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Red is the New Black. Storytelling and Style in *Candidate* (2013) and *The Red Captain* (2016)

The deficiency of popular films in Slovak cinema has been a constant subject of discussion among Slovak filmmakers and film critics. Film critic Pavel Branko (1991)¹ pointed out already in 1970 that although Slovak cinema reached the threshold of artistic maturity during the new wave period in the 1960s, there was still a lack of dramaturgical strategy in the field of popular cinema. In 2008, Martin Šmatlák, film critic and currently also the director of the Slovak Audiovisual Fund, attributed the absence of popular genres after 1989 to the non-existence of solid production background and pointed out that “Slovak cinema lacks what might be called ‘storytelling’, a professional narration of story in a coherent film form” (Šmatlák, 2008, p. 144). Attempts at financially more demanding mainstream films were rare and can be found only towards the end of the first decade of the new millennium in the cycle of historical mystifications (*Bathory* [2008, Juraj Jakubisko]; *Gypsy Virgin* [*Cinka Panna*, 2008, Dušan Rapoš]; *Jánošík: A True Story* [*Jánošík - Pravdivá história*, 2009, Kasia Adamik – Agnieszka Holland] and *The Legend of Flying Cyprian* [*Legenda o lietajúcom Cypriánovi*, 2010, Mariana Čengel Solčanská]), later in low-budget youth films (*BRATISLAVAfilm* [2009, Jakub Kroner] and *Love* [*Lóve*, 2011, Jakub Kroner]) and in domestic appropriations of horror and science-fiction B-movies (*Evil* [*Zlo*, 2012, Peter Bebjak]; *Attonitas* [2012, Jaroslav Mottl]; *Immortalitas* [2012, Erik Bošňák] and *Socialist Zombie Massacre* [*Socialistický zombi mord*, 2014, Rastislav Blažek – Peter Čermák – Zuzana Paulini]).

¹ Branko worked on the manuscript of his book in the wake of the normalisation era in the years 1969-1970, when he had to leave his career as an established film critic and went to work as a researcher for the Slovak Film Institute. The book was published in 1991 after the downfall of the communist regime.

While nowadays the spectre of popular genres in Slovak cinema ranges from comedies to thrillers and fairy tales,² the myth of weak genre potency of Slovak cinema still endures and is mainly connected to rather low audience rates for the majority of domestic films.³ Many of these are social realist dramas successful on the festival circuit, but there are also comedies, thrillers and science fiction films with unfulfilled popular ambitions. This myth also resonates in the filmmaking community⁴ and reflects a rather inaccurate understanding of “genre” film as a product of serial production conforming to a set of solid conventions and as the antitheses to “arthouse” film which is on the contrary based on overcoming limiting genre norms and conventions.

The Slovak Audiovisual Fund reacted to the absence of popular genres by establishing the programme MINIMAL which was targeted towards the support of low budget popular genre films of debutants. It also repeatedly set its programme priorities on supporting popular genre films with the potential of audience success.⁵

My paper deals with two recent films that film critics perceived as milestones of popular cinema in Slovakia because of two facts: the first being their popularity among audiences, the second was their aesthetics, contesting the stereotypical image of a Slovak film as a paradocumentary social drama. These are political thriller *Candidate* (*Kandidát*) by Jonáš Karásek from 2013 and detective film *The Red Captain* (*Červený kapitán*) by Michal Kollár from 2016. While these films took a rather different approach towards conventions of popular genres, they share several common features.

Candidate reflects current reality and *The Red Captain* deals with the period shortly after the democratic turn, but both stories derive from political subjects and several actual events in Slovakia. *Candidate* is a story about the wiretapping of a boss of an advertising company, who is assigned by a bishop to run the campaign for a completely unknown presidential candidate and decides that he is going to make him win the election. First he and his team make up a fictional genealogy leading to Slovak national revivalist and national icon Ľudovít Štúr,⁶ then he even wants to

² For an analysis of the genre landscape of contemporary Slovak cinema see Mišíková (2015).

³ While the attendance for Slovak films has been on the rise for several years, in 2016 the total share of audience attendance of domestic films was still only 6.61% and none of them made it to the Top 10 box office hits (Ulman, 2016, p. 24-27).

⁴ Even Peter Bebjak, director of the melodrama *Apricot Island* (*Marhuľový ostrov*, 2011), the horror film (*Evil*) and the gangster thriller *The Line* (*Čiara*, 2017), who is paradoxically considered to be one of the few genre film specialists of Slovak cinema, thinks that “genre film production in Slovakia does not really work” (Kudláč, 2015).

⁵ See the archive of the structure of support of the Slovak Audiovisual Fund online <http://www.avf.sk/support/structurearchive.aspx> [Accessed December 10, 2017].

⁶ Ľudovít Štúr (1815-1856) was the leader of the Slovak national revival in the 19th century, the author of the Slovak language standard (which became the basis of Slovak literary language) and a member of the Hungarian Parliament.

turn him into a Slovak John Kennedy and plans his fake assassination. However, things get out of control, the candidate is shot for real and this is traced back to the sponsors of the campaign. The film suggests that the former communist secret service and the church officials are closely linked to democratic political power and at the same time ironically comments on the milieu of advertising business.

The Red Captain goes back to the year 1992, to the period shortly before the split of Czechoslovakia. It is an investigation of the torture and murder of a lay clerk who was killed by a group of communist secret police called Spiritual, which was investigating the clergy and collecting evidence against it. The film refers to the collaboration of the Catholic church with the secret police as well as to the continuity of its power in democratic times, when many agents became businessmen.

Both films nod to popular conspiracy theories about the country's power-political background in the process of transformation from communism to democracy and question the functionality of the institutions of state, church and police.⁷ By the same token, they drive from actual realities. The scriptwriters of *Candidate* Maroš Hečko and Michal Havran published their book *Candidate – Diaries of wire-tapping* (Hečko – Havran ml., 2012) just shortly after the infamous Gorilla affair leaked.⁸ This was one of the biggest political scandals of the recent period, which arose from wiretapped conversations about provisions and bribes of an owner of a big Slovak investment group with several politicians.⁹ The film's opening was scheduled a few months before the presidential elections in 2014 which were won by the current Slovak president Andrej Kiska, originally little known candidate from the business and charity work milieu. While the publishing of the book several days before the Gorilla affair leaked was most probably an extraordinary coincidence, the date of the film's opening was already part of its marketing strategy.¹⁰ The film also incorporated several realia from Slovak political marketing into the plot, for example the slogan of Slovak government party SMER "People deserve their guarantees" or the name of the webpage *www.goodpresident.sk*, which was used in the actual presidential elections in 2004 by the unsuccessful candidate and later the advisor to Andrej Kiska, the sociologist Martin Bútorá.

On the other hand, *The Red Captain* is an adaptation of the eponymous literary bestseller from 2007 by the Slovak detective fiction writer Dominik Dán,¹¹ which features references to several real events, especially to the collaboration of archbishop Ján Sokol with the communist secret police. He is listed in its confidential

⁷ Jana Dudková (2017) considers both films to be part of a cycle of Slovak films that epitomise the general mistrust in functionality of state institutions.

⁸ The second edition of the book was published by a major publishing house Ikar at the time of the film's opening (Hečko – Havran ml., 2013).

⁹ The political scandal was disclosed by the journalist Tom Nicholson who also published a book about it (Nicholson, 2012).

¹⁰ Cf. Dudková (2017).

¹¹ Dán (2007).

records as agent Špirituál.¹² Several actual events from the period of the split of Czechoslovakia are incorporated into the film's narration in the form of newspaper and television news.

Both films gained mainly positive critical appraisal and became the biggest box-office hits in the year of their release. The annual attendance rate of *Candidate* in 2013 was 80,234 viewers (Ulman, 2014, p. 24), the annual attendance rate of *The Red Captain* in 2016 was 87,224 viewers (Ulman, 2017, p. 18).¹³ However, it is interesting to note that these domestic hits were commercial failures in the Czech Republic (*Candidate* had only 8,604 viewers and *The Red Captain* had only 13,342 viewers).¹⁴ When comparing the commercial success of these two films, it is also worth mentioning that their production background was completely different. *Candidate* was the first outcome of the Audiovisual fund's MINIMAL programme and its budget was € 180,000 (€ 112,000 support from the Audiovisual fund), *The Red Captain* was an international Slovak-Czech-Polish co-production and its budget was € 2,140,000 (€ 925,000 support from the Audiovisual fund, € 150,000 contribution from Slovak Television), which makes it one of the most expensive Slovak films ever.¹⁵ However, marketing strategies of both films, which contributed to their domestic audience reception, show several similarities. They both profited from political subjects resonating in Slovak society and from connections to other commodities related to films. In the case of *The Red Captain*, it was mainly the effect of Dominik Dán's fandom. *Candidate* worked with more complex marketing devices: apart from strategical timing also from advertising channels still not very common in Slovak cinema – it featured not only the book which was written simultaneously to the film script, but also the Facebook profile of the fictional presidential candidate Peter Potôň¹⁶ and a fashion collection named Candidate by the fashion brand Marco Mirelli (the main protagonist wears these suits in the film as did the filmmakers while attending the film's premiere).

However, the real novelty of the films *Candidate* and *The Red Captain* was their flashy visual style. Both films work with modified colour temperature – *Candidate* is dominated by cold neon lights, screens and glass reflections, *The Red Captain* is attuned to ochre palette corresponding to the season of hot summer as well as with the retro ambience of the decaying post-socialist world. While *Candidate* rests on advertisement aesthetics and rapid editing, *The Red Captain*

¹² See the online registry of protocols of the State security (secret police) available at: <http://www.upn.gov.sk/regpro/zobraz.php?typ=kraj&kniha=63&strana=7&zaznam=56940> [Accessed December 5, 2017].

¹³ As a point of reference: arthouse social realist dramas get approximately 2000 viewers per year, the most commercially successful among them was the film *Eva Nová* (2015, Marko Škop) with an annual attendance rate of 9000 viewers (Ulman, 2016, p. 16).

¹⁴ See the attendance rates statistics available at: <http://kinomaniak.cz/filmy/kandidat/> and <http://kinomaniak.cz/filmy/rudy-kapitan/> [Accessed October 15, 2017].

¹⁵ See the statistics of financial support of the Slovak Audiovisual fund available at: http://registracia.avf.sk/zobraz_ziadosti.php?program=1&podprogram=11 [Accessed October 15, 2017].

¹⁶ See <https://www.facebook.com/peter.poton.1> [Accessed December 1, 2017].

employs longer shots with self-cautious travellings. Both films present a certain stylistic mannerism, which creates the effect of smoothness, fast rhythm and easy comprehension. They represent two distinct ways of implementing post-classical cinematic style. David Bordwell labels this style as the intensified continuity¹⁷ and claims that this concept refers to aesthetic tendencies of mainstream popular cinema after 1960 which adhere to classical narrative principles of temporal, spatial and causal relations, however, by the intensification of established techniques amp up traditional continuity and raise it to a higher pitch of emphasis.

“Far from rejecting traditional continuity in the name of fragmentation and incoherence, the new style amounts to an intensification of established techniques. Intensified continuity is traditional continuity amp up, raised to a higher pitch of emphasis.” (Bordwell, 2002, p. 16)

The most prominent features of intensified continuity are the faster cutting rate, the bipolar extremes of lens lengths, the reliance on tight singles in dialogue scenes and a free-ranging camera. However, several scholars have challenged the notion of intensified continuity, claiming that the changes introduced in popular mainstream cinema in recent decades depart radically from the concepts of classical continuity and that the style of contemporary popular cinema needs to be described within a different conceptual framework. Steven Shaviro (Shaviro, 2010), while being in accord with many of Bordwell’s stylistic descriptions, proposes the term post-continuity. It is a style of filmmaking in which “the preoccupation with immediate effects trumps any concern for broader continuity – whether on the immediate shot-by-shot level, or on that of the overall narrative” (Shaviro, 2012).

For the purpose of this paper there is no need to solve the dilemma between classical or post-classical cinema. Instead, I would like to concentrate on distinctive stylistic strategies that conform to changes described by both Bordwell and Shaviro as well as other scholars.¹⁸ Let us have a look at the narration of these films. They both considerably depart from their literary sources in order to create a compact story. The book *Candidate* includes numerous digressive reflections of the narrator that touch upon the autofictive background of both authors, while the film makes the protagonist of its narration the wiretapped subject. On the other hand, the filmic plot of *The Red Captain* completely omits the literary storyline about the templar treasure, which was without doubt inspired by the books by Dan Brown. The key element of both film plots thus becomes the detective framework of surveillance and investigation. *The Red Captain* adheres to conventions of detective genre and concentrates on the character of high-principled detective Krauz, who wants to solve an old case of murder and reveals a complex intrigue among secret police officials. The narrator of *Candidate* is a character called The Blond who was hired to wiretap the advertising guru Adam Lambert. Although the film was promoted as a “cynical thriller”, it combines elements of several genres: thriller

¹⁷ Bordwell (2002).

¹⁸ Cf. Elsaesser – Buckland (2002).

(the motif of surveillance), detective film (the motif of murder) and comedy (parody of political phenomena and sitcom-like scenes, featuring a popular TV comic actor Michal Kubovčik who plays The Blond). Both films adhere to clear temporal, spatial and causal relations between scenes thanks to what Noël Carroll (1985) called erotetic narrative structure and reach a considerable level of narrative redundancy in dialogue scenes summarising the events for the viewer. However, the two films also feature certain structured ambiguity. While they provide the viewer with answers to macro-questions (who ordered the wiretapping in *Candidate?*; why was the lay clerk killed and by whom? in *The Red Captain*), they leave certain narrative lines undecided, which gives way to conspiracy interpretations. In *Candidate*, it is mainly the subversive way in which the narration undermines the importance of its own microanswers: it does not really matter who actually killed the candidate. In *The Red Captain*, it is the way in which certain micro questions are left without answers: were all the injuries of the lay clerk caused by the secret police or were some of them from WW2?; was he a mere victim of the regime, or an involuntary collaborator as well? Furthermore, the narration shows a distinct level of self-consciousness by deploying stylistic devices revealing or concealing crucial information. For example in *Candidate* the face of Peter Potôň is not revealed to the viewer at all, he is either shown from behind, only in a fragment or defocused in a long take. The Presidential candidate without identity, who delivers only clichés, has no face even on his posters – his face is composed of a thousand photos of ordinary people. This self-conscious stylistic choice contributes to the cynical suspense of the film: it simulates suspense, but at the same time reminds us that what is not shown is not important at all, because the head of the state is only the head of a dummy, appointed by powerful men in the background (the slogan of the film was “It is (not) you who elects the president.” and its poster featured a headless dummy dressed in a suit). In *The Red Captain* the narrative authority is represented mainly by ostentatious camera movements as well as by framing in dialogue scenes and in scenes that point out the secret police’s record hidden in the bolstering of Krauz’s car.

According to Bordwell, the aesthetics of intensified continuity strives to invoke moment-by-moment anticipation by intensifying techniques, even in scenes without special dramatic suspense, in order to enhance the emotional impact on the viewer. This creates overt narration in which self-conscious stylistic gestures are not reserved for expositions or shock moments, but make up part of normal scenes. In a similar vein, Shaviro observes that the post-continuity style aims to create a series of continuous shocks for the audience by fracturing and fragmenting classical continuity and reducing it to incoherence.

Candidate features mainly intensifying editing techniques. Its pre-title and title sequence in condensed form introduces the setting, initial event of wiretapping and main characters. It lasts 140 seconds, with average shot length around 1.5 seconds.¹⁹ The style exhibits an ostentatious change of image ratio, image rotation,

¹⁹ As a point of reference: ASL of the social drama *Koza* (2015, Ivan Ostrochovský) is 38 seconds.

“wipe-by” cuts, split screen, atypical camera angles, graphic design elements and intertitles, crane shots as well as security camera shots. The film further combines more traditionally shot dialogue scenes with montage sequences and paradocumentary TV inquiries and intertitles indicating the number of days left to the elections. Transitions from one scene to another are made smoother by rapid editing (e.g. Lambert’s drive home); the montage of advertisement images (details of visually attractive objects void of significant meaning, such as red varnish Prada stiletto heels, a shower head, a coffee machine, or an aspirin pill dissolving in a glass of water); dialogue scenes are made dynamic by camera movements (e.g. slow-motion push-in in the scene of the bet between Lambert and his rival); titles (e.g. when the election team is introduced by name and their professional roles) or even repeated lines of dialogue (when Lambert repeats the name of the Finnish art director in a loop because he cannot get the pronunciation right).

The title sequence of *The Red Captain* introduces the setting and era at a much slower pace but in a similarly condensed form by incorporating CGI newspaper in the film’s opening. The newspaper titles and photos interconnect diegetic and nondiegetic elements: they feature not only production details about the cast and crew, but also events like the planned split of Czechoslovakia, the war in the Balkans or the Olympic games together with an article about a serial killer, who was caught by detective Krauz. The film’s visuals are dominated by CGI effects that create a compelling visualisation of Bratislava in the early 1990s (400 CGI shots make for a Slovak record in digital effects [Poláš, 2016]). Similarly to *Candidate*, *The Red Captain* features atypical diagonal framing (e.g. in the dialogue scene between Krauz and the former secret service official in a car, or in the train when Krauz picks up his bag), even a the Vertigo effect in the scene without any internal dramatic suspense between Krauz and the former secret service official in the field. As an alternative to *Candidate*’s montage of advertisement attractions *The Red Captain* deploys extreme close-ups in dialogue scenes (e.g. a glass of rum devoured by the archivist) or explicit images of mortal remains and body injuries that visually stimulate viewer’s emotions (e.g. in the autopsy room, at the crime scene or when pulling the fishing hook off the small boy’s temple).

To conclude, let us question whether the domestic success of these two films is a result of their aesthetics. While they surely presented novel stylistic techniques to Slovak cinema (techniques not new at all in international measure), their poor reception in the Czech Republic as well as attendance rates of much more traditional mainstream films from last year which were no. 1 and no. 2 box office hits of 2017²⁰ (the romantic comedy *Everything or nothing*²¹ [Všetko alebo nič, 2017, Marta Ferancová], shot after the popular romantic bestseller and political thriller *The Abduction*²² [Únos, 2017, Mariana Čengel Solčanská], which draws from real

²⁰ See statistics of the Union of Slovak Cinema Distributors available at: <http://www.ufd.sk/i-polrok-2017-v-kinach-sr/> [Accessed December 15, 2017].

²¹ 68,352 viewers during the first weekend

²² 69,354 viewers during the first weekend

events of the abduction of the president Michal Kováč's son, organised by the secret service and orchestrated by prime minister Vladimír Mečiar in 1995) seem to suggest that the Slovak audience is rather interested in strong local subjects connected to popular commodities or prominent media representations than to new visual aesthetics. I would claim that the success of *Candidate* and *The Red Captain* lays in the fact that they were able to attract broad audiences as well as gain critical appraisal thanks to the combination of several aspects. On the one hand, domestic audiences appreciated popular conspiracy theory subject matter, the dynamic style giving the impression of "fast" narration that grips viewer's attention even in narratively undynamic sequences, and marketing devices. On the other hand, the critics were keen on the alternative culture elements integrated in the film *Candidate* (e.g. cameo appearances of figures from the intellectual milieu) and the subversive touch of its plot, while in *The Red Captain* they mostly appreciated the combination of the subject dealing with the communist past in a different way than the nostalgia trend and the film's smooth visual style.

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Red is the New Black Storytelling and Style in *Candidate* (2013) and *The Red Captain* (2016)

The non-existence or deficiency in the production of popular genres in the history of Slovak cinema after the split from Czech Republic in 1993 has been a much discussed subject in the Slovak filmmaking community. It is a common belief among both filmmakers and film critics, that due to the lack of popular genre traditions and financial difficulties of film production, Slovak cinema is not able to attract domestic audiences and is primarily focused on the arthouse and festival circuit. This overt simplification, however, has in recent years been challenged by the emergence of several films that introduced generic novelties into Slovak cinema.

The paper deals with two major representatives of this popular genre upheaval that were successful at the box office: the political thriller *Candidate* (2013) by Jonáš Karásek and the detective story *The Red Captain* (2016) by Michal Kollár. Both films are literary adaptations touching upon the subject of continuity of the communist regime after the democratic turn in 1989. Although not unanimously critically praised, they both gained considerable attention thanks to presenting an alternative to the realistic arthouse social drama trend of Slovak fiction film. The text examines innovations that these films introduced into popular genre discourse of Slovak cinema by concentrating on prominent storytelling and stylistic techniques derived mainly from mainstream popular cinema and offer some preliminary thoughts on reasons underlying their successful reception among domestic audiences.

Keywords: film genre, popular cinema, intensified continuity, post-continuity, Slovak cinema.