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## **The Context of Slovak Filmmaking during the Imposition of Communism (1948-1955)**

### **Censorship**

The first laws on censorship in Slovakia after World War II were technically inherited from the pre-war democratic period. A directive of the Minister Plenipotentiary for Slovakia from 1919 stated: “each public performance of each [motion] picture must be formally authorized by the Censorship Commission for Slovakia.”<sup>1</sup> This, in turn, was a modification of the laws on censorship from the earlier Kingdom of Hungary, which differed from the rest of the Habsburg monarchy (including the Czech lands). After World War II, the Commission on Censorship was attached to the Slovak Ministry of Information.<sup>2</sup> This initial disjunction between censorship in Slovakia and in the Czech-speaking area actually caused a stir shortly before the Communist takeover when the Slovak censors rated the Soviet film *The Man with a Gun* (dir. Sergey Iutkevich, 1938) as “NC-15”—that is, no one 15 and younger was to be admitted—while it had a “G” rating (all ages admitted) in the Czech lands. However, the Slovak decision was not attacked as anti-Soviet at that time. The censors in Bratislava described the film as “militaristic” and “war-like,” and as such deemed it unsuitable for the youth.<sup>3</sup>

The Censorship Commission in Bratislava was eventually abolished and its role was taken over by an equivalent office in Prague, with some members commuting from Slovakia.<sup>4</sup> But ideological oversight of film production was effectively transferred to the structures of the Communist Party, and to Prague, as well. Starting in 1946, before the Communist takeover, the conceptual oversight of film development was entrusted to the Film Arts Corps (*Filmový umelecký zbor*), established at the same Ministry of Information that hosted the Censorship Commission. These governmental bodies remained in place immediately after the takeover, but personnel changes were carried out. They were later restructured and retained, but as in other spheres of life, the new parallel centers for film oversight within the Communist Party effectively took over. The government centers of control took their lead from the Party centers. Both were staffed with Communist Party members. Censorship was later transferred to the Main Management of Press Oversight (*Hlavná správa tlačového dozoru*) created in 1953 within the Ministry of the Interior in Prague—a key government department that controlled the police, intelligence agencies, and local governments.<sup>5</sup>

The third and, in a way, the most important and direct channel of control over film production were the directors of development and, perhaps paradoxically, self-censorship by the filmmakers themselves. The directors of development submitted lists of their projects for approval to the Culture Council of the Central Committee of the Communist Party in Bratislava—and to its parent office in Prague—and to the Film Council established in 1949 at the Ministry of Information in Prague. The Film Council became the highest ideological and artistic body of Czechoslovak filmmaking in 1950.

While respecting the decision-making supremacy of the Prague bodies, Bratislava set up its own Film Council as an advisory board to the Director of Slovak Film, the highest office in the studios. The Film Council was composed of Communist officials and filmmakers. Although it vetted films throughout their production—from themes for development, stories, screenplays, and casting through editing and the final product—its

powers to approve, as opposed to its powers to hamper or eliminate, always remained secondary to those of the Film Commission of the Central Committee of the Communist Party in Bratislava, created in 1948.

In December 1948 the Film Commission gave final approval for the themes proposed by filmmakers for the following year. In the process, it issued binding directives. Slovak filmmakers were ordered to focus on “Slovak” themes, further narrowed to “current” themes. Although the hundredth anniversary of the European revolutions of 1848 made them a quite topical theme, not one of the six projects about Slovak activists from that period was approved.<sup>6</sup> In order to suppress the fact that Slovakia and the Czech-speaking lands had separate political histories until 1918 and again between 1939-1945, themes from Slovak ethnic-national activism in the Kingdom of Hungary in the 19<sup>th</sup> century became undesirable, as did the Slovak country-wide uprising of 1944 against Bratislava’s alliance with Germany.<sup>7</sup> Prague was already drawing up charges of “bourgeois nationalism” against prominent and not-so-prominent Slovaks, including, ironically, pro-Czechoslovak Communists and non-Communists, in an effort to squash any residual potential for Slovak extrication from Communist centralism.

The directives further stated that the Hungarian minority issue, which had created considerable tensions in both Slovak and Czechoslovak history over the past two centuries and had flared up again immediately after World War II, was to be handled in film through confrontation: “the old type of romantic patriotism willing to join forces with reactionaries abroad in its mistaken ambition to solve patriotic issues” was to be confronted with “socialist [that is, Communist] patriotism of a new type.” The reference to “reactionaries abroad” was to some in Hungary who had wanted to annex parts of Slovakia with a substantial Hungarian minority, while “patriotism of a new type” was supposed to embrace the working class and the Communist Party anywhere, regardless of ethnicity and political boundaries. There were no takers among the Slovak or Hungarian-minority filmmakers for this topic. Another tabooed theme was the educated and the middle class because according to Communist doctrine the “bearers of [Communist] ideas are the masses.”

Along with guidelines and interdictions, the Film Commission called for three desirable themes: “1. The road to socialism [that is, Communism]—a topical socialist theme; 2. The fight against reactionaries—aggressive, biting satire; 3. The fight for peace—a national wealth-building, peace-loving mission.”

The biggest undertaking by the censors in film distribution was the elimination in 1950 of older films from public showing for ideological reasons. 542 domestic and foreign films were banned, including 263 feature films. Among them were two recent films directed by Paľo Bielik: *Beware...! (Varuj...!, 1946)* and *Wolves Lairs (Vlčie diery, 1948)*. According to a report by Ján Svikruha of Czechoslovak State Film presented to the Board of Commissioners (that is, to the regional government in Slovakia), the first one was “fallacious from the point of view of its ideological value” and the second carried “full-blown marks of bourgeois filmmaking and bourgeois nationalism”—a damning label applied by Prague to most, specifically Slovak, efforts that were not merely folkloric.<sup>8</sup> The relevance of formal approval by government offices gradually decreased as the Communist Party enhanced its visibility in the process.

Despite all the checks, the multi-level bureaucracy occasionally resulted in errors. *Bratislava Spring (Bratislavská jar)*, a documentary directed by František Žáček, was released in six theaters in Bratislava on 7 May 1955, only to be withdrawn a week later on the orders of Jozef Kot from Central Programming in order to delete certain passages.<sup>9</sup> It turned out that the cuts had already been done and that the order was issued due to miscommunication among the numerous offices in charge of film oversight. The issue was considered embarrassing, since the Communist authorities had kept the existence and

working of censorship under lid: some of the misaddressed correspondence that led to the gaffe was actually stamped as “confidential” and “secret.”

### **Office of Film Development (*Dramaturgia*)**

These influential offices in the film studios had a substantially wider reach than they have in Hollywood. They were in charge of aspects of film development, as well as of film production, and also of censorship and self-censorship typical of totalitarian systems. Each film was produced under a director of development (*dramaturg*). After the Communist takeover, the new directors of development began to revise not just the studios’ future plans, but intervened in films already in production.

A case in point was *Devil’s Wall* (*Čertova stena*, 1949; the title referred to the name of a mountain rock face), directed by Václav Wasserman. The script was expanded by the incongruous motifs of “the exploitation” of workers in a ski factory and the trade unions’ furtherance of the workers’ rights and subsidized vacation trips. Production was also marred by the defection, motivated by the Communist takeover, of Klára Cihlová in the main supporting role.<sup>10</sup> As a result, the comedy about skiers was released after *Wolves’ Liars*, even though its production had started earlier.

But *Wolves’ Liars* was on shaky ground, too. The minutes of a high-level meeting of filmmakers and officials note: “due to the advanced stage of its production, when it is not possible to implement substantial changes, the Film Arts Commission consents to its completion.” The film became a hot potato. On the one hand, Czechoslovak State Film did not dare to premiere it on the occasion of the anniversary of the massive Slovak anti-totalitarian uprising during World War II, when the story took place, but, on the other hand, it was reluctant to ban it altogether. Under Czechoslovak Communist doctrine, the uprising, effectively prepared and launched by the democrats in the Slovak armed forces on 29 August 1944, was to be portrayed only led by the Communists and guided by guerilla commanders parachuted into Slovakia by the Soviet army. The resolution of the problem posed by *Wolves’ Liars* was characteristic of Communist procedures in general. Completion of the film was to be delayed past the anniversary, the minutes stated, not because of the Film Arts Commission’s “comments” and “appraisal”—that is to say, disapproval—but due to “inclement weather” hampering its production. The Film Arts Commission advised that the film’s completion not be hastened just because of the anniversary lest its qualities suffer. Still, these steps did not save *Wolves’ Liars* from ideological attacks after Communist rule had been tightened and from being banned in 1950.

### **Distribution**

In the turmoil after the Communist takeover in February 1948, the centralized distribution of films split into two directions: first, through the selection and scheduling of films to be released, their promotion, and the maintenance of movie theaters; and second, through the management of the final stages of the transfer of theaters to government ownership and the building of new theaters. A separate committee was in charge of purchasing foreign film (first named the *Import* and then the *Selection* Committee). Originally a department in the Ministry of Information, the committee was effectively part of film censorship. It was located in Prague and had members from both Slovakia and the Czech lands. Communism had an immediate impact on which films were shown in cinemas. The balance of foreign movies shifted dramatically toward Soviet productions and films from those Central European countries where Moscow had imposed Communism.

The sparse opinion polls carried out under Communism were both skewed and kept secret, but a telling record of an unpublished survey in 1949 suggests that audiences were hardly satisfied with this shift.<sup>11</sup> It revealed that the most popular films were Slovak, then

Czech, American, and only then Russian (Soviet). The most frequent answers to the question: “What do you dislike about newsreels [10-minute compilations of short, propaganda news items shown before every feature film]?” were: “Bias” and “Political shots, speeches, and [mandatory] parades.” An internal letter by the Hlohovec County Communist Party Committee from 1951 lamented that attendance at Soviet films was poor—even Communist Party members did not go to see them: “The Hlohovec County Communist Party Committee has been promoting Soviet films continually, with some initial success that did not last. However, when the theaters show some garbage, like *Laurel and Hardy* the other day, the theater was full and people were even asking for extra chairs to be put in the theater.” It was not until 1954, a year after Stalin’s death in the Soviet Union, that pre-World War II Czechoslovak comedies and a few Western films were released in Slovakia.

### **Film schools**

In 1949 the University of Performing Arts was established in Bratislava with Schools of Theater, Dance and Music. But the Film School was not opened until 1964, although plans for it had first been conceived up in 1957. Until then, Slovak students interested in film went to study at the Film Academy of Performing Arts (FAMU), which had been opened in Prague. All students wishing to study in Czechoslovak colleges had to take entrance exams. Because FAMU was the only film college in the whole country, it co-opted entrance-exam committee members from Slovakia in order to create a degree of Slovak–Czech balance. Since the Communist Party considered the working class to be the natural bearer of Marxist-Leninist ideas, and film to be one of the most important arts, it campaigned in 1952 in factories to recruit applicants for FAMU. The year before, extramural courses in filmmaking were set up in Bratislava and Prague. They soon developed into the Vocational School of Filmmaking (and later of Radio and TV production), located in the Czech lands, which also trained film technicians from Slovakia.

### **Film publications and scholarship**

The period after the Communist takeover was characterized by a heavy impact of ideology and by the authors’ giving up on their own ways of thinking in favor of quotations from and paraphrases of Soviet sources. While other arts were able to showcase a plethora of quotations from the three icons favored by Communist regimes—Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Vladimir Il’ich Lenin—film had but one meager quotation from Lenin about the “ideological priority of film.” However, authors writing about film were able to quote the Soviet dictator Stalin, especially before his death in 1953 and until his denunciation in the Soviet Union in 1956. Moscow’s exaggerations about Soviet filmmaking, like exaggerations about other aspects of Soviet Communism, were presented in all seriousness as facts. A Slovak version of an by Valerii Smirnov, “Russia—the Fatherland of Filmmaking,” claimed that two Russians were the inventors of the film camera, and that sound film, as well as color film, also appeared first in the Soviet Union.<sup>12</sup>

But more consequential than such peculiarities of the times was the importation of Soviet prescriptive aesthetic theories and ideological bogeymen. According to the Communist principle of a radical break with the (democratic) past, only certain types of conflict were allowed to be represented in film and other arts. Moreover, any conflict in the storyline had to be anchored in the rejected past. All that was allowed in contemporary themes was “conflictlessness”—an “argument of the good with the even better.” Artists were at a loss. Despite their efforts, they were unable to overcome the boredom of “conflictless” conflicts or to breathe life into characters synthesized in laboratories. The Communist party saw as much. A Resolution on Film by the Presidium of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in 1950 warned:

Besides such successes, our filmmaking suffers from serious shortcomings. The main ones are that it has not been liberated, so far, from the non-ideological routine of filmmaking in [pre-World War II democratic Czechoslovakia], from bowing before the decadent filmmaking in the West; it has not reached with both hands for all the new that has been brought about by the construction of [Communism] in our public, economic, and cultural life, in the ideological and moral relationships among people.<sup>13</sup>

The already narrow space for artistic expression became a slope that was difficult to navigate, extending along a predetermined route that started with a distilled “Character-Idea” as outlined by Communist ideologues and resulted in schematic characters during the process of making an actual film. Any conflict in the storyline would become a political conflict and, therefore, dangerous under the circumstances. The art of portraying people in film resulted merely in a monolithic absence of ambiguity in their ideological interpretation. A wider range of filmic expression was disallowed as *formalism*; the depiction of real-life situations was rejected as *naturalism*; attempts to establish a context with non-Communist European and world-wide cinematography was attacked as *cosmopolitanism*; and attempts to respect Slovak traditions were thwarted as *bourgeois nationalism*—all negative labels in Communist ideology. The meaning of words and their ideological implementation parted almost completely during that period.

Soon after the Communist takeover in February 1948 a lead article in the short-lived popular magazine *Our Film (Náš film)* clearly sounded the attack when it said that art “... must meet ideological criteria. It must depict class struggle, the struggle of the working classes, it must be firmly against imperialism and for peace. These are very different, new, and essential criteria. The aesthetics of film and art must demand that these criteria be met before anything else.”<sup>14</sup> Next to the lead article was a picture of a miner with the caption: “New aesthetics have criteria that demand leaning towards the masses. A new work of art must focus on the working people and must elevate the heroism of their labor.” Ideological pressure and attempts to “re-educate” in *Náš film* grew from issue to issue. The magazine was also a meeting place for film criticism as it began to develop under Communism. The magazine was on a downward spiral, reaching the point where it did little more than praise Soviet movies and the Soviet Union, and celebrate Stalin. Its publication was discontinued in 1951. Film criticism continued in newspapers and the weekly *Cultural Life (Kultúrny život)*. A new film magazine did not appear until 1957—*Film and Theater (Film a divadlo)*.

There was a marked hiatus between film criticism before Communism and after its imposition. Authors distanced themselves from “bourgeois” traditions; after initial enthusiasm for Slovak film, they began to tow the ideological line. Films already made according to Communist Party resolutions were criticized as not meeting yet newer Party resolutions, adopted after the films had been completed. Academic interest in film and filmmaking was close to non-existent. A translation from the French of Jean Epstein’s *L’intelligence d’une machine* was pulped by the authorities in 1948 before it was shipped to bookstores. The manual *School Filmmaking in Practice (Školský film v praxi, 1950)* by Florián Andris was just about the only film publication that was not completely focused on ideology during that period.

### Filmmaking

The storylines of all the thirteen feature films of this “founding” period of Slovak filmmaking under Communism were driven by a conflict between the impending “Communist progress” and the expiring “bourgeois darkness.” It affected the whole gamut of filmic expression, from the choice of genre and ideological-thematic starting points through stylistic means. A fear of being accused of formalism made it impossible to experiment with

the elements of filmic expression. Filmmakers' poetic idiosyncrasies were, thus, completely leveled. Films from the first half of the 1950s can hardly be told apart. Any minute diversions can be counted on the fingers of one hand. The framing of shots, camerawork, editing, directorial decisions, acting, music, etc., were all subjugated to the agit-prop function of cinema. While it proclaimed realism, in fact it "reflected" a utopian vision of the Communist world according to the general line of Party prognostication and commands. Each attempt to marry one's personal experience of the real world under Communism with the "reality" of the cardboard Party resolutions brought the filmmaker to inevitable artistic self-destruction. Yet, the normative aesthetic of *socialist realism* forced them to take the leap over and over again. All of life's conflicts were forced into the matrix of a fight between "the new" and "the old." This bipolarity was varied thematically, but a "happy end" was a given: progress knocked out its adversary.

Film historians speak of "entiretism" during that period, of attempts to solve the entirety of problems in building a Communist society within the scope of one film.<sup>15</sup> Others point to the exceedingly optimistic and naïve belief in an instantaneous transformation of people's consciousness, which was a product of post-World War II euphoria. But it should not be forgotten that at that time "the executioner and the poet shook hands. While the prison walls were covered with blood, there was dancing outside the walls."<sup>16</sup>

The aesthetic norm of *socialist realism* was very vague. It relied on general postulates of Marxism-Leninism, but more so on the categories of adherence to the Party line and on the supremacy of the masses. It seemed that artists might be able to implement *socialist realism* in a multitude of their own ways. In fact, however, the very vagueness of the guiding directive made it possible for ideological oversight to regulate the direction of art according to momentary needs: to reduce it to a minimum ("schematism") or to allow it a maximum ("boundless realism").

A dominant feature of film poetics of this period was descriptive-symbolic stylization. Even the titles of films like *Dam (Priehrada)*, 1950 directed by Paľo Bielik, *Young Hearts (Mladé srdcia)*, 1952 directed by Václav Kubásek, and *The Mountains are Stirring (Lazy sa pohli)*, 1952 directed by Paľo Bielik were designed to represent social and societal change. The name of the leading female character in *Kathy (Katka)*, 1949 directed by Ján Kadár was popular at the time, and so her "ascent" to an industrial laborer was laid out as a better future for thousands of young women. The title of *The Fight Will End Tomorrow (Boj sa skončí zajtra)*, 1951 directed by Miroslav Cikán symbolized the irreversibility of what was shown to be the progress of the working class.

Unlike Czech cinema in the first years after the Communist takeover, the Slovak directors of development were consistently unable to "meet the plan" outlined by the Communist Party and were unsuccessful in drafting the required number of socialist-realist projects. The progression of three comedies was characteristic of other films made in Bratislava during the early years under Communism. Wasserman's *Devil's Wall* (developed before the Communist takeover) is a naïve conversational comedy-cum-morality play about the rise and fall of a promising skier, with a belatedly attached ideological motif of *nationalization* (that is, of confiscation by the Communist authorities) of a treacherous owner's ski factory. The corrupt and fallen in the film come from the city and party at resort hotels; the morally clean live in the surrounding pristine Tatra mountains. Rather than a comedy, the film is a testimony to the filmmakers' failed ambition to add a lesson, perhaps demanded by the times, a moralistic layer to the quite clumsy comedic underpinning of the script. The next comedy, *Kathy*, Kadár's debut film,<sup>17</sup> was also the first movie of the period characterized by the Communist makeover of society. Its techniques are more inventive and, mercifully, it dispenses with the trappings of socialist-realist storylines—anti-Communist

“subversives” and “class enemies.” Consequently—and with lots of comfortable humor—the film and its heroine progress toward a joyful building of Communism.

While *Kathy* still bore a semblance to aspects of real life under Communism, the authors of the third comedy *Goat Milk* (*Kozie mlieko*, 1950), an adaptation of a play by Ján Skalka directed by Ondrej Jariabek, did not allow themselves to be troubled by contemporary reality or the probability of the plot. A straightforward application of Marxist-Leninist teachings about the predestined demise of private farmers is supplemented by ridiculing them farcically in the film. The Leninist-Stalinist dictum about tractors and electricity “meaning” Communism is illustrated not only when the tractors plow through the hedges between neighboring farmers’ fields, but also “artistically,” in a descriptive-symbolic stylization: when electric streetlights are brought to a village, the main opponent of the collectivization of farms (effectively, of their confiscation by the Communist authorities) begins to shade his windows murmuring: “You will shed no light on me.” The three comedies fought a progressively losing battle between the goal of simply making something humorous, making audiences laugh, and the goal of generating an unequivocal explication of their ideologically mandated messages. The incompatibility of the two goals became most pronounced in *Goat Milk*. The penalty had arrived: the comedy simply was not funny. Filmmaking found itself in the iron embrace of socialist realism. The situation remained largely unchanged for about a decade.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Úradné noviny*, 174/1919, 1.4 (31 December 1919).

<sup>2</sup> Its chief, Samuel Belluš, an official of the Democratic Party that won the 1946 elections in Slovakia, defected to the West after the Communist takeover and soon became Director of the Czechoslovak Desk at the U.S.-sponsored Radio Free Europe.

<sup>3</sup> Card 65, Collection Povereníctvo informácií a osvety, Slovak National Archives.

<sup>4</sup> J. Havelka: *Čs. filmové hospodárství 1945-1950*, Vol. I. Praha: Český filmový ústav, 1970.

<sup>5</sup> Decreed by the unpublished Government Resolution 17 of 22 April 22 1953, as quoted by Karel Kaplan: *Nekrvavá revoluce*. Praha: Mladá fronta, 1993. 216.

<sup>6</sup> Slovenská filmová tvorba, Collection Archív Ústredia slovenského filmu, Umelecká filmová komisia.

<sup>7</sup> Section “Miscellaneous,” Slovenská filmová tvorba, Collection Archív Ústredia slovenského filmu, Umelecká filmová komisia.

<sup>8</sup> Card 237, Collection Povereníctvo informácií a osvety, Slovak National Archives.

<sup>9</sup> Václav Macek and Jelena Paštěková: *Dejiny slovenskej kinematografie*. Bratislava: Vydavateľstvo Osveta, 1997. 150.

<sup>10</sup> O. Jariabek: *Veselé i vážne filmové omrvinky; (To, čo v scenároch nestálo)*. Manuscript, Slovenský filmový ústav—národné kinematografické centrum.

<sup>11</sup> Slovenský národný archív, fond Povereníctvo informácií a osvety, kartón 202/a.

<sup>12</sup> V. Smirnov: “Rusko—vlast kinematografie” in *Film v prehľadu časopisů a literatury*, 2-3 (1950): 24.

<sup>13</sup> “Cesta k ďalšiemu ideovému a uměleckému rozvoji československého filmu.” Usnesení předsednictva ÚV KSČ (duben 1950). Reprinted in: *KSČ a československá kinematografie (Výbor dokumentů z let 1945-1980)*. Prague: Československý filmový ústav, 1981. 68.

<sup>14</sup> S.: “O novú kritiku.” in: *Náš film*. 2.9 (1948):163.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Mihálik: *Vznik slovenskej národnej kinematografie 1896-1948*. Bratislava: Kabinet divadla a filmu Slovenskej akadémie vied, 1994.

<sup>16</sup> Milan Kundera: *Život je jinde [Life is Elsewhere]*. Toronto: Sixtyeight Publishers, 1971.

<sup>17</sup> *The Shop on Main Street* directed by Ján Kadár and Elmar Klos received an Oscar for Best Foreign Film in 1966.