishing the co-production documentary **Pongo Story** that went through dok.incubator, which was of immense help to us. Production of the series **My Emigrant** is in full swing and takes up a lot of my time now. I work on it in collaboration with young authors and it feels very personal to me. I am excited to see the intensive preparations for the March shooting of our fiction debut **Gritty Eyes**, directed by my husband Juraj. And I am glad to collaborate with Robert Kirchhoff again, this time he is the dramaturge for Marek Šulík's long-term observational documentary **The President**.



Nazarij Kľujev

[producer]

I'm currently working on the distribution of my latest documentary film **The Sailor**, directed by Lucia Kašová. Last year, it enjoyed success at festivals and these weeks,

it's entering television and internet VOD distribution. In order to bring the film closer to a global audience, I am extensively communicating with various international platforms. Speaking of future projects, I am part of a small creative team making preparations for a new feature fiction project and I also provide services to commercial advertising production.



Mariana Čengel Solčanská

[director, screenwriter]

I am spending the winter time in the editing room with **The Chambermaid**. The film has been in the making for eight years. It is set at the dawn of the 20th century in Prague which has always been the threshold between Eastern and Western Europe. The story of Anka, a servant in a German household of a high-profile official, illustrates the disintegration of the old world of the massive Austro-Hungarian monarchy and the birth of a new Europe, one with many small states. The script was written by Hana Lasicová. When we first met over a cup of coffee, my daughter was only one month old. Now, she's eight and a half... Some projects progress smoothly, however, financing **The Chambermaid** was a lengthy, demanding process. To top it all off, one of the key actresses came down with Covid in the last stretch of shooting. We could either disassemble the scenery and go home, or rewrite the script right on the spot. It is fascinating to see how an artwork takes on a life of its own. Sometimes I feel it's not us who make the film, but rather the film that makes and shapes us.



Tomáš Gič

[producer]

As of now, we are focusing on the international funding for director Martin Gonda's project **Flood**. We're developing the project together with producer Katarína Krnáčová from the Silverart production company. The fiction debut draws inspiration from the displacement of Ruthenians during the construction of Stariná water reservoir. As part of my

work, as line producer at Silverart, I also provide services to a foreign production that resumes shooting in the beginning of 2022. At the same time, I'm also in my final year of my bachelor studies at the Faculty of Law of Comenius University in Bratislava.



Tomáš Krupa

[documentarist, producer]

In my production company HAILSTONE, I am currently working on two full-length projects. **We Have to Survive**, a documentary in the early stage of production, takes us on a journey to the four corners of the planet to meet people who, due to the impact of climate change, are already forced to adapt their lifestyles, customs, and habitats in order to survive and continue to live where they were born and raised. **Tiso**, a historical feature drama based on true events, is also in the development stage. It uncovers the personal tragedy of a loyal ally of Adolf Hitler – Jozef Tiso, the Catholic priest and the president of the fascist Slovak State who refuses to change and assume responsibility for crimes committed by his political regime.



Lucia Kašová

[documentarist]

I am currently working on my second feature documentary **World of Walls**. We have just secured funding for development from the Slovak Audiovisual Fund. **World of Walls** is a documentary sci-fi set in the near future, in the environment of extreme social disparities and an escalating state of climate crisis. The rich hide into their strictly protected luxury resorts, while others are starving behind the wall. An unspecified country is ravaged by an environmental catastrophe the world knew about for years, but ignored it. The film is built upon a double portrait of children from both sides of the barricade. ◀

Cottbus — Spotlight: Slovensko

Last year, *107 Mothers* by Peter Kerekes won the main award at the FilmFestival Cottbus. Projects *The White Mare* by Teodor Kuhn and *The Word* by Beata Parkanová were awarded at the festival's industry programme Connecting Cottbus. From 2 to 7 November 2021, the festival which counts among the most important events focused on East European film presented a major retrospective show of Slovak cinema titled Spotlight Slovensko.

— “We have been collaborating with FilmFestival Cottbus for years. We are in close communication with its programme director Bernd Buder and our film centre gives him recommendations of contemporary films submitted by producers, and then the festival does a selection for its programme. But with Spotlight Slovensko, the approach was different,” Rastislav Steranka, director of the National Cinematographic Centre which forms part of the Slovak Film Institute, describes the situation behind the making of the extensive retrospective of Slovak cinema. Steranka and Buder selected fourteen films arranged into seven double bills consisting of contemporary motion pictures and film classics united by a theme. They created original connections that present the same theme, but interpreted in different times by different creators. “Chronology was not taken into account and we tried to ignore film types and genres. Finding the themes, connecting classic and contemporary films, and showing how filmmakers processed the chosen themes half a century ago versus now, these were the key aspects of the selection,” adds Steranka.

— The double bill titled *For a Better Future* is thematically tied together by emigration to find work and believing in a better future which is represented by films *Beware...!* (1946) by Martin Frič and *Made in Ash* (2012) by Iveta Grófová. Regarding *Beware...!*, Steranka said that the film is dominated by “the post-war optimism and enthusiasm for a better future. When we add *Made in Ash* into the mix, we can suddenly see that the positive dream about

building a better future from 1946 has morphed into a 2012 nightmare. It is interesting to see the films from the perspective of social-political, cultural, and historical context of the time they were made in: the postwar era and new beginnings contrasted by the current predatory capitalism and the filmmakers' point of view. It's important for the viewers to see the films in tandem, as that was the dramaturgical intention.”

— The rest of the double bills follows the same principle. The one titled *Dare or Die – Surviving the Holocaust?* is composed of the films *The Boxer and Death* (1962) by Peter Solan and *The Auschwitz Report* (2020) by Peter Bebjak. The bill *Night Bar Fatale – Urban Microcosm* features *Fifi Fatale* (2018) by Mária Kralovič and *Before Tonight Is Over* (1965) by Peter Solan; *Life as an Existential Battle* presents the films *The Bells Toll for the Barefooted* (1965) by Stanislav Barabáš and *My Dog Killer* (2013) by Mira Fornay; and *Unfortunate Returns* show the films *Are You Feeling Good?* (2011) by Matúš Krajňák and *Dragon's Return* (1967) by Eduard Grečner. In the last two months, even before the Cottbus festival, two documentary film sections were screened in Berlin as a warm-up: in September, the Czech Center screened *Worlds Beyond Light*, a section composed of *Marked by Darkness* (1959) by Štefan Uher and *Blind Loves* (2008) by Juraj Lehotský, and in October, the Slovak Institute presented the double bill *Images of Stark Reality* that presented *In Shallow Water* (2020) by Marek Moučka and *Pictures of the Old World* (1972) by Dušan Hanák. ◀

— text: Simona Nôtová —
photo: archive of the SFI/Anton Podstraský, M. Švehlík
— *Dragon's Return* (1967) —

The Sun in a Net Awards Waited for the Influx of Premieres

Due to the ongoing pandemic, the presiding committee of the Slovak Film and Television Academy (SFTA) decided to make an exception and combine the 2020 and 2021 editions of the national film awarding ceremony *Sun in a Net* together into one event in April, which will be broadcasted live on Slovak public television RTVS.

— “Taking into account the epidemic situation and the fact that cinemas were closed for a long time, the SFTA decided to make an exception and get inspired by the beginnings of the *Sun in a Net* when the awarding ceremony was occurring biennially. So next spring, the eleventh edition of the national film awards ceremony will give prizes to winning films of the last two years,” stated the SFTA's general manager Agáta Jeleneková for *Film.sk*.

— The awards' first edition took place in 2006 as a result of the initiative of then-president of the SFTA, screenwriter and dramaturge Zuzana Gindl-Tatárová. Her idea to name the awards after the film *The Sun in a Net* (1962) also caught on. This film by Štefan Uher was a deflection from all the preceding socialist schemes of cinematographic storytelling and it set the tone for the following artworks of the Czechoslovak New Wave. “It reminisces a secret that is up for grabs, yet remains out of touch,” the academy explained the reference to the film in the award's title when it was first established. “The film has connotations of innovation and the ability to look at the traditional values (of our culture) in a modern way, a certain variability of things and relations, the shortness of a moment materialised in a flash of light, giving a different feel and meaning to things.”

— As the number of Slovak made films in those times was low, the Slovak analogy to the French César Awards or the American Oscars used to only be award-

ed once every two years, originally. It has been awarded every year since 2016, as Slovak cinema got a boost from the establishment of the Slovak Audiovisual Fund in 2009 (two decades after the national film monopoly disintegrated) and its effect on yearly local production of films has become palpable by then. This new public institution replaced the earlier grant schemes of the Ministry of Culture and brought many more possibilities and sources of support for the audiovisual culture and industry in Slovakia.

— The awarded categories gradually expanded and 2022 will see two more added: a new award for best visual effects and a joint category for best television film, mini series, or series. So the *Sun in a Net* will be awarded in eighteen standard categories. The honorary award for the outstanding contribution to Slovak audiovisual culture constitutes a separate category of its own.

— Though the *Sun in a Net* may be the most watched local film award, it's not the oldest one – *Igric* is. It's awarded by the Slovak Film Union, the Union of Slovak Television Creators, and the Literary Fund. The jury members pick the winners. *Igric* Awards were stopped by normalisation after the first three years (1967 – 1969), but *Igric* followed up on the tradition back in 1993 and the year 2022 will follow with its 33rd edition. ◀

— text: Matúš Kvasnička —
photo: SFTA/Martina Mlčúchová —

— text: Matúš Kvasnička —
photo: archive of the SFI/Václav Polák,
archive of the SFI —

The Fates of Heroes

Last August marked the 90th anniversary of the birth of director Martin Hollý. The Slovak Film Institute has released his film *Night Riders* (1981) on Blu-ray and DVD.

— Hollý began his career as a documentarist and considered making documentaries his biggest source of knowledge on filmmaking. His fiction debut *The Crows Fly Over* (1962) was released during the advent of the Czechoslovak New Wave. “In my films, be it in a more traditional or modern way, I wanted to tell the story of my times as a sort of chronicler. I have never been an auteur filmmaker. I would not even know how to make my own script into a film. It would bore me, and I would not be able to bring anything new to the process. I enjoy getting inspired by somebody else’s ideas and then interpret them through my own lens,” he told Richard Blech in an interview from 1994, an excerpt of which you can find in the *Night Riders* booklet.

A Film Appealing to the Audiences and a Thought-Provoking Piece of Art

— In their review of *Night Riders*, the Czech magazine *Scéna* noted that “this picture combines the strengths of a film appealing to broad audiences and a thought-provoking piece of art” and applauded the cooperation between

the Czech film studios at Barrandov and Slovak studios at Koliba which, “when supported by a mature choice of the subject matter, keeps delivering distinctive works.” This was Hollý’s second such cooperation in a short period of time. The contemporary reviews with a more critical subtext were mostly motivated by the comparison of the film with Hollý’s former project at Barrandov, a war film named *Signum Laudis* (1980), and its success. *Night Riders* was awarded the Special Jury Prize at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival.

— Its story is set in the period shortly after World War I and the formation of Czechoslovakia. It takes place on the Slovak-Polish border where two men are pitted against each other by the times they live in. A border guard commander Edo Halva, portrayed by Radoslav Brzobohatý, is faced by a worthy adversary Marek Orban, the leader of horse smugglers played by Michal Dočolomanský. Orban does not break the law for his own personal gain but to help the poverty-stricken village and earn some money for a collective emigration in search of a better life in

America. The creators decided to set the story inspired by westerns in the environment of the High Tatras with horses playing a significant role in the film. “A horse is perhaps the most beautiful creature on Earth. It fits perfectly into the frame, but problems arise when there is a rider on its back. The camera has to zoom out to fit in the rider which creates a blank space behind and in front of the horse. When, however, there is a synergy between the two of them, it is a joy to capture such a scene,” said the film’s DoP František Uldrich in an interview with the Czech magazine *Květy*. The reviewers commended the fact that the camerawork “adheres to the director’s vision and perfectly captures the grim quaintness of the region, which seems to influence even the attitudes of the film’s protagonists.”

— The casting choices were also the subject of praise. Despite Hollý’s works being diverse in genre and subject matter, one of their common characteristics is the precision with which he casts the actors and the way he works with them. He describes it as “the most potent tool for captivating the audience.” With *Night Riders*, his goal for the two main characters who stood against each other was to portray them as equals. “In *Dočolomanský* and *Brzobohatý*, I was definitely able to find equal opponents. They both had to be men oozing with manliness and willing to adhere to certain rules in their rivalry,” said the director in a contemporary interview with the *Mladá Fronta* magazine. “The story of my characters is supposed to show the first small steps towards the coexistence of our two nations. (...) I pay close attention to giving both sides the same fair treatment. That is why I was so careful with choosing the main protagonists. Neither of them was supposed to have a single handicap, be fatter, or uglier. And they had to be manly men. I went as far as to skew the uniforms. In those times, customs officers would wear footwraps around their lower legs. We adjusted the uniform so that the actors would not appear ridiculous next to the smugglers. I paid close attention to all that,” added Hollý when commenting on the main characters of his eleventh feature film.

Tibor Vichta – The Ideal Kind of Screenwriter

— Hollý had received the first draft of the screenplay ten years before the film was made and its authors Vít Olmer and Marta Kadlečíková offered a predominantly adventure-driven story. “Tibor Vichta adjusted the screenplay to make it more historically and ethnographically accurate,” mentions Hollý in his monograph. He specifically mentions the screenwriter Tibor Vichta and the composer Zdeňek Liška as two co-creators he was fortunate to have found and who significantly contributed to the success of his films. At the end of the 70s, Liška (who passed in 1983) began to refuse new projects due to his health issues. He managed to compose the music for *Signum Laudis* but *Night Riders* features music by Svetožár Stračina.

— Tibor Vichta, together with Albert Marenčin, was one of the key personalities of Slovak screenwriting and dramaturgy that, according to Pavel Branko, “at the beginning of the 1960s overcame the barriers of dogmatism and dull pathos” and “allowed Slovak fiction film to become part of a movement that later grew to be an international wave known as the Czechoslovak film miracle.” Besides writing for Hollý’s

films, Vichta also wrote many of Peter Solan’s films, including *The Boxer and Death* (1962), worked with Dušan Trančík, and cooperated with other directors as a dramaturge. As stated by Renáta Šmatláková in Solan’s profile in the SK Cinema’s database, Solan considered Vichta “the ideal kind of a screenwriter who does not create screenplays rigidly, only draws from a basic situation, outlines the basic descriptions of the characters, writes the dialogues, and gives the director a freer hand in the process of filmmaking.” It is possible that this also suited Hollý, who on one hand, according to his own words, would opt for dramas with firmly established essence of the story; on the other hand, he maintained that although the screenplay was a “holy scripture” for him, it was his prerogative, as the director, to be its interpreter.

— The contemporary reviews of *Night Riders* had noted that Radoslav Brzobohatý owed Vichta for the biggest and best role to date (naturally, they have not considered the films from the 60s banned by the communist regime, such as *All My Compatriots* by Vojtěch Jasný or *The Ear* by Karel Kachyňa). They also praised the screenplay itself and Vichta’s dialogs that, according to the *Zemědělské noviny* newspaper, belong, together with the music composed by Svetožár Stračina and the performances given by the actors, to the collection of qualities that make the film “worth every piece of attention it can get from the audiences.” When it came to captivating Hollý’s attention, the stories he would choose featured human tragedies motivated by the surroundings and circumstances of the character whose fate they brought about. “I am drawn by the situation or the time period, doesn’t matter if present or past, and the people that live in it, the good ones and the bad ones, and what leads them to amorality or, on the contrary, what keeps them on the righteous path, even when it might not be easy,” said Hollý for the *Mladá Fronta* magazine in 1981. ◀



Tibor Vichta and Martin Hollý —

— text: Matúš Kvasnička —
 photo: archive of the SFI/Margita Skoumalová —

Hidden Gems of Peter Solan

A basic outline with a few drafted scenes, dialogues invented on the spot, right in front of the camera at a luxurious night bar in the Tatra mountains. A handful of characters, one night full of jazz, dreams, and disappointments. The British publishing company Second Run released the film *Before Tonight Is Over* (1965) by Peter Solan, part of the collection of the Slovak Film Institute, on Blu-ray. Along with other motion pictures, it is also available online at DAFilms.com.

“The great trump card of the film is Vichta’s screenplay, a kind of libretto, the main framework facilitating maximal involvement of the director, cinematographer and actors, even enabling improvisation, which in and of itself is very remarkable in the context of Slovak cinema,” wrote Milan Polák in a review of *Before Tonight Is Over* published in Pravda daily newspaper back then. In the communist Czechoslovakia, it was customary that before a film went into production, the script had to undergo the torment of approval. It was full of pitfalls that could have taken it off the table completely, which happened to the first version of Tibor Vichta’s script from 1957. He had to wait for the making of the film well into the more liberal 1960s. The original script was also intended to be directed by Peter Solan – it was supposed to be his individual feature debut. By the time it finally reached production, Solan had already made the first Slovak detective film *The Man Who Never Returned* (1959), and another collaboration with Tibor Vichta – a concentration camp drama *The Boxer and Death* (1962), which gained international success and was awarded in San Francisco.

“What Solan has to say here about life in 1960s Czechoslovakia is just as important and insightful as that of Miloš Forman, Jiří Menzel, Vojtěch Jasný, Věra Chytilová and any other of his peers you’d care to name and who are now rightly regarded as giants of the Czech New Wave movement,” writes Mark Cunliffe in an extensive review of the *Before Tonight Is Over* Blu-ray at thegeekshow.co.uk. He states that having the film set in a night bar enables him to inspect a sample of society up close, showing people whose lives “are unmistakably affected by the regime they live under, brush-

ing up against its stifling restraints with the tantalising allure of life in the West and all that Capitalism seems to offer.” Solan made the film with the DoP Vincent Rosinec.

In her text titled *Senses of Cinema*, Cerise Howard says the film was a “joyous discovery and essential catch-up viewing for anyone already bitten by the Czechoslovak New Wave bug.”

The Blu-ray edition includes special features. Two short films *Operation BL* (1959) and *High Tatras* (1966) reflect the locale and milieu of the film. A new filmed appreciation of the film *A Conversation About Peter Solan and His Film ‘Before Tonight Is Over’* (2020) talks about the socio-political situation in Czechoslovakia, the beginnings and other work of Peter Solan and, last but not least, the specific approach of shooting the film *Before Tonight Is Over*. “While it emerged at the same time as the early New Wave films of Miloš Forman, it doesn’t replicate his ‘documentary’ style and concern for a ‘working class’ environment. Solan uses actors who are consciously ‘acting’ yet placed in situations in which they are required to respond to unexpected developments and situations,” writes Peter Hames in the booklet of the Blu-ray version.

Since the beginning of this year, *Before Tonight Is Over* is available online on DAFilms.sk, along with the drama *The Boxer and Death*, the satirical anthology film *The Devil Never Sleeps* (1956), the satirical tragicomedy *The Barnabáš Kos Case* (1964), and numerous short films by Solan. This is the first online release of Solan’s works. All of the films of the retrospective come from the collection of the Slovak Film Institute and were digitally restored. ◀

— text: Mariana Jaremková —
 photo: archive of the SFI/Dušan Dukát —

Seven Faces of Dušan Trančík

The Slovak Film Institute has released a selection of seven short films by Dušan Trančík on Blu-ray.

Dušan Trančík caught everyone’s interest with his two graduation films that marked the end of his editing studies at FAMU in Prague. *Photographing the House Dwellers* (1968), in which he introduces the members of a rural family via the construction of their house, won the category of fiction and experimental films at the Days of Short Film in Karlovy Vary. The *History of Slovak Cinema*, a book published by the Slovak Film Institute, documents that back then, in the general discussion about local documentary and popular-science production, this film was considered to be one of the most substantial short films of those years, even at the European level. Trančík built the film on a simple principle and using an equally simple shortcut, he aptly expressed the paradoxes and contradictions of that era.

Trančík’s second graduation film is the fiction mid-length *The Gallows* (1969). The brutal parable from a Ruthenian hamlet in the mountains was awarded at the 18th Mannheim International Film Week. *The Gallows* reflects the spirit of the era of hopelessness that followed after August 1968.

Peter Mihálik was the dramaturge of both of these films. Together with Mihálik and Vladimír Kubenko, Trančík also made *Commemoration* (1969), recording the days after Jan Palach burned himself to death. It was shot in Prague, Brno, and Bratislava. “I came back to Prague, Mihálik was in Brno, and Kubenko in Bratislava. I mostly esteem the film’s news value, it is not a documentary we would want to express our artistic ambitions in. We were mapping events. Now that I have seen it after all those years, it is ac-

tually very factual – it did not fabricate any big imaginary enemies, and it did not pretend to be mapping the events that followed after Palach’s death subjectively, poetically,” says Trančík. According to him, *The Gallows* should also be perceived in this context, as an allegory of the occupation and violation of a nation. “The film has to be perceived via its context, otherwise, people will more or less not understand it anymore.” Another film from the collection is titled *Tree tops* (1972), and Trančík managed to make an original motion picture even about cement production. It is followed by *Breathe Out* (1970), a documentary profile of the poet Ján Smrek, awarded at ARSfilm in Kroměříž. The fiction featurette *Amulet* (1975), made to commemorate the 30th anniversary of liberating Czechoslovakia, features music by Marián Varga and introduces Milan Kňažko as an actor about to portray the death of an insurrectionist. The collection is completed by a promotional film dedicated to Bohemian glass and Dutch tulips, *The Story of the Seven Masters Guild* (1973). ▶

— text: Matúš Kvasnička

— photo: archive of the SFI/Margita Polónyová —

Film.sk – Slovak Film of the Century

The winner of the Film.sk's survey – Slovak Film of the Century – is the feature fiction debut of director Dušan Hanák. *322* was made in 1969 and won Grand Prize at Mannheim-Heidelberg International Filmfestival.



Aside from the classics of the 1960s, many of which also ended up locked in a vault during communism, some newer more recent motion pictures were also successful in the survey.

Many films are missing in it – they are not filmed well, not original enough, boring, outdated, compliant to the era they were made in... Others that were produced not long ago, or older ones that still remain vigorous, are authentic and can spark interest even upon second or further viewing, pose questions and often do not provide the answers, are also missing from it. The reason for it is apparent; they simply could not squeeze in and the respondents preferred other films. That is how surveys like this one work.

Not every respondent was thrilled by the idea. How do we choose ten films among the hundreds? They were all given a list of fiction, documentary, and animation feature films made in Slovakia, or in Slovak co-production from 1921 to 2020. When we were outlining the survey created on the occasion of the centenary of the first Slovak feature film *Jánošík* (1921), we decided to leave out short films and narrow it down to feature films, without further division into fiction, documentaries, and animation.

Another issue was choosing how many people to ask and how to select them. The respondents are film experts and critics who regularly evaluate the local film production of previous years on the pages of *Film.sk*. Martin Ciel, Jana Dudková, Eva Filová, Martin Kaňuch, Katarína Mišíková, and Jelena Paštéková were joined by our colleagues from the Slovak Film Institute, Petra Hanáková and Mária Ferenčuhová. Since the survey's title is *Film.sk – Slovak Film of the Century*, editors-in-chief of previous

editions of *Film.sk* Simona Nôtová and Daniel Bernát, as well as the current editor-in-chief Matúš Kvasnička participated in it too.

We let the respondents decide on their own criteria and logic behind the selection. It is simply impossible to declare that *322* is “two ranks better” than *Pictures of the Old World* or that *The Boxer and Death* “ranks a few places higher” than *Before Tonight Is Over*. Moreover, the list features very diverse films. In his text about film acting in the 1960s, the dramaturge and playwright Martin Porubjak was searching for a common denominator of many of the featured titles. He found it in the high degree of authenticity and the effort to discover the truth about oneself through art. The same can be said about the films appearing in the survey.

Each respondent first selected ten films they considered to be either the best or interesting enough to deserve a mention, and put these ten titles in order, starting from what they considered best. The films were then scored and a collection of twenty films was rounded up. The respondents received this list, in alphabetical order, and again had to rank the items according to their own preferences, starting with their best. The sum of these points determined the final results.

Please, do not perceive the survey *Film.sk – Slovak Film of the Century* as a dogma dismissing all the other options, and do not pay too much attention to the order of the list. Take it as a collection of exceptional film artworks that are worth watching. Nor as an attempt to call attention to the fact that one or two hands are not enough to count all the excellent Slovak films. There are many more! ◀

322
dir. Dušan Hanák
1969

**Before
Tonight
Is Over**
dir. Peter Solan
1965

**Pictures
of the Old
World**
dir. Dušan Hanák
1972

Organ
dir. Štefan Uher
1964

**The Sun
in a Net**
dir. Štefan Uher
1962

**Dragon's
Return**
dir. Eduard Grečner
1967

**The Boxer
and Death**
dir. Peter Solan
1962

66 Seasons
dir. Peter Kerekes
2003

**Birds,
Orphans
and Fools**
dir. Juraj Jakubisko
1969

Tenderness
dir. Martin Šulík
1991

5 October
dir. Martin Kollar
2016

**The Prime
of Life**
dir. Juraj Jakubisko
1967

FREM
dir. Viera Čákanyová
2019

**Celebration in
the Botanical
Garden**
dir. Elo Havetta
1969

**Everything
I Like**
dir. Martin Šulík
1992

**The Deserter
and the Nomads**
dir. Juraj Jakubisko
1968

**Part-time
Job: Mother**
dir. Eva Štefankovičová
1990

**Captain
Dabac**
dir. Paľo Bielik
1959

**The Last
Self-Portrait**
dir. Marek Kuboš
2018

**The Bloody
Lady**
dir. Viktor Kubal
1980

— text: Martin Šmatlák
— photo: archive of the SFI —



Where Are You Going, Jurko? Into the Mountains!

— In relation to the upcoming centenary of the first Slovak film *Jánošík* being made and presented to the public, I have been thinking about what kind of an anniversary it is in our historical-cinematic context. It is a fact that half a century earlier, there was one film that was shot partly in Slovakia but production-wise, it was mostly American and regarding the nationality of the actors and shooting locations, it was Czech-Slovak. It was all developed in labs in Prague where production was based, but the theme and the protagonist, and most of all, its own “life story” were all typically Slovak.

— A group of American Slovaks, some of them hanging around the nascent film industry, decided it would be nice to give their compatriots some Slovak silver screen content, preferably with an adequate amount of nostalgia. They put their heads and money together and followed suit of the American film studios, establishing and registering a joint-stock company. They had little stock, but a whole lot of determination. After a short preparation period, they set out for Europe. On the way, they bought a second camera and tried to finish the script, which they actually never did. They had little time and not much funds, so they found the actors and locations hastily, shot two versions of the film just to be sure, and returned to America, leaving debts behind. And since the result of it all really did not become the next big thing, one version of the film ended up in a garage in Chicago. The other, who knows where. The Tatra Film Corporation disbanded and the protagonists of this story went their separate ways.

— All of that happened at a time when the Lumière brothers and Georges Méliès were already retired from filmmaking and David W. Griffith was pulling himself back together after his *Intolerance* for the fifth year. Carl Th. Dreyer was contemplating the script to *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, Victor Sjöström revelled in *The Phantom Carriage*, and Sergei M. Eisenstein was well on the way to abandon theatre to pursue montage of his attractions for the film stock. In Germany, film studios in Babelsberg were

developing at full speed, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* was being screened, *Nosferatu* was about to be released into the world, and *Metropolis* was looming on the horizon, somewhere in the distance. The French were experimenting, the Italians were reviving history, the British were already thinking about financially supporting film production from public funds. The Czech incorporated films into their traditional industry of light entertainment and fun fairs gradually evolved into *The Lucerna Palace*. Of course, Mack, Frigo, Charlie, Fatty, and many more were already entertaining millions of paying viewers not only in America, but around the world. For years.

— But we and the Siakel bunch returned to a paperback novel from the end of nineteenth century and tried to liven up our (somewhat stiff) brigand legend. The resuscitation was not all that successful, but that did not stop every one of the two film archivists we had to quarrel over its rediscovery half a century later. No, this short contemplation does not intend to disparage the spontaneous enthusiasm of the original *Jánošík* film crew and the quick burst of the bubble that followed. Nor make fun of the diligent research of its fate, or the stubborn making of its reconstruction. It is merely a rumination about what is worth remembering about this event, if not celebrating it on a national level. This one film from one hundred years ago certainly does not mark the birth of Slovak cinema, so let's not make it into a lifeless legend. We made the film as best as we could at that time – it is more or less skilfully crafted, the theme and its depiction are typical to us and have an amateur-theatre-like quality to them, and from the production point of view, it was absolutely naive. Let's commemorate it as an adorable, even amusing, and still very much alive episode from the times when the art of film was born and massively developed in many parts of the world. Our little country still had to wait patiently for it to happen, for quite some time. ◀

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Morris Chapdelaine, producer of *Van Helsing*

