

## FORTRESS

‘Art should be a fortress  
where the last reasons to live are defended.’  
Jozef Felix<sup>1</sup>

by Martin Kaňuch

In June 1969, almost a year after the Warsaw Pact occupation of Czechoslovakia, one of the last free, and until then regular evaluation meetings of filmmakers, all members of the Slovak section of the professional organisation SLOFITES (part of the nationwide Association of Film and Television Artists, FITES) was held. Before the discussion, director Eduard Grečner gave a presentation entitled ‘Who Are We? Where Do We Come From? Where Are We Heading?’ The title is an obvious reference to Gauguin's famous painting from Tahiti (1897), ‘where a life stricken painter took refuge from civilisation to think about mankind.’<sup>2</sup> Besides an evaluation of the 1968 feature film production, Grečner's contribution presented a concise summary of contemporary reflections on freedom of creation, an artist's relationship with society, peripeteia of post-war film development in Slovakia, and goals and limits of filmmaking set primarily by the communist regime. Thinking critically and speaking openly represented a unique and extremely demanding artist's mission in such a reality. Therefore, the words of literary critic and translator Jozef Felix became the core of Grečner's reflection. In the fortress of art, in Slovakia of the late 1960s, what was defended above all was dignity of man, ‘not as a slogan, but as an individual’.<sup>3</sup>

The Year 1953 marked the death of Joseph V. Stalin and Klement Gottwald, the first Czechoslovak communist president. The film studios at Koliba in Bratislava, still under construction, began operating in September 1953. At the same time, the first graduates of FAMU, the only film school in the Czechoslovakia (established in 1946), started to return from Prague to work at Koliba Studios. Every adept of film directing had to pass an initial test of professional skills and loyalty in the documentary film studio. In the second half of the 1950s, the first contacts with the International Short Film Festival Oberhausen (founded as *Westdeutsche Kulturfilmtage* in 1954) played a crucial role in the creative emancipation of Slovak filmmaking. Already in 1958, the first Slovak representative at the festival, director Štefan Uher, was impressed by the avant-garde potential of short film, as it ‘deepens and expands creative practices in the true depiction of reality’.<sup>4</sup> In addition to Oberhausen, festival trips to other neighbouring countries, especially to Leipzig and Krakow, helped filmmakers and film critics see through the false, staged depiction of the undaunted building of socialism,

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<sup>1</sup> Jozef Felix (1913–1977) – Slovak literary critic, translator for French, dramatic advisor for theatre; motto quoted from the text **Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we heading?** by E. Grečner, same source as in fn. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Slovenský národný archív, fond FITES [Slovak National Archive, SNA; FITES archive fond], box 31, **Stenografický protokol z aktívu o tvorbe hraného filmu v roku 1968** [Stenographic minutes from a meeting on the feature film production in 1968]; Bratislava, 20.6.1969, p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> **Prehliadka v Oberhausene** [Showcase in Oberhausen]. In: *Film a divadlo* 1958, no. 7, p. 15.

to use the metaphor of that era, and enabled them to look into the forbidden 'thirteenth chamber', i.e. into the true depiction of life, to see 'reality without rose-tinted glasses'.<sup>5</sup> The German film critic Hans-Joachim Schlegel retrospectively identified this journey of emancipation of documentary cinema as 'a history of subversive self-liberation', in which the notion of subversiveness did not refer only to 'openly offensive anti-regime films', but to filmmaking rejecting uniformity and servitude.<sup>6</sup>

However, the problem of short film in Slovakia was its *provinciality*, poor presence at film festivals and creative confrontation with other filmmakers abroad, and its ignorance of the jolts in documentary and short film. The film critic Pavel Branko (1921–2020), editor of the magazine *Film a divadlo* (Film and Theatre), who specialised in international as well as domestic documentary and short film production, began to play a key role as an active festival explorer in the late 1950s. He used to return to Oberhausen regularly, the festival being one of the few places behind the Iron Curtain which, due to its 'neighbourly' profile, was accessible to delegations from the socialist countries. He selected and commented on films from the programme that were to inspire people at home—not thematically, but rather in terms of cinematic expression (dominance of the image, direct sound, searching for their counterpoints, avoidance of pathos and superiority of voice-over). Branko unveiled the lag of Slovak film work in the effectiveness of argumentation, at the level of imaginativeness or poetization, and in general in the 'orchestration' of all components of the film. He did so not only in published texts, but also in papers and discussion contributions during internal evaluations of the work or at working meetings of filmmakers. Only a few film critics in Slovakia were able to smuggle so many observations and knowledge back into the country.

The Koliba Studios in Bratislava, one of the proclaimed fortresses of art, are in fact (geographically) not too far away from the fortress of imprisonment in Leopoldov. Some documentary filmmakers from the studios began to stand out as early as in the late 1950s (as Grečner recalls in the aforementioned SLOFITES presentation, referring to the old High Tatras saying that 'lightning strikes only the rocks that stick out'), and started provoking by subverting 'ready-made ideas' (*pensée toute faite*; Charles Péguy) on which the official, centrally planned cinema was built. Filmmakers who had the courage to be critical of a one-dimensional vision of reality, uniformed consent, and servitude of art, were threatened with blitz redeployment from the fortress of creation as the Felixian last *refuge*, i.e. Koliba, to the fortress of imprisonment as the last *post*, i.e. Leopoldov. The filmmaking output characteristically reflected this strong link between the regime's fortresses. A case in point is the fate of *Leopoldovská pevnosť* (The Leopoldov Fortress, 1968), a film by Ladislav Kudelka. His work from the 1960s evidently attracted the most attention from media/press supervision,<sup>7</sup> provoking

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<sup>5</sup> Antonín Navrátil, *Cesty k pravdě a lži. 70 let čs. dokumentárního filmu* [Paths to Truth or Lies: 70 years of Czechoslovak documentary film]. Praha: NAMU 2002, p. 260.

<sup>6</sup> Hans-Joachim Schlegel (ed.), *Podvratná kamera* [The Subversive Camera]. Praha: Malá skála 2003, p. 32.

<sup>7</sup> Media/Press Supervision stands for censorship activities of the Headquarters of Media Supervision (aka Head Office of Press Supervision; HMS), a national body of the Ministry of the Interior (since 1953). Via test screenings and subsequent debate confrontations, telephone warnings, and correspondence, HMS used to control and correct print, film and other media outlets that could jeopardize the regime's image. Each finished film had to be shown to the HMS representatives, who granted a censorship

controversy, power obstructions, and bans. Kudelka's position as an 'oppressed' filmmaker was later confirmed by the Slovak contribution to the special programme of 'forbidden films' in Oberhausen in 1990,<sup>8</sup> half of which were films directed by Kudelka himself (**Obec plná vzdoru** / A Village Filled with Defiance, 1969; **Intolerancia** / Intolerance, 1969; **Leopoldovská pevnosť**). In the 1960s, Kudelka was focusing on taboo social issues closely linked to the repressions of the founding phase of the regime (wrongs committed during collectivisation, wrongdoings against churches, abuse of justice, and rehabilitation of political prisoners). Throughout the 1960s, he was fascinated by the most sensitive area of the totalitarian regime—correctional facilities. First, he dealt with youth delinquency issues and practices of their re-education in **Zlé deti?** (Bad Kids?, 1963). In the summer of 1968, however, he made a film in Leopoldov, the regime's 'most representative' correctional facility. There, his views were expanded significantly, and he became socially involved. Conversations with former prisoners about harsh conditions of detention caused a serious political scandal. A communist politician convicted during the war, a left-wing Jewish intellectual, one of the key players in the Prague Spring, and a former minister of the interior of the fascist First Slovak Republic were among those who spoke in front of the camera. Giving them a voice meant risking the film itself to be condemned to silence. After the occupation, Kudelka's 'revelation pathos' brought not only fears of possible regret and nostalgia (for the first independent republic), but also fear of unearthing the war past of various Party officials.

The second solely prison-themed short film, a memento of the period's reflection on crimes and legal distortions from the 1950s, was a feature film by Petr Solan **...a sekát dobrotu...** (...And Toe the Line..., 1968), which still made it to Oberhausen in the spring of 1969. Solan approached the film as an experimental reconstruction of a real-life case and shot it in a real-life prison in Nitra. He was inspired by the personal experience of Lenka Reinerová, a novelist from Prague writing in German (she was imprisoned for 15 months by the State Police, without any reasons, and was rehabilitated in 1964). After release, she perceived the whole world as a prison ('I will never get rid of them') where she had to 'toe the line' until the end of her days. Both Kudelka and Solan unmasked this only perspective of living in fear and numbness from various angles. The core themes of both films, criticism of the regime's past failures, and the issue of rehabilitations (of political prisoners) were tabooed again after the occupation.

The process of rehabilitating filmmakers harmed by the regime (through censorship and other administrative interventions) failed from the very beginning. Many of them 'toed the line' out of fear and did not even respond to the calls of the SLOFITES rehabilitation committee (established in June 1968, last sessions in January 1969). At the SLOFITES conference, held already in October 1968, only two out of

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permit. They often left the decision to other officials of the Party apparatus (Ideological Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Slovakia). 'Their stamp represented a final decision about the fate of the film. [...] Most of the films, which didn't get the HMS seal of approval were locked up in a vault, usually until the next thaw.' Rudolf Urc, **Traja veteráni za kamerou. Viktor Kubal, Vladimír Kubenko, Ladislav Kudelka** [Three Veterans Behind the Camera. Viktor Kubal, Vladimír Kubenko, Ladislav Kudelka]. Bratislava: NCAU (aka SFÚ) 1998, p. 74.

<sup>8</sup> See section **Verbotene Filme: ČSSR** [Forbidden Films: CSSR]. In: Catalogue / 36. Internationale Westdeutsche Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen (19.–25. April 1990), p. 77.

thirty invited filmmakers admitted to feelings of injustice.<sup>9</sup> The growing unacceptability of these film topics was characteristically reflected in the state control of film submissions at film festivals, especially Western ones. In the spring 1969, a representative selection of Slovak short films was to be presented in Oberhausen: **Ideály** (Ideals), **Čierne dni** (Black Days), **Tryzna** (The Wake), **Fotografovanie obyvateľov domu** (Photographing the House-Dwellers), **Zbehovia** (Deserters), and **...a sekať dobrotu.... Tryzna**, dedicated as a last farewell to Jan Palach, was withdrawn from the competition and its screening was banned by the central management of Czechoslovak State Film (ČSF) in Prague. Solan's film was sabotaged in a certain way as well. It was submitted into competition without any subtitles (actually without a dialogue list), without any promotional material and thus, in accordance with regulations, should have been rejected. In his festival report from Oberhausen, SLOFITES secretary Ján Szelepcsényi took note that the film was 'almost against our will' saved by the German film critic Klaus Koch, who prepared the dialogue list and 'synchronized the film live'.<sup>10</sup>

At SLOFITES, Dušan Hanák had already complained about similar festival counter-policies several times in previous years. His film **Prišiel k nám Old Shatterhand** (Old Shatterhand Came to See Us, 1966) was withdrawn from Karlovy Vary and Oberhausen competitions by the central director of ČSF Jiří Poledňák for 'ideological reasons'. Hanák's provocation using hyperbolization (contrast of reality and music) presented the country as an enclosed backward reservation way too obviously. Despite Hilmar Hoffmann's and Will Wehling's efforts to include this 'excellent film' in the festival programme, the film did not make it to Oberhausen in the end.<sup>11</sup> The discriminatory approach of the central director in Prague similarly affected Štefan Kamenický's **Zakliata dolina** (Cursed Valley, 1966), another testimony to backwardness, this time in the remote regions of eastern Slovakia. Oberhausen's interest is proven by the rich correspondence with the festival in the SLOFITES archive. Both films' subversiveness consisted in a critical stance towards the propaganda of progress and prosperity, while the country had officially declared the achievement of the goals of socialism already in 1960 with a new constitution and by renaming the country: Czechoslovak Socialist Republic.

Installation of 'consolidated', new managements in the film studios in Prague and Bratislava (beginning in November 1969) necessarily triggered classification of harmful film production from the so-called crisis period (1968–69), followed by further inspections and transfers of filmmakers within Koliba, shifts in their attitudes and entire profiles of their work. In the document 'Analysis of the Activities of Slovak Film 1968–1970', the nationwide central committee of FITES (Solan was one of its members) was identified as one of the main culprits, influencing thematic plans at Koliba with its 'right-wing opportunist views'. The analysis states that 'about 160 short films of all

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<sup>9</sup> SNA, FITES, box 7, **Stenografický protokol z aktívu SLOFITES** [Stenographic protocol from the SLOFITES meeting]; Bratislava, 25.10.1968, p. 6 and 16.

<sup>10</sup> SNA, FITES, box 29, **Cestovná správa zo študijnej cesty na DKF v Oberhausene** [Report from a study trip to Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen]; 14.4.1969.

<sup>11</sup> SNA, FITES, box 12, **list Dušana Hanáka** [Dušan Hanák's letter], 24. 3. 1967); list Hilmar Hoffmanna a Willa Wehlinga [Hilmar Hoffmann and Will Wehling's letter]; 28.6.1967.

kinds were made in the studio' during the crisis period.<sup>12</sup> Director Martin Slivka later remembers, for Schlegel's 'Subversive Camera', that the list of subversive and therefore banned films produced in 1968 read 66 films.<sup>13</sup> It included films which were either completed in or whose first prints were already made in 1969 (**Tryzna; Som prekliaty fotograf** / I Am a Cursed Photographer; **Rolníci** / Farmers; **Šibenica** / The Gallows; **Intolerancia, Obec plná vzdoru, Hokej '69** / Hockey '69; **Moja teta Vincencia** / My Aunt Vincencia; **Symetrála** / Symmetry Axis; **Interview v metelici** / Interview in a Blizzard). This whole part of the production was condemned mainly for its 'anti-socialist character'. The analysis clearly identifies problematic anti-party, anti-socialist, or 'poisonous' anti-Soviet attacks in each film. Kudelka's **Leopoldovská pevnost** crossed all the lines with the statement of a former fascist prominent who dared to 'give lesson in ethics' to communists.

Other films were condemned for their apoliticism, subjectivism, escapism, decadence, artisticity, or formalism (**Som prekliaty fotograf, Šibenica**), inclinations for which the analysis blamed the influence of national leadership and national sections of the FITES, which it described as a 'political organisation' and a 'pressure group'. The aim of the filmmakers was to court 'fashionable worldwide reputation' and success at Western film festivals, which the association inadequately overestimated. The management of Koliba saw a direct relationship between appreciation of the films in the Western world and the degree of their criticism or unmasking of the regime.

The return to the 'dictate of the Party' and attributes of the Marxist aesthetics in filmmaking lead to a revival of making corrective films,<sup>14</sup> known since the late 1950s. The aim was to make ideologically exemplary corrections on the very same subject. Koliba's new management returned to this practice after the Soviet occupation, when in the first normalisation years it decided to 'rework' short films from the crisis period,<sup>15</sup> correct the films which had not made it to cinemas or festivals due to their harmful content. In a broader context of post-war development and degree of Slovak film culture, it was generally related not only to the initial absence of building a film archive, but also to the respect for the archived materials. All source materials and prints were stored by individual studios. Cutting from duplicate negative, original negative, or film prints of a film that was an interesting source of footage, or where traces of the past had to be erased, was a common practice (it saved money and time).<sup>16</sup> The film heritage preservation was inferior to political needs, it therefore was all the easier to interfere with film material.

In 1972, filmmakers were given a chance to **straighten** themselves (practice of self-criticism), and the committee decided on the form of interference. If filmmakers refused to do so, the right to supervise film corrections was passed to a more willing colleague from the studio. Sometimes it was enough to replace the voice-over or cut

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<sup>12</sup> SFÚ, Ústredie Slovenského filmu [SFI, Slovak Film Headquarters archive fond; SFH], 1971, Analýza činnosti Slovenského filmu v rokoch 1968–1970 [Analysis of the Activities of Slovak Film 1968–70], p. 18; unprocessed archive.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Slivka, '**Podvratná kamera**' slovenských dokumentárnych filmů [„Subversive Camera“ of Slovak Documentary Films]. In: H.-J. Schlegel (ed.), *The Subversive Camera*, p. 242.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 240.

<sup>15</sup> SFI, SFH, central director's meeting 1972, notation from the 2nd collegium (31.1.1972); unprocessed archive.

<sup>16</sup> **Stenografický protokol z aktívu o koncepcii Filmového ústavu v Bratislave** [Stenographic minutes from the meeting on a conception of the Film Institute in Bratislava]. Bratislava: SFI 1968.

out problematic shots. In some cases, however, entire corrected films had to be shot again. The film **Rolníci** (Farmers, 1969) by Jaroslav Pogran, which according to the 'Analysis of the Activities of Slovak Film 1968–1970' depicted a neglected socialist village welcoming the arrival of the life-giving 'Czechoslovak Spring', was replaced by the film **Lazníci** (Hill Farmers, 1971). In its opening credits, only professional advisers are listed, and the original filmmakers (director, cinematographer, editor, dramaturg) are mentioned only as 'collaborators'. The film opens with a sequence of the last three minutes of **Rolníci** with a patronizing voice of the 'new political commentary' condemning the film as erroneous: 'The film **Rolníci**, which you are now watching, was made in an era which disorientated many people. The film is marked by such tendencies. That is why, for good reasons, we had another look at the problem.'

However, the most sensitive were so-called occupation sequences (fragments with anti-Soviet inscriptions on the walls, shots and photos of armed forces in the streets, etc.). Július Matula recalls how programmers from Oberhausen selected his film **Som prekliaty** fotograf in early 1969. Into the experimental portrait of a young, non-conformist photographer, Matula incorporated photos from the occupation combining them with gunshots and a song by underground singer Karel Kryl. The discreditation campaign of the film began with its exclusion from the festival selection and even cutting out a sequence without the director's consent did not save the film. 'Then I took both original picture and sound negatives of the cut-out sequence from the editing room and kept them at home for more than twenty years.'<sup>17</sup> In 1991, Matula gave the film material to the Film Institute, but the film has still not been restored. Conditions in remote fortresses change at a snail's pace.

The archival policy of the Oberhausen film festival—acquiring prints of prize-winning films—certainly kept the Koliba management on their toes. In 1986, the selection of films to go to international festivals, including Oberhausen, was decided by a 32-member Foreign Committee of the Czechoslovak Film in Prague, consisting of members of the management of all the film studios (Prague, Bratislava, Gottwaldov), FAMU teachers, editors-in-chief of film periodicals, dramaturges, and also a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. However, from the beginning of the 1980s, the segment of Koliba production in the selections for Oberhausen was gradually replaced by increasingly daring student (VŠMU) and television production (ČST Bratislava). Different conditions for productions on campus brought to life **Tri tony šťastia** (Three Tons of Happiness, 1980), a film by Vlado Balco, who dared to go farthest by depicting a man without pathos, idealisation, heroism. Balco's film is a portrait of a scrap collector who is not a role model at all, but an authentic, free man who decided to live with his family on the fringes of society. Not a medallion of lost and ugly life, but a cinematic testimony to a life choice, which after receiving an award in Oberhausen could not remain hidden or tampered with.

Subversive films from the late 1960s documenting the regime's crisis are followed by parables about its agony in the years of 1988–89. Fero Fenič first visited Oberhausen in 1985 with **Batromijov dom** (Batromij's House), the story of a woodcutter who lives with his family in the easternmost house of Czechoslovakia in harmony with nature and with the horses he loves. The same year, he was fired from Koliba for political unreliability and anti-socialist activities. He moved to Prague

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<sup>17</sup> Július Matula, **Spomienka po rokoch** [A Memory Years Later]. In: Václav Macek (ed.), Peter Mihálik 1945–1987. Bratislava: FOTOFO 1997, p. 12.

where, in the spring of 1988, he made **Vlak do dospelosti** (Train to Maturity). He takes a train journey with young recruits (including 'anti-social elements' such as punks, skinheads, and a young Romani) entering a compulsory two-year military service. Some are dissatisfied and angry, others apathetic. As one of them says, 'We are such a confused generation.' Perhaps it's because they were all born a year after the occupation. Not a single one of them on that night train is sure what fortress they are actually going to defend.

Following a year-long approval process, **Train to Maturity** entered theatrical distribution and film festivals after the fall of the fortress/regime in November 1989. It was among the first films to be presented abroad in a selection of recent Czechoslovak shorts at Oberhausen festival in the spring of 1990. Together with a special programme of forbidden Czech and Slovak films from the 1960s, it symbolically confirmed the impregnability of the fortress of art.

Translated from Slovak by Rastislav Steranka.