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Slovene Culture Encounters through Film from 2003 to 2011

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Abstract

This paper will introduce films shown as part of classroom activities of the program of Slovene language and culture at the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies and the University of Tokyo. The question of how the films present Slovene society at a certain point in time and place in its evolutionary path will be examined.

Keywords: Slovenia, film, society, history, culture

要旨

本論は東京外国語大学および東京大学のスロヴェニア言語文化プログラムの授業内で上映された映画を紹介する。それらの映画が発展をたどる中のある時点、ある場所におけるスロヴェニア社会をどのように描いているのかという問題を検証する。

キーワード：スロヴェニア、映画、社会、歴史、文化

Introduction

Slovene films have not been shown in Japan very often. Public screening in Japanese cinemas of Slovene films can be counted on one hand. *Dolina miru* ‘The Valley of Peace’ (1955) directed by France Štiglic, was released in Japan as the first film from Yugoslavia when Slovenia was still part of the Yugoslav federation. A couple of films, produced after Slovenia became independent and had joined the EU, were shown in Japan as part of the European film festival, namely *Mokuš* (2000) directed by Andrej Mlakar and *Kajmak in marmelada* ‘Cheese and Jam’ (2003) directed by Branko Đurić. However, the Slovene motion picture legacy is more than a hundred years old,¹ and recently is flourishing with more than forty feature films being released in the last decade alone. Some of these films have won prestigious awards at international film festivals, such as *Kruh in mleko* ‘Bread and Milk’ (2001) directed by Jan Cvitkovič, which received the New Director’s Award at the Venice International Film Festival and *Varuh meje* ‘Guardian of the Frontier’ (2001), the first Slovenian film to be made by a

woman director, Maja Weiss, which received an award in the Panorama section at the Berlin International Film Festival.

The program of Slovene language and culture, which has been running at the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies (TUFS), and intermittently at the University of Tokyo, since 1997, took it upon itself to correct this situation by organizing several public screenings of Slovene films at the respective universities. In the last decade, starting from 2003, twelve feature films and two documentaries have been shown as part of classroom activities and as special screenings and film festivals open to the general public. These screenings are usually preceded by a short lecture with an introduction to the film and the theme it addresses, and are followed by a question and answer session; thus providing a significant learning experience. Feature films are great cultural products, on a par with literature and art, which show how people live, think and behave in a certain cultural environment at a certain time in history (Sherman 2003: 2). Slovene films have introduced to the Japanese viewer certain aspects and features of the Slovene culture,² including Slovenian mythology: *Kekec*; old and recent history: first settlers – *Iz vzhoda* ‘From the East’, first years in the new Kingdom of Serb, Croats and Slovenes – *Splav Meduze* ‘Medusa’s Raft’, WWII – *Na svidenje v naslednji vojni* ‘Farewell Until the Next War’, Socialist Yugoslavia – *Sladke sanje* ‘Sweet Dreams’, *Zvenenje v glavi* ‘Head Noise’, independent Slovenia – *Ekspres ekspres* ‘Express Express’, and modern day Slovenia – *Rezervni deli* ‘Spare Parts’; as well as more timeless human dramas: *Ples v dežju* ‘Dance in the Rain’, *Šelestenje* ‘Rustling’ and *Osebna prtljaga* ‘Personal Baggage’. This paper will introduce some of the films and examine how they present Slovene society at a certain point in time and place in its evolutionary path.

Organization of the screening

The first film to be shown to the students of Slovene language and culture was the film *Ekspres ekspres* in 2003. The film portrays Slovenia soon after it had gained its independence, when the future was still rather uncertain. As such, it also reflected the sentiments of the organizers at the beginning of their endeavor to introduce Slovene films to the Japanese audience.

The Slovene at Foreign Universities (STU) program at the Center for Slovene as a Second/Foreign Language of the Faculty of Arts of the University of Ljubljana, which supports the program of Slovene language and culture in Japan, organized the first World Festival of Slovene films in 2005 to mark the 100th anniversary of the making of the first Slovene film. The Center provided three feature films and a documentary, and prepared a brochure with a short history of Slovene film and information sheets about each film which included the production team, the cast, the director as well as the synopsis of the film. The brochure was translated into Japanese beforehand by Kumiko

Kanazashi, a dedicated supporter of the Slovene program at TUFS, and provided a valuable introduction to the viewing of each film. In the following year, as part of the World Festival of Slovene Literature, a well-known author and film director Vinko Möderndorfer visited Tokyo. His first feature film *Predmestje* 'Suburbs' (2004) was screened first at the University of Tokyo at Komaba and a couple of days later at TUFS.³ In 2008, the Center organized a second film festival on the theme of Slovene Literature on Film when three feature films based on literary works were introduced. The success of these film events was a great incentive for future independent film screening projects. In 2009, after the Symposium of Slovene Language and Culture at the University of Tokyo,⁴ a group of Japanese and Slovene academics and film experts got together to outline a program for regular screenings of Slovene films at the University of Tokyo. The first Slovene Film series was held at the Tokyo University Komaba Campus in June 2010, when three films from different periods were introduced, namely *Kekec* (1951) directed by Jože Gale; *Splav Meduze* 'Medusa's Raft' (1980) directed by Karpo Godina; and *Rezervni deli* 'Spare Parts' (2003) directed by Damjan Kozole. In the following year, the project was expanded to incorporate films from the former SFR Yugoslavia, under the heading Cinema Jugo, Myth and Reality in SFR Yugoslavia through its Black Wave Films. The program included three films; a Slovene film *Na svidenje v naslednji vojni* 'Farewell Until the Next War' (1980) directed by Živojin Pavlović, a Croatian film *Licem u lice* 'Face to Face' (1983) by Branko Bauer, and from Serbia the Oscar winning film *Skupljači perja* 'I Even Met Happy Gypsies' (1967) directed by Alesksandar Petrović. A series of films in the black comedy genre is slated for June 2012 at the University of Tokyo and a festival of Slovene documentary films for December 2012.

The changing face of Slovene society, as shown in films

Modern day Slovenia is defined by its history. It is a history characterized by alliances with, or occupations by, its regional neighbors and shaped by resistance to assimilation while maintaining its quiet internal independence and retaining its unique Slavic language and culture (Slovenian New Wave).

The first Slavic settlers from the East came to the present day Slovene lands in the sixth century. Their life on the edges of the Pannonian Plain is portrayed in the documentary *Z vzhoda* 'From the East' (2003), directed by Miha Knific. The settlers are shown living in *zemljanka* earth dwellings and going about their everyday chores which include spinning of wool, feeding and slaughtering of cattle, carpentry and pottery. The arrival of the Avars provides a dramatic effect in the film. Historically, the Avar and Slavic tribes jointly advanced westward and deep into the Eastern Alps, merging with the ancient cultures on the way and thus creating and defining the present day Slovene lands and culture.

Christianity replaced old Slavic pagan beliefs by the ninth century and provided the first scripts in Slovene language.⁵ However, pagan beliefs and practices continued for centuries in rituals and worshiping of lesser gods, such as demons and spirits of nature and homesteads. In the film *Kekec* (1951) directed by Jože Gale, some of these mythological beings appear as real characters. This delightful film, which received the Children Film Award at the Venice International Film Festival, features a young boy, Kekec, who rescues a girl and an old man captured by a villain in the mountains. The villain Bedanec is based on an old Slovene mythological being *vedomec* 'the one who sees or knows everything'.

Fast forward to the twentieth century and we find Slovenia as a part of a newly formed Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, in the film *Splav Meduze* 'Medusa's Raft' (1980), directed by Karpo Godina. In the film we follow a group of avant-garde artists whose leader has set out to promote 'zenithism', his own homegrown movement that combines dadaist performance with Marxist agitation. Delivering equal doses of vaudeville, performance art, burlesque, and propaganda to a bemused, but often captivated audience, the itinerant performers make their way through the newly formed polity, until rivalries, romantic entanglement, and political instability gradually take their toll.

The Kingdom of Yugoslavia collapsed at the beginning of WWII and was invaded by the forces of the Axis; Germany, Italy and Hungary. The movement for liberation started, with the Communists soon taking over the helm, while Royalists and anti-communist groups found themselves siding with the occupier. A civil war ensued which was fought in parallel with the war for liberation. In the film *Na svidenje v naslednji vojni* 'Farewell Until the Next War' (1981), directed by Živojin Pavlović, the absurdity of such a war is exposed through the eyes of the main protagonist, a young intellectual with a communist activist past. The film is the first critical portrayal of the partisan liberation movement and includes scenes of brutal execution by communists of their opponents and the disobedient elements within the liberation front which culminated in the mass execution of the Home Guards at the end of the war.⁶

The consequences of the civil war extended well beyond the end of WWII, as can be seen in the film *Osebna prtljaga* 'Personal Baggage' (2008) directed by Janez Lapajne. On the surface, the film is a story of a modern Slovene family whose unresolved personal relations and undisclosed passions bring about their ruin. The personal guilt of the father is paralleled with the collective guilt of the Slovene nation which is still struggling to come to terms with this dark part of its history.

The first decade after WWII was the time of adjustment and implementation of the new communist rule. Tito broke with Stalin in 1948 and embarked Yugoslavia on an independent path along which workers' self-management and a non-alignment movement

were introduced and implemented. The late 1950s and early 1960s saw a high rate of economic growth and a degree of prosperity not seen in the rest of Eastern Europe (Luthar 2008: 468). Yugoslavia, and Slovenia as its most industrialized republic in particular, was a land of prosperity. Imported goods were flooding in, among them American music, films and fashion. In the film *Sladke sanje* 'Sweet Dreams' (2001) directed by Sašo Podgoršek and based on the novel by Miha Mazzini, this period is portrayed through the eyes of a thirteen year old boy whose dream is to own a record player in order to be able to listen to western music. With the help of his friend, his neighbor and a former-hippie uncle, he devises a plan to finally get hold of this precious possession. On his journey to reach his final goal, he interacts with his family members, teachers, classmates, communists and dissidents. The journey symbolizes his path to adulthood.

One notable event of this period was the World Basketball Championship which was hosted by Yugoslavia. The final match between Yugoslavia and Brazil took place in Ljubljana, the capital of the then Republic of Slovenia. World attention was focused on the maverick communist state and the victory of its team, which brought huge crowds into the streets of towns all over the country in celebration of the unprecedented achievement. The event is a catalyst in the film *Zvenenje v glavi* 'Head Noise' (1998), directed by Andrej Košak, which is based on the novel written by one of the leading contemporary Slovenian authors Drago Jančar. The story takes place in a penitentiary, where a drama evolves when, after being denied the viewing of the final match on TV, some prisoners start a revolt with bloody consequences.

Was this the pinnacle of the Yugoslav federation? The 1980s brought about a gradual disintegration of the once celebrated and revered model of social and ethnic unity. After Tito's death in 1980, the economic crises escalated which led to a decline in living standards. Slovenia started pushing for more economic and social, as well as political reforms. The democratization process started to take shape with the first democratic elections taking place in 1990. By the end of the same year the nation opted in a referendum to exit the Yugoslav federation.

The first few years of the newly founded independent state was a time of great uncertainty. How can a small nation manage economically and politically on its own? This uncertainty about the future and a sense of loss is superbly portrayed in the film *Ekspres, ekspres* (1996), directed by Igor Šterk. The story of a young man who, after the death of his father, gets on a train and starts on an aimless journey of no return is symbolic of the sentiments of the time.

In the twenty years as an independent state, Slovenia has established itself as a successful political and economic entity in Europe and in the world. It is often seen as a land between Eastern and Western Europe, as well as the meeting point of Central Europe and the Balkans (Luthar 2008: 515). However, the legacy of the decades of life

in the Yugoslav federation remains clearly imprinted in the social structure and in the memory of the Slovene people. Around 11% of the residents in Slovenia are foreign born, the majority coming from the former Yugoslav republics (Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia). The cultural friction caused by these settlers, the so called *Južnaki* 'Southerners', has been the topic of a couple of films shown in our program in Japan. *Kajmak in marmelada* 'Cheese and Jam' (2003), directed by a Bosnian actor and director Branko Djurić, is a light-hearted comedy of a Bosnian man and his Slovene lover. *Kajmak* is a cheese typical of the Balkan south, symbolizing Bosnian culture, which is often looked down upon with disdain and a feeling of superiority by the Slovenes. The story is based on the director's personal experiences of living in a mixed marriage in Slovenia.

The more sinister portrayal of the same topic is given in the film *Predmestje* 'Suburbs' (2004) which is the first feature film by the Slovene author and director Vinko Möderndorfer. The story deals with the xenophobic treatment of immigrants from the South. The main protagonists are four bored middle-aged suburban men who engage in scandalous, brutish behavior with their foreign born neighbors and, in one extreme and controversial scene, a stray dog. The film was introduced to the Japanese audience by the author himself who sees xenophobia as a great danger for Slovenia, Europe and the world as a whole (Dobovšek Sethna 2011).

In the 1990s, and before joining the EU, Slovene borders were rather porous, which encouraged human traffickers and smugglers to use Slovenia as a transit state for the transportation of refugees from Eastern Europe and the Third World to the EU. The film *Rezervni deli* 'Spare Parts' (2003), directed by Damjan Kozole, portrays a young man and a former race car driver who are involved in the smuggling of Albanian and Turkish refugees in a van from Croatia through Slovenia to Italy. The two drivers begin to question what they should do when they learn that these illegal immigrants will be sold to gangsters operating a human organ smuggling business.

The idiosyncratic local culture is pursued in *Petelinji zajtrk* 'Rooster's Breakfast' (2006), directed by Marko Naberšnik. The film, based on the novel by Feri Lainšček with the same title, was a huge box office success in Slovenia. The film is a romantic comedy about people of a small town in the north-eastern province of Prekmurje which has culturally and economically greater affinity to the nearby states of Hungary, Austria and Croatia than mainstream Slovenia. The main characters include a garage owner, his young apprentice who falls in love with the wife of a local mobster, and a real life singer, Severina, from Croatia.

Conclusion

Prekmurje is the area on the edge of the Pannonian Plain where the first Slavic tribes settled in the sixth century, as seen in the documentary *Iz vzhoda*, and planted the first seeds for the future Slovene nation. The screenings of Slovene films at the University of Tokyo and Tokyo University of Foreign Studies over the past eight years were designed to inform Japanese viewers about the history, culture and everyday life of the Slovene people. The films were presented in the original Slovene language with English subtitles. Introductory lectures and printed materials for each film were prepared to guide the participants through the stories on the screen, which were then further illuminated through discussion at the end of the showing. For the next project in 2012, organized by the Center of Slovene as a Second/Foreign Language at the University of Ljubljana, Slovene documentary films will be introduced in which Japanese students of Slovene will be involved in the translation and preparation of subtitles in Japanese. In this way, Slovene language and culture will be brought even closer to the Japanese audience.

¹ Karol Grossmann made the first Slovene documentaries 'Leaving the Mass' (*Odhod od maše*) and 'The Ljutomer Market' (*Sejem v Ljutomerju*) in 1905.

² Culture here means the total set of beliefs, attitudes, customs, behavior, social habits, etc. of the members of a particular society.

³ A detailed account of Moderndorfer's visit can be accessed in Dobovšek Sethna (2011).

⁴ A symposium of Slovene Language and Culture was held in November 2008 on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of the birth of Primož Trubar and the Slovene EU Presidency. See Proceedings of the Symposium.

⁵ The Freising Manuscripts written in old Slovene are the oldest Slavic texts written in the Latin alphabet. They were probably written over the period of 972-1022, and contain sermons and confessional formulas.

⁶ The largest spate of killings of anti-communist Home Guards, who collaborated with the German occupant, took place immediately after WWII in the summer of 1945 at the Kočevski Rog (Luthar 2008: 448).

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