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A Future Archive of Identity. Stories and Tropes of Contemporary Slovak Nonfiction Cinema

Abstract:

The study focuses on cinematic reflection of the post-1989 history of Slovakia as the most recent layer of communicative memory closely related to the formation of the country's modern identity. Its aim is to explore what image nonfiction films create for the future of the present reality. Therefore, it examines what rhetorical and narrative tropes documentary filmmakers use to construct knowledge about the socio-political reality.

Key words:

Slovak documentary cinema, history, collective memory, archive, socio-political realities, memory studies, new historicism, poetic tropes

Collective memory, as a crucial factor in the formation of collective identity, is not only preserved through documentary films but can also be directly shaped by them. The significance of documentaries for cultural memory is more recog-

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nised as epistemic tools, less as messages of filmmakers creating a testimony of their own knowledge. The form of these messages shapes the ways in which the current reality is understood when it becomes a past reality. But when does the present become the past? Let us assume that it happens when it is preserved in memory.

This study focuses on the cinematic reflection of the current social reality in Slovakia, spanning from the 1990s to the present. It explores the most recent layer of communicative memory, intertwined with the country's identity formation in the era of independence on the one hand and European integration on the other. As stated by Jan Assmann, "memory is knowledge with identity-index," (Assmann, J., 2008, p. 114) thus always being tied to specific social groups. These groups shape their collective selves as diachronic identities through processes of communication, social interaction, and external symbols, such as artworks.

The aim of this study is to examine the images of the collective identity constructed by Slovak nonfiction films concerning current socio-political themes as a form of archive for the future. What narrative forms and rhetorical tropes do documentary filmmakers employ to construct knowledge about the socio-political reality? How do they organize knowledge of the present for collective memory and identity?

Dynamics of cultural memory of Slovak nonfiction cinema

According to Jan Assmann (2008)[1], communicative memory pertains to a social group's recent past, representing shared memories of contemporaries within about three generations (around 80 years). Unlike cultural memory, which relates to a group's distant past and is institutionalized, communicative memory is informal and dependent on affective frameworks. Changes in these frameworks can lead to forgetting. It is my belief that documentary films can influence memory by creating affective frameworks through narrativization of events.

Aleida Assmann (2008) discusses cultural memory dynamics between remembering and forgetting. Active cultural memory, within established frameworks like religion, art, and history, is called the memory canon. Passive cultural memory, stored outside its original frames, is the memory archive. Slovak historical documentary films mainly focus on memory canon events, such as world wars, the Holocaust, the communist era, etc. Documentary films about the current social reality deal with the most recent layer of communicative memory.

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[1] Assmann proposes the distinction between communicative and cultural memory as two aspects of what Maurice Halbwachs originally referred to as collective memory.

These films capture reality in latency, representing a potential archive for the future. According to Assmann, "the archive is the basis of what can be said in the future about the present when it will have become the past." (Ibid., p. 102) Events preserved in the memory archive have the potential to update or reframe the existing canon, because memory is, as Nassim Nicholas Taleb points out, "… a self-serving dynamic revision machine: you remember the last time you remembered the event and, without realizing it, change the story at every subsequent remembrance." (Taleb, 2007, p. 71) Thus, films about current social reality become part of the memory archive, potentially updating the existing canon.

Slovak nonfiction production has a rich reservoir of memory about the current social reality, often prioritizing topics like the Roma minority[2] or using documentary portraits with a wide spectrum of themes and authorial approaches reflecting Slovakia's post-1989 history in creative documentaries.

To confront the legacy of communism, several filmmakers have explored various aspects of Slovak history and society. Ľubomír Štecko's *Stanislav Babinský* (*Stanislav Babinský: Život je nekompromisný boomerang*, 1990) focuses on a fraudulent scandal involving a director of a socialist state enterprise. Dušan Hanák's *Paper Heads* (*Papierové hlavy*, 1995) delves into political persecutions during communist totalitarianism and their parallels with the cult of personality surrounding prime minister Vladimír Mečiar in the 1990s. Jaroslav Vojtek's *The Border* (*Hranica*, 2009) captures the story of a village on the Slovak-Ukrainian border divided by the Red Army in 1946. *Velvet Terorists* (*Zamatoví teroristi*, 2013) by Peter Kerekes, Ivan Ostrochovský, and Pavol Pekarčík explores the lives of three romantics attempting terrorist acts against the communist power in the 1980s.

Filmmakers have also depicted Slovakia's transition from socialism to democracy. Iľja Rupeldt's *Letová správa OK 89-90* (1990) focuses on the year from 1989 to 1990, capturing changes after the downfall of state socialism. Eva Štefankovičová's *All Together… / In a Slovak Way* (*Všetci spolu... po slovensky*, 1991) portrays the fading euphoria of freedom. Zuzana Piussi's *Men of the Revolution* (*Muži revolúcie*, 2011) presents personal interpretations of historical events by Slovak tribunes of the Velvet Revolution.

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[2] Given that the life of the Roma ethnic group is a timeless and significant topic in Slovak nonfiction production, forming a crucial segment of social documentaries, it may not be the subject of this particular study unless it intersects with broader socio-political events, as exemplified in the film *The Gypsy Vote* (*Cigáni idú do volieb*, 2012) by Jaroslav Vojtek. The reflection of Roma-related themes in Slovak fiction and nonfiction films has been the focus of Zuzana Mojžišová's work (Mojžišová, 2014).

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The era of "Mečiarism" and the 1990s were subjects of interest as well.[3] Marek Kuboš's *Hlas 98* (1999) examines attempts to buy votes before the 1998 elections. Zuzana Piussi's documentary detective story *Koliba* (2009) focuses on the fraudulent privatization of the state film studios by Mečiar's family. Tereza Nvotová's *The Lust for Power* (*Mečiar*, 2017) reassesses the period of her childhood from an adult perspective. Barbora Berezňáková's *Never Happened* (*Skutok sa stal*, 2019) explores connections between the abduction of the president's son and the murder of a police officer by the secret service.[4]

Filmmakers have also covered the rise of nationalism, right-wing extremism, and Slovakia's integration into European structures. Mário Homolka's *Country-men* (*Rodáci*,1997) examines fascist resentment during the Mečiar era. Zuzana Piussi's *Fragile Identity* (*Krehká identita*, 2012) depicts the abuse of nationalist sentiments. Marko Škop's *Osadné* (2009) shows efforts to put a Slovak village on the map of Europe. Zuzana Piussi's *Difficult Choice* (*Ťažká voľba*, 2016) focuses on the 2014 presidential elections. Miro Remo delved into the subject of right-wing extremism in a portrait of an autocross enthusiast *At Full Throttle* (*Láska pod kapotou*, 2021). Jaroslav Vojtek's film *The Gypsy Vote* (*Cigáni idú do volieb*, 2012) explores the ambitions of a Romani musician in local politics. Vladislava Sárkány's *That Monarchy* (*To ta monarchia*, 2020) provides insights into the relationship between mayor and residents of a village in Eastern Slovakia.

Economic transformation and globalization are themes in various documentaries. Robert Kirchhoff's *Hey, Slovaks!* (*Hej, Slováci!*, 2002) examines economic problems. Marko Škop's *Other Worlds* (*Iné svety*, 2006) delves into the clash between the East and the West in the midst of globalizing processes. Tomáš Krupa's *Graduates – Freedom Is Not For Free* (*Absolventi - Sloboda nie je zadarmo*, 2012) portrays struggles of university graduates. Mária Rumanová's *Hotel Sunrise* (*Hotel Úsvit*, 2016) depicts the bleakness of the Slovak-Hungarian-Ukrainian border region after the economic collapse. Dominik Jursa's *The Golden Land*

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[3] Vladimír Mečiar was the prime minister of the Slovak Republic for three terms and his reign was marked by abuse of power, corruption affairs and the international isolation of Slovakia.

[4] The abduction of the President's son Michal Kováč organised by the secret service in 1995 was part of a discreditation campaign that was supposed to discourage further public protests by the President against the abuse of power by the prime minister Vladimír Mečar. Michal Kováč junior was beaten and forced to get drunk, then abducted to Austria where he was held because of an international arrest warrant issued on the basis of fabricated economic crimes.

This conspiration plot was disclosed by a member of the secret service hiding abroad and his friend and connection, a young policeman Róbert Remiáš. In 1996 Remiáš was killed in an explosion of his car, which was organised by the secret service to dispose of witnesses and cover the traces of the abduction. Legal charges against the perpetrators had to be dropped because of an amnesty issued by Vladimír Mečiar during the time he served as acting president in 1998. The amnesty was annulled in 2017. For more on the case see (Lesná, 2017).

Identity and History in Documentary Films from Eastern Europe

(*Zlatá zem*, 2020) sheds light on the residents' fight against a large American oil company in three eastern Slovak villages.

Miro Remo's *Coolture* (*Cooltúra*, 2016) and Marek Kuboš's *The Last Self-Portrait* (*Posledný autoportrét*, 2018) explore the impact of transformation on culture. Zuzana Piussi's *The Grasp of the State* (*Od Fica do Fica*, 2012) covers political machinations during the kleptocratic regime of prime minister Róbert Fico[5], while *The State Capture* (*Ukradnutý štát*, 2019) investigates the murder of journalist Ján Kuciak in 2018[6]. Eduard Cicha's *Peter Breiner's Elementary School of Art* (*Základná umelecká škola Petra Breinera,* 2018) highlights political power abuse in local politics.

Institutional failures and the absence of the rule of law are explored in Robert Kirchhoff's *Normalization* (*Kauza Cervanová*, 2013) and Zuzana Piussi's *Disease of the Third Power* (*Nemoc tretej moci*, 2011) and *Ordeal* (*Očista*, 2021). The dehumanization of obstetrics is highlighted in Zuzana Límová's *Before I Met You* (*Medzi nami*, 2016) and Maia Martiniak's *Unseen* (*Neviditeľná*, 2020).

Collective film projects and television cycles also reflect current social reality. *Slovakia 2.0* (*Slovensko 2.0*, 2014) offers insights into Slovak statehood over two decades. *Customs office* (*Colnica alebo Československo po 20 rokoch*, 2013) confronts identities between Slovakia and the Czech Republic. *Ex Prime-Ministers* (*Expremiéri*, 2018) portrays seven post-1989 prime ministers of the Slovak Republic.

From this concise overview of documentaries capturing contemporary social reality, it is evident that Slovak nonfiction film does not shy away from political topics. It is also clear that in the early years after the fall of socialism, filmmakers made efforts to reflect on current events. Considering the resurgence of sociopolitical themes in the new millennium, one could hypothesize that the absence of immediate past images in the second half of the 1990s was more a result of the collapse of the film industry than a lack of interest from creators. This is supported by the fact that after the emergence of the so-called "Generation 90"

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[5] Róbert Fico, four-time prime minister of the Slovak Republic, has been connected to several corruption affairs of his close collaborators, repeatedly convicted of abusing political power and stirring conflicts with both his political opponents, journalists, and NGOs.

[6] Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová were shot dead in their house in 2018. Kuciak was an investigative journalist covering the corruption affairs of Róbert Fico's government and his business allies, including the businessman Marián Kočner. The assassination was linked to Fico's close circles and stirred massive civic protests across the country, which forced the prime minister to step down. Marián Kočner is accused of organising the assassination. Although he was sentenced to 19 years of jail for economic crimes, he has to this day not been lawfully convicted for plotting the assassination. For background of the case see the documentary film *The Killing of a Journalist* (Matt Sarnecki, 2022).

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filmmakers, the interest in socio-political themes intensified. It seems that the apparent absence of current socio-political themes in Slovak nonfiction production compared to the Czech one may also be due to the long-term resignation of Slovak public television in mapping key sociological issues in its original documentary and journalistic programs, unlike Czech Television.[7]

Instead of (investigative) journalism, Slovak nonfiction films about the current social and political situation focus on relating the reflection of a specific contemporary issue to a broader historical framework (e.g., comparing the celebrations of International Women's Day in the 2010s organized by the Smer party of Robert Fico to the rallies in the 1990s of Vladimír Mečiar's HZDS party in the film *Lust for Power*, or exposing the current failures of justice in the context of continuing practices from the communist era in *Normalization*). They also examine the geographical context (e.g., the relationship between small and large politics, minority and majority in the film *The Gypsy Vote*, or the relationship between the centre and periphery in the film *Osadné*).

The filmmakers' interest in challenging the principles of liberal democracy and their engagement in the never-ending struggle for the rule of law and the functionality of its institutions become particularly prominent. There is also a noticeable activist stance among filmmakers who deliberately intervene in social events through their films, aiming to influence them (e.g., the intentional release of *Peter Breiner's Elementary School of Art* on the internet shortly before local elections[8] or the director's advocacy in the reopened trial of the accused men in the case of murder of a medical student in the film *Normalization*[9]).

This is closely related to the fact that documentary filmmakers not only engage in public discussions on the events they represent in their films, but they also make themselves present in the films themselves. Whether through self-reflection (e.g., The *Last Self-Portrait*), interaction with respondents (as seen in the methods of Zuzana Piussi in almost all of her films), through authorial commen-

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[7] For more on the comparison of handling social themes in Slovak and Czech nonfiction films, see Mišíková, 2022, p. 203.

[8] For more on the case see the interview with the director Eduard Cicha. (Cicha, Krekovič, 2018).

[9] See Kirchhoff (2017). The film *Normalization* deals with the violent murder of medical student Ľudmila Cervanová in 1976. It is one of the most controversial and longest justice cases in the history of Slovakia. Seven men were accused and convicted of raping and killing the young woman. However, after the fall of communism, their case was reopened due to claims that their confessions were coerced by the police and manipulated by judges to cover up for the real perpetrators. Kirchhoff's film makes a strong claim about malfunctions of the judiciary system and implies the convicted men were victims of "judiciary mafia". This claim, supported by several Slovak journalists, was not supported by either the Slovak constitutional court or by the European court of human rights.

tary (e.g., *Never Happened*), framing the topic with their own memories (e.g., *The Lust for Power*), or with less obvious authorial interventions like associative editing (e.g., *Paper Heads* or *Coolture*), staging (e.g., *Velvet Terrorists*), utilizing the syntax of fiction films (e.g., *Hotel Sunrise*), animated sequences (e.g., *The Grasp of the State*), and last but not least, through frequent use of archival material from various sources, to relate the present to the past. Filmmakers thus emphasize the subjective memory aspects of their testimony on the socio-political reality to which their films refer.

Documentary film as lived history

Although processes of memory making through non-fiction films are grounded in the subjective perspective of the filmmakers, forms of collective memory are shaped by specific collective narratives. These can often be identified as stories about the country struggling for its post-socialist identity between dictatorship and democracy, between liberalism and conservativism, between the East and the West, between the local and the global, between resistance and resignation, between ideals and reality.

Documentary film, whether focused on historical events or the representation of current reality, is parallel to what Hayden White refers to as the historical work: it presents a model or symbol of past processes to explain what they meant through their representation. (White, 1973, p. 2) White points out the structural kinship between literary fiction and historical nonfiction, as both use rhetorical and poetic tropes in the process of composing events (imagined or conjectured in the case of fiction, real in the case of history) through literary techniques to create an organized picture of the world. (White, 1978, p. 121-125) Just as, for White, fictional discourse is not structurally distinct from historical discourse but differentiated by its reference to events, today's understanding of nonfiction and fictional film is more a matter of discursive practice than the form itself.

In this study, however, I am not focusing on documentary films about history but on those that reflect current events. My goal is to examine how these films construct meanings about the present, how they relate to past events, and how they create the basis for collective memory. With this intention, I apply Hayden White's typology of historical writing to cinematic representations of the present.[10] Similar

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[10] Hayden White's typology of genres inspired James Krapfl in his analysis of the Velvet Revolution (Krapfl, 2016). Jana Dudková (2021) also applied Krapfl's rhetoric of revolution in her typology of narratives of social change in television fiction from 1990 to 1993.

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to the interpretation of past events, genres[11] of representing current reality differ not in the events themselves but in how they construct the central problem/conflict and present possibilities for its resolution. I believe that among Slovak documentary films, we can find representatives of the genres of romance, comedy, tragedy and satire that correspond to White's typology of historical discourse. They do not fundamentally differ in terms of themes but rather in the way they formulate conflicts. They also vary in the rhetorical and poetic devices chosen, which serve not only an aesthetic function but, as conceptual tropes and experiential gestalts, play a crucial role in cognition.[12]

The selection of documentaries presented here does not aim to be representative in the sense of representing universal tendencies in Slovak documentary filmmaking about contemporary social reality. It is likely that several films combine approaches from multiple discursive genres, and not all films falling under a certain genre are dominated by the same discursive tropes. However, the four documentaries that will be the focus of the following analysis illustrate the possibilities of structuring current socio-political reality as a kind of archive for the future through characteristic discursive practices. Besides referring to the lived reality, they also share the aspect of relating the reflection of the present to its past through the use of archival material. In different ways, they handle what Jaimie Baron (2012)[13] calls the "archive effect" (drawing attention to transformation through temporal disparity) and through the "archive effect" (evoking a longing for a forever lost past), they create various affective frameworks for the represented events. They evoke different dimensions of memory that refer to various aspects of collective identity. They function in a historical continuum dominated by a kind of "present perfect tense" – experienced in communication and interaction – where events flow in a state of historical latency with the potential to penetrate from the archive into the canon in the future.

Let us, therefore, examine through the lens of White's four types of plots the four different possibilities by which documentary filmmakers, as historians and archivists of the present, can represent the current socio-political reality. The specific form of the plot determines the genre of the story that the film presents and grants it its meanings. White's typology inspired me to identify four prominent stories that establish affective frames for the identity of Slovakia: the story

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[11] White's typology draws from Northrop Frye's genre theory in literary studies (Frye, 1957). However, it does not align with the commonly used genre classification of nonfiction writing/filmmaking; it is more related to genres of discourse.

[12] For the cognitive function of conceptual metaphor, see Lakoff, Johnson, 1980.

[13] Baron's concept was applied to the study of Slovak cinema by Martin Palúch (2021a). He also dealt with it in connection to appropriated cinema. See Palúch (2021b)..

of a search for the authenticity lost because of the change from the idealism of the post-socialist transition period to the contemporary pragmatism of neo-liberal society (*The Last Self-portrait*), the story of moral values challenged by the economic transformation and by the downfall of the working class (*At Full Throttle*), the story of the struggle of civic society against the toxic alliance between politics and business (*The State Capture*), and the story of self-identification through locally specific topics and globally universal goals (*Osadné*).

The *Last Self-Portrait* as the romance of a documentary filmmaker

According to Hayden White, "the romance is fundamentally a drama of self-identification symbolized by the hero's transcendence of the world of experience, his victory over it, and his final liberation from it." (White, 1973, p. 8) Director Marek Kuboš filmed the documentary *The Last Self-Portrait* as his testament to documentary filmmaking. He returned to his student assignment with the intention of answering why he hadn't made an auteur film in fourteen years, how the world around him and himself had changed during that time, and lastly, what his responsibility was towards the people he had portrayed in his films.

In the film, Marek Kuboš travels back in time and space to revisit his completed and unrealized films, retracing his own filmmaking history. He visits the protagonists of his documentaries, confronts their past images captured in the films with their current appearance, and combines film excerpts with repeated re-enactments. He reveals his creative struggles with filmmaking and, in conversations with fellow filmmakers, confronts various approaches to the ethics of documentary filmmaking. Ultimately, in trick sequences, he engages in conversations with his own alter ego, which urges him to abandon inhibitions and, in the name of art, disregard responsibility towards the world and other people.

Gradually, he identifies external causes for his crisis: paperwork that literally stands between the camera and the protagonist; the fears of individuals who experienced the euphoria of freedom in the 1990s but became conformist and now fear being on camera; the tabloidization of the media, which seeks out inauthentic exhibitionists. But there are also internal causes: the director's introversion and loss of contact with the world; his own "softness," fearing to harm his protagonists. He also proposes preliminary solutions: dealing with an unscrupulous double; removing his previous film from YouTube to prevent anonymous commentators from attacking his protagonist; asking the participant ridiculed in a reality show not to appear on television anymore; considering making a fictional film; attempting to distance himself from his mother to find a partner.

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Kuboš's self-portrait is not just an autobiography; it is also autofiction and, last but not least, cultural history. It speaks about the changing social atmosphere from the 1990s to the present, the increasing commercial pressures of life, the loss of immediate human connections, and the rise of cynicism. It also reflects on the legacy of a filmmaking generation that, since the turn of the millennium, has been focused on reflecting social reality. Lastly, *The Last Self-Portrait* is also a discussion about the forms and ethics of documentary filmmaking.

Kuboš frames his self-portrait with the central metaphor of a journey. This is physically present through the repeated filming of himself and respondents in a car or walking on the road at the end. Figuratively, it is represented through the rear-view mirror and windshield of the car, which continually show what is left behind. These tropes of the journey, along with the film's structure using Kuboš's film archive, emphasize the temporal disparity between the present Kuboš and his past self, between his present-day protagonists and those from the past.

The temporal disparity highlights the physical transformation of Kuboš himself and his protagonists, as well as the transformation of places, especially the railway station in Kraľovany, which the director portrayed in a humorous essay about rules and people in his student film *Železničná stanica II. triedy Kraľovany* (1998). It is precisely in these passages that the epistemological effect of the archival footage is most evident, allowing for an understanding of the changes over time, as well as the emotional impact of perceiving this change, known as the archival affect.

Kuboš portrays his journey of self-discovery and self-identification as a romance, as a story of triumph of good over evil in the metaphorically conceived quest of life. He stylizes himself with a certain detachment as the hero fighting against the adversities of fate and his own uncertainties, ultimately seeking an answer to the question of how to come to terms with the world both as a filmmaker and as a person/man.

At Full Throttle as a bitter satire of heroism

According to White, "the archetypal theme of satire is the precise opposite of this romantic drama of redemption; it is, in fact, a drama of disruption." (Ibid.) Miro Remo presents such a drama of disruption, sophisticatedly disguised as an upside-down romance, in his film *At Full Throttle*. The film portrays Jaroslav, a fifty-year-old living on the Moravian-Slovak border. Jaroslav is a passionate enthusiast of autocross, who modifies racing cars for his girlfriend, Jitka, a race

car driver. Both are mature individuals who have not had an easy life and, both in everyday life and on the racing track, face one obstacle after another.

Remo's portrayal of the protagonist, whose central conflict lies in the clash between imagination and reality, has many facets. He presents him as an idealist, constantly pursuing his goal regardless of the circumstances: undeterred by repeated defeats in races, tirelessly improving and repairing the racing car, living for his beloved Jitka's desired victory. He is also portrayed as a man broken by fate: the son of a man whose property was confiscated by the communists during collectivisation, a former miner who earned a lot during socialism but lost his job after its fall, and now has compromised health and nerves. Additionally, he is depicted as a romantic hero, faithfully standing by his partner, with whom he found not only a life companion but also the will to live after his failed marriage. And finally, as a man in constant conflict with his family: he is in legal disputes with his adult children over property and constantly argues with his aging mother, who does not understand his passion for cars. Remo, in turn, encourages the viewer to oscillate between amusement at the absurdity of the protagonist's efforts and pity for his wasted fate.

The plot of this portrait unfolds as a series of unsuccessful attempts to overcome obstacles. Jitka gets stuck in the mud during the races or the car's engine stops working, Jaroslav is dragged from one court case with his daughter to another. In conversations with the director, his girlfriend and his mother, Jaroslav reflects on his life's failures, but at the same time, we see that he doesn't give up. He identifies himself with Don Quixote, the knight of the woeful countenance, who fought against windmills but in the name of authentic ideals. And finally, victory comes, and Jitka places first in the races.

It seems that Jaroslav's struggle had meaning. He celebrates his triumph in the circle of friends at a concert of the xenophobic music group "Ortel". Here, this eternal outsider finally finds recognition within his community, and during a song with explicitly anti-Islamic lyrics, he experiences rare moments of harmony with the surrounding world. However, for the viewer, it is a moment of sobriety, as Remo subverts the meaning of the previous events. He shifts towards what White calls romantic satire: "a form of representation intended to expose, from an ironic standpoint, the fatuity of the Romantic conception of the world." (Ibid., p. 10) Until then, the viewer perceived Jaroslav mainly as a somewhat eccentric idealist and followed his growing frustration due to a chain of life's failures. The story of the film was read as a tale of love overcoming obstacles. Despite mild amusement, one couldn't help but feel a mixture of pity and admiration for his determination. Now, however, the characters' frustration finds

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a simple solution in collective rejection of other identities, and suppressed aggression is released through a straightforward vent. Jaroslav, the idealistic knight, suddenly transforms into Jaroslav, the latent aggressor in the last scene.

Similarly to Marek Kuboš, Miro Remo also works with the central trope of a journey as a metaphor for life. He portrays Jaroslav and Jitka behind the wheel and on the backseat, during races and travels, even in private moments of sleep. However, unlike Kuboš, Remo does not focus on the journey in relation to the past but in relation to the obstacles that need to be overcome in the present. These obstacles are physically manifested during races and emotionally in interpersonal relationships. But in the spirit of satire, Remo satirizes the metaphor of obstacles: he does not present it as a grand goal to be overcome but as mundane failures or an annoying fly that constantly bothers the protagonists with its buzzing. This fly even makes its way into the closing credits, which follow the portrait of the central couple dancing. With a similar ironic effect, Remo manipulates the image in a shot where Jaroslav sits in the racing car under a colourful rainbow.

Remo, unlike Kuboš, is not directly involved in his documentary discourse but rather through authorial interventions. However, like Kuboš, he utilizes archival material, but in two different ways. In the visual component, this is achieved through home movies without sound, capturing Jaroslav's original family. Despite Jaroslav's negative statements about his former wife, these family scenes evoke a lost domestic idyll, reinforcing his claim that things were good back then. Remo complements the family archive with Jaroslav's old photographs, archival news footage, and photos and headlines from period press. In the audio component, memory is evoked by popular songs from the 1980s, which implicitly refer to the protagonist's current situation and create the impression of his subjective experience through a mental return to an idealized pop past. Jaroslav's mother also speaks of the past as a better world in her chillingly humorous comments while reading tabloids or reminiscing about the communist era. While for Kuboš the trope of a journey was a way to refer to his future through a reflection on the past, for Remo's protagonist the journey is a process of continuous disruption. The resentment of an unfulfilled life can be seen as the root of the xenophobic inclinations of the characters who seek self-identification. In the surprising final scene, Remo does not satirize the protagonist's search for self-identification itself but rather its resolution.

The State Capture as a collective tragedy

According to White, tragedy portrays the downfall of a person in their struggle with the world. However, this downfall has a deeper meaning because "there

has been a gain in consciousness for the spectators of the contest. And this gain is thought to consist in the epiphany of the law governing the human existence which the protagonist's exertions against the world have brought to pass." (Ibid., p. 9) Zuzana Piussi is undoubtedly the most tireless chronicler of the current Slovak socio-political scene.[14] In her film *The State Capture*, she focused on the most traumatic event of the recent past: the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová, which occurred in 2018. Piussi unravels the complex web of connections between Kuciak's work and death, as he was dedicated to exposing the relationships between the government, the business environment, and the mafia. The director portrays this crime as a symptom of the state's failure.

Piussi focuses on the confrontation of honest people, represented by Kuciak, with corruption and crime that have permeated the state apparatus. She creates a richly structured mosaic of testimonies from dozens of respondents, through which she presents her version of the story behind Kuciak's murder. Her respondents come from diverse backgrounds, including journalists, political commentators, former secret service officers, philosophers, former politicians, security analysts, lawyers, and representatives of civil protest initiatives.

This mosaic is assembled not only from interviews but also from other heterogeneous materials, such as footage from the demonstrations "For a Decent Slovakia / Za slušné Slovensko," which led to the government's reconstruction after Kuciak's murder. It also includes anti-protest warnings about the alleged threat of a civil war provoked by Western powers, recordings from government press conferences and businessman Marián Kočner's trial, as he was accused of ordering the murder. Additionally, there are shots from Ján Kuciak's funeral, published and unpublished photographs documenting the surveillance of various figures involved in the case, audiovisual materials taken from the news or YouTube, audio recordings of phone calls and live conversations, as well as text message transcripts. Piussi weaves these diverse materials together with animated passages and her own commentary, vividly illustrating the connections between politics, business, the secret services, the police, justice, and journalism.

The director concludes that while she initially thought the title *The State Capture* might be an exaggeration, after hearing testimonies during the trial of Marián Kočner, the accused businessman with political connections, she realized that a stolen state is indeed a reality in Slovakia. The tragedy of the state's collapse is complete. However, the film also offers awareness of a possible solu-

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[14] Martin Palúch draws attention to the uniqueness of Zuzana Piussi's position. See Palúch (2015, p. 251 and 267).

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tion, which one of the respondents, a Czech philosopher, mediates: the systemic problem of the state, infested with parallel structures, can only be resolved by separating politics from business.

The citizens, like spectators of the fight for the rule of law, singing the national anthem during protests, might be aware of this possibility. But Piussi combines their image with the tragic finale of the city filled with cranes and high-rise buildings, representing developers connected to politics. This juxtaposition conveys a powerful message about the struggle for a just state amid the challenges posed by intertwined political and business interests.

While the previous two films worked with archival material to evoke the past, in *The State Capture*, archive footage serves an evidential function to support the director's discourse. Similarly, Piussi employs a skilful montage of testimonies, which mutually corroborate and verify her interpretations. Piussi doesn't solely select respondents based on their relevance to the case but also for their controversial nature. During interviews, she interacts with some respondents, adjusting their reactions or confronting them with subsequent testimonies, while leaving others unmodified. Furthermore, she freely integrates archival material into the film, blending it seamlessly with the overall narrative.

The film's mosaic-like structure follows the principles of synecdoche, describing the phenomenon by using its various parts to symbolize the whole. The arrangement of the mosaic appears smooth due to the connections established between its components. However, it is essential to recognize that the portrayal of events is inherently selective, and without a more thorough articulation of individual testimonies, it may inadvertently support conspiracy theories, which are also present in the film.[15]

Osadné **as a local comedy**

According to White, "in comedy, hope is held out for the temporary triumph of man over his world by the prospect of occasional *reconciliations* of the forces at play in the social and natural worlds." (White, 1973, p. 9) This reconciliation is traditionally represented by festive occasions that culminate in the process of transformation. The conflict in a comedy ultimately leads to harmonization. In his film *Osadné*, Marko Škop portrays the story of the small Eastern Slovak village of Osadné on the road to Europe in a comedically structured plot. The village's problem lies in its isolation from the world, lack of job opportunities,

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[15] Synecdoche as a crucial creative technique of Zuzana Piussi was described by Mária Ferenčuhová (2009).

and population decline due to the migration of young people for work. Symbolic heads of the small community – the mayor, a former communist who has governed the village for thirty-six years, and a young Orthodox priest – embark on a mission to revitalize Osadné by connecting it with Europe. The mayor aims to build a House of Mourning with the help of EU funds, while the priest plans to establish a spiritual centre.

Škop labels the film as a "document-toury movie" in the opening titles, implying a kind of documentary film journey. He organizes it into three chapters along the axis of Osadné – Brussels – Osadné. The visual motif of the journey dominates the entire film, as the protagonists from Osadné travel to the world, or the world represented by official authorities comes to Osadné. Although the mayor and the priest join forces in their common effort, the film suggests through their mirrored representation that there is also rivalry and separation in their worlds.

The aging mayor, who overcomes a heart attack while filming, represents the dwindling Ruthenian population. The young priest, expecting the birth of his first child with his wife, symbolizes hope for the future. The mayor embodies secular power, while the priest represents ecclesiastical authority. The priest provides spiritual comfort to the faithful, while the mayor helps them in their fields. The mayor hangs the EU flag alongside the Slovak flag on the municipal building, whereas in the home of an old woman who the priest visits, a communist diploma hangs right next to a crucifix. The mayor and his wife watch a programme on television about the only Czechoslovak astronaut from the socialist era, while the priest and his wife choose a name for their child. However, both are prepared for the journey to Brussels, where they were invited by a Slovak member of the European Parliament to seek support for their development plans, by their beloved wives. The mayor's wife prepares pork cutlets, while the priest's wife prepares soy-based cutlets. The mayor's wife packs formal shirts and ties for him, while the priest's wife packs Bibles.

After their visit to Brussels with the caricaturist and representative of the Ruthenian minority, Fedor Vico, both are sobered by the lack of interest in their grand plans. They realize that neither the Slovak European Commissioner nor the former Czechoslovak astronaut and current Czech member of the European Parliament are particularly interested in their projects. In line with folk wisdom, they conclude: "Help yourself, and the Lord God or the EU will help you too." Ultimately, both abandon their visions and instead decide to build an information board with a wooden statue of a bear – a symbol of the Ruthenians – in the village.

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The film's plot is organized around a series of various rituals and festive occasions: elections, religious holidays, baptisms, funerals, welcoming official visits, events related to Slovakia's entry into the Eurozone, and the opening of tourist attractions. These celebrations serve as a binding force within the community and aim to connect it with the world outside. Their portrayal emphasizes the contrast between the official behaviour of the likable provincial authorities and their spontaneous expressions in private, creating a comedic tone. The final celebration of unveiling the information board is a celebration of hope: the mayor, after health problems, is "reborn" for the second time, and the priest welcomes another Ruthenian into the world. In his speech, Fedor Vico compares Ruthenians to bears that must wake up from their winter sleep to continue living. While their grand European plans for Osadné did not come to fruition, they managed to unite the community and build a symbolic path between their village and Europe. Marko Škop emphasizes this connection between the small and the large world through news reports integrated into the film, which capture the official image of Osadné's integration efforts.

Mária Ferenčuhová noticed that Škop's film is built upon spatial metaphors, depicting movement to and from Osadné in line with the European written tradition, from left to right: Osadné represents the old world on the left, Europe the new world on the right. However, the final shot of the village nestled among the mountains transitions into a map of Europe with a small red dot representing Osadné, located on its very edge and outside the circle of European stars. (Ferenčuhová, 2011) While the film contains various visual tropes, it seems that the principle of connecting Osadné with Europe is dominantly metonymic, not metaphoric – the whole is reduced to one of its parts. Osadné symbolizes isolated eastern Slovakia and its dying national minority, striving to preserve its cultural identity in the face of European globalization. Brussels, on the other hand, represents the larger world of the European Union. Similarly, the mayor and the priest, along with the MEPs, are metonymic representatives of these two worlds, with the former astronaut even being a space explorer. These two worlds have distinct spatial orientations: while Osadné and its surroundings are associated with horizontal movement along the road, in Brussels, our protagonists move vertically in tall buildings of EU institutions. Although they fail to connect these two worlds as the mayor and the priest originally envisioned, the hope for the future of Osadné through the European ethos is revitalized, and their mutual rivalry appears to be overcome in an act of reconciliation. After all, even the European Parliament made its way to the "pub parliament" in Osadné, and a piece of a Ruthenian pub, in the form of gifts for MEPs, travelled to Europe.

Conclusion

The opening question of the study asked how creating an archive of the present for the future shapes the images of collective memory and identity in Slovak documentary films dealing with contemporary socio-political topics. The answer cannot be exhaustive since these films not only work with the most recent layer of communicative memory but are also a living part of it. However, from the presented research, it is evident that Slovak documentaries addressing current socio-political issues share common characteristics: linking specific problems to a broader context, adopting an activist stance, employing reflexive and self-reflective approaches of hybrid filmmaking, and utilizing various types of archival material.

The four case studies of the films demonstrate four different paths that filmmakers choose to formulate their understanding of reality and create various possibilities to capture the ever-changing epistemic frameworks of lived reality. It became apparent that films focused on the seemingly private fates of protagonists (*The Last Self-Portrait* and *At Full Throttle*) can equally relevantly depict the current social reality as films explicitly addressing a specific socio-political problem (*The State Capture* and *Osadné*). Additionally, through the application of Hayden White's metahistorical method of analysis, it was revealed that different genres of discourse on the present relate to social reality in different ways and utilize archival material differently. While the romance *The Last Self-Portrait* and the satire *At Full Throttle* work with older and more private images of the past to evoke nostalgia through the archival effect, the tragedy *The State Capture* and the comedy *Osadné* use more recent news footage to illustrate or support their interpretations of the represented events. Furthermore, both the comedy and tragedy maintain more distance from their protagonists compared to the romance and satire - unlike the latter two, they do not enter the private sphere of the protagonists' inner experiences.

The forms of cognition and mediating knowledge about reality are not only reflected in the plots or genres of discourse but also in the tropes organizing the film's representation of reality. The four analyzed films present four possibilities of using conceptual tropes: metaphor, irony, synecdoche, and metonymy. Their validity is not universal: each film works with several types of figures to help documentarists capture and preserve images for the memories that we live by.

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