

REPRESENTING “OTHERS”



QUEER AS METAPHOR:
REPRESENTATIONS OF LGBT PEOPLE
IN CENTRAL & EAST EUROPEAN FILM

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Queers and queer desire are virtually invisible in feature films from Central and Eastern Europe before the eighties.¹ While homosexual acts had been decriminalized in a number of countries in the region in the 60s and 70s, homosexuality was certainly not accepted or encouraged by the state. Lenin's dictum that film is the most important of the arts coupled with the fact that most film studios were state run meant that control over film production was even tighter than over book publishing or theater. While there no doubt were gay and lesbian directors, screenwriters, and actors, they do not appear to have smuggled much if any covert gay meaning into their films. Homoerotic images—images presented as or read as the objects of same-sex desire on the part of either the viewer or a character in the film itself—could be found: women's bodies have always been objectified in film, and Socialist-Realist films often presented male bodies for admiration as well. There were a few films about homosocial relationships with homoerotic overtones: *Wajda's Promised Land (Ziemia obiecana, Poland, 1975)* and *Zanussi's Camouflage (Barwy ochronne, Poland, 1977)*, for example; and occasionally stereotypical gay characters were included in episodes for comic relief, for example in *Živko Nikolić's Beauty of Sin (Lepota poroka, Yugoslavia, 1986)*, where the swishy gay character wears makeup and makes fruitless passes at the visiting village macho. But only in the 1980s, with increasing relaxation of political scrutiny, did the first gay and lesbian characters appear as the focus of feature films.

POLITICS IN HUNGARY:
GAY SPIES AND LESBIAN DISSIDENTS

The first film in Eastern Europe to feature homosexuality openly was *Károly Makk's Another Way (Egymásra nézve, 1982)*. It was also the first

¹ By the terms "queers" and "queer desire" I mean any persons or desires that do not fit the standard heterosexual model of biologically and gendered male desiring biologically and gendered female and vice versa.

film in Hungary to refer to the events of 1956 as a revolution, rather than a counter-revolution. Makk's film was therefore groundbreaking in its portrayal of both sexual and political dissidence. The screenplay by Makk and Erszébet Galgóczi was based on Galgóczi's 1980 novel, *Another Love* (Galgóczi 1983, original title: *Törvényen belül*, literally "Within the Law"). The film centers on the love between two women journalists in the aftermath of 1956. In his article on Hungarian film in *Post New Wave Cinema in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe*, David Paul writes that "at first glance the issues of lesbianism and censorship may strike one as unlikely twins," (Paul 1989, 192) but the connection between sexual and political dissidence should be obvious, and the parallels are drawn brilliantly in both the film and the novel. Makk, one of Hungary's top directors, confessed that the story grabbed him both because of its dramatic tension and because it contained two taboo subjects: 1956 and lesbian love (Bagota 2000). Makk's film, which won the 1982 FIPRESCI critics' award at Cannes, continues to be popular.

Éva is politically the more outspoken and the more out of the two journalists. At the newspaper she crusades for revealing the truth about the methods used to coerce farmers into joining the collective, and her refusal to compromise results in her losing her job. Éva is much more cautious in her affair with the married Lívia, who obviously loves her, but is less willing to brave the consequences. When Lívia finally tells her husband Dönci she's leaving him, he shoots her, perhaps leaving her paralyzed for life. Lívia then rejects Éva again, and the latter is shot trying to cross the border.

One might argue that the shape of the plot is homophobic, since one lesbian is killed in a quasi-suicide and the other is shot by her jealous husband and paralyzed. Vito Russo documents numerous Hollywood films in which homosexuals are punished by death at the end of the plot, but the suicide and homophobic violence in *Another Way* are not meant to confirm heterosexual values. Dönci's actions are meant to turn the audience against brutal homophobia, and Lívia calls Éva a "martyr"—Andrew Horton is right that our sympathies are with Éva as a political dissident *and* a lesbian (Horton 1999a).

Éva and Lívia are played by Polish actresses Jadwiga Jankowska-Cieślak and Grażyna Szapolowska, and Jankowska-Cieślak won best actress at Cannes for her tomboyish street-smart crusader playing against Szapolowska's more femme sensuality. The predicament of real lesbians in Hungary is revealed both in the authorities' ignorance about lesbian sex (one investigator asks, "how do you do it?") and in a scene in which the police harass the pair for kissing on a park bench. After checking

their documents, the policeman reminds Éva that “we are not in America,” she is detained, and Livia is warned to return to her husband.

The overall effect of the changes introduced in moving from the page to the screen is that the theme of lesbian love is expanded at the expense of political dissidence. Given that the novel was written by a lesbian and the director and co-author of the screenplay is a heterosexual man, this shift is somewhat paradoxical. Perhaps Galgóczi, who was conflicted and in the closet for much of her own life, showed restraint by reflex in her own novel that Makk had no stake in preserving. The soft-focus eroticization of the women’s bodies in the love scene suggests that there may also be something of the traditional heterosexual male fantasy of lesbian love involved. More likely Makk’s motivation was political: in a film that broke two taboos, political and sexual, the sexual taboo may have been equally controversial, but it was less politically risky than calling the events of 1956 a revolution. The lesbian plot served both as a smokescreen, as a distraction from the fact that Makk’s film was pushing the political envelope, and as a metaphor for political dissidence itself. Balázs Varga suggests that while the film should have been forbidden for political reasons in 1982 like Mészáros’s *Diary for my Children* (*Napló gyermekeimnek*) and Erdély’s *Version* (*Verzió*), “paradoxically the breaking of the second taboo, the depiction of a lesbian relationship, ‘defused’ the bomb” (Varga 1999). Critics of the day focused on the lesbian theme while remaining silent about the fact that the film was unequivocally critical of the system.

The year before it was won by Makk’s *Another Way*, the Cannes FIPRESCI award went to István Szabó’s *Mephisto* (1981), which also won the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film. Szabó’s next film, with the same team, including Klaus Maria Brandauer in the lead, was *Colonel Redl* (*Oberst Redl*, 1984). *Colonel Redl* is a fictional film inspired by John Osborne’s *A Patriot for Me* (Osborne 1965) and, as the opening credits put it, “the historical events of our century.” The central event that inspired the film (and Osborne’s play before it) was the affair of Alfred Redl, the high-ranking intelligence officer in the Austrian military who was found out as a spy and committed suicide in 1913. The real Redl became the archetype for society’s distrust of homosexuals as a security risk, and Osborne played up Redl’s homosexuality. Szabó—again one of Hungary’s top directors, on the contrary, downplays Redl’s homosexuality as a cause for his treason. Instead he is an innocent pawn, a scapegoat framed by the Imperial machinery. For Szabó, Redl’s tragedy is that he is a career man who has divorced himself from any identity other than his rank in the Imperial service. In an interview about the film, Szabó explains that “Osborne’s play is chiefly about the problem of homosexu-

ality" (Szabó 1984, 15), while that is not a topic he wanted to make a film about. Unlike Osborne and others, Szabó and his colleagues saw Redl's story "through Central-East European eyes." Redl is "a protagonist who wants to be somebody else, who wants to be a different person from what he actually is," and this conflict of identity leads to his tragedy. Other characters in the film can comfortably inhabit their class, their family background, their nationality, and their sexuality. Redl attempts to conceal his, and it is his lack of identity that makes him an ideal scapegoat.

Szabó plays down Redl's homosexuality, yet while he may say he is not interested in making a film about homosexuality, he does not eliminate it. Homoerotic scenes remind the audience throughout the film of what they know of the historical Redl's sexuality. Sexuality first enters Redl's world when he visits his aristocratic friend Kubinyi, and the boy's grandfather places his hand on Kubinyi's while praising Redl. Redl may be infatuated with Kubinyi, but some of his attention spills over to his sister Katalin, who also uses a ruse to put her hand on his knee, then move it up his leg. This scene is then echoed by the boy's piano teacher, who casually puts his hand on young Redl's leg while he is playing. Homoerotic tension is palpable between Redl and many of his colleagues, especially Kubinyi. When they visit a brothel, Redl seems more interested in hearing from the whore about Kubinyi than in making love to her himself. He even spies on his friend having sex with another girl for inspiration. On his way out of the brothel, an officer stops him on the stair and kisses him. Redl's affair with Katalin is fraught with suggestions that it is really her brother he loves, and he admits that he was thinking about her brother when they first made love. Accusations of homosexuality also play a part. A fellow officer is accused of being an invert or a homosexual, and Redl's commander warns him that he has heard a rumor that Redl is homosexual—the rumor Redl's abrupt marriage is meant to quash.

In the scenes leading up to the denouement Redl is seduced by Velocchio, who like the historical Redl is a homosexual involved in spying for money. Szabó's beautiful depiction of their courtship takes three brief scenes, all of which are completely wordless. First we see them on horseback in a snowy wood, their playful glances suggesting their infatuation. The second scene—again without dialogue—takes place in a piano store, where the Papageno/Papagena duet from Mozart's *Magic Flute* takes the place of dialogue. They play a few tentative notes, the other responding, then chords, then finally a fully arranged version for four hands. The final scene in the development of their affair shows Velocchio apparently naked and asleep in bed, while Redl, wearing a robe, looks on lovingly. Edward Plater points out that this is an expression we have not

seen before: “Redl has completely abandoned his posing here so that his outward appearance offers no obstacle to our effort to peer into his soul” (Plater 1992, 54). But the unmasking comes at a price, since the following scene shows that he knows Velocchio is a decoy.

Both Makk and Szabó show queer desire in a favorable light, but showing real queer reality is not the primary goal for either of these great Hungarian directors. The queer in the film is used to make a political statement. Both films are set in the past—the 50s for *Another Way*, pre-WWI Austria for *Redl*. A third film from Hungary, Péter Timár’s 1989 thriller, *Ere the bat has flown his flight* (*Mielőtt befejezi a röptét a denevér*) can also be read as a metaphor for politics. In this film, set in contemporary Budapest, single mother Teréz falls for a colorful but manic policeman László, who in his turn becomes obsessed with her teenage son Róbert. László attempts to control both Teréz and Róbert, but after an attempted seduction in the shower things rapidly deteriorate, leading to Teréz’s suicide and Róbert’s revenge on the predatory pedophile policeman. While the plot is interesting, László’s infatuation is never quite believable, and the film does not read as a realistic portrayal of queer desire. Instead the policeman’s lust for the boy appears as just one more aspect of his manic desire to control everything around him, which itself can be seen as a metaphor for authoritarian police control, which was self-destructing in 1989 all over the region.

It is hard to find anything specific to Hungarian queer life in these films, though one small detail does appear in all: reference to the baths. In *Another Way* Dönci rants that his recruits are “not soldiers, but dancers . . . or fag whores at the Rudas baths.” In *Redl* the hero is shown twice in a Turkish bath with a fellow officer—both scenes that hint at their homoerotic attraction. In Timár’s film the scene is a private, not a public bath, but seduction with two men in the shower is still the crucial turning point in the film. Given the importance of the public bath as both a Hungarian institution and a major locus of cruising for gay men, it may be no accident that the two are connected in these films. Surely most straight Hungarian men would have seen gay desire primarily at the baths.

VIOLENCE AND GENDER IN THE BALKANS: VIRGINAS AND TRANSVESTITE PROSTITUTES

Two films from Yugoslavia in the early 90s feature transgendered heroes / heroines: Srdjan Karanović’s *Virginia* (*Virdžina*, 1992), about a girl raised as a boy in the early 1900s, and Želimir Žilnik’s *Marble Ass* (*Dupe od mramora*, 1994), about a transvestite prostitute in contemporary Beo-

grad (Moss 2005). Set in the mythic past, Karanović's *Virgina* is about a sworn virgin—a village girl raised as a male because the family had no male children. *Virgina* shows a culturally conservative society in which the expectation that the sworn virgin will live as a man comes into conflict with her desire to live as she wants. In the West we usually think of transvestites and transgendered people as going against societal norms to perform their desired identities, but in the case of sworn virgins, it is the patriarchal society that forces the women to live as men. Though informed by ethnography, Karanović's film does not strive for complete cultural verisimilitude, and he writes about the many significant changes from conception to final completion in his book *Virgina: Diary of a Film (Dnevnik jednog filma: Virdžina 1981–1991)* (Karanović 1998).

Karanović was inspired to make the film *Virgina* by reading a newspaper story about an Albanian woman who lived for 25 years as a man, fought with the Partisans near Trieste, and was wounded and discharged, when it was discovered that she was a woman. (Karanović 1998, 7) Karanović set the first screenplay for *Virgina* among the partisans in WWII near Trieste. Subtitled "a love story about freedom" Karanović's screenplay was meant to be universal and metaphorical: "through her fight for liberation of the country the main heroine fights for her own personal liberation, her identity and right to be what she is—a woman!" (Karanović 1998, 28).

Guns as a characteristic male attribute play a central role in both the plot and the symbolism of the film. Carrying guns and participation in war and blood feuds are strictly men's activities and are regularly mentioned in accounts of real sworn virgins.² The film begins when yet another girl (Stevan) is born into a family whose bad luck is ascribed to the lack of a male child. Her father Timotije, who carries a gun through most of the film, takes her out to a field to shoot her, but then relents and declares he will raise her as a boy. At Stevan's christening Paun (whom we later learn is a sworn virgin himself—played in the film by a man) asks to "see his gun"—meaning his penis—but is stopped by Stevan's father just in time. At the end it is Timotije who is shot by Paun, which frees Stevan to escape his oath and live as a woman.

Karanović's "Love Story about Freedom" is about Stevan's freedom to live life as he—or rather she—chooses, as a woman. We see her expressing her inner, essential desires as she avoids her fiancée, is attracted to Mijat, and most of all as she longs to play with her sister's doll. The doll

² Whitaker even claims that for some Albanians shooting and participation in blood feud were the only male activities, all other work, even hard labor in the fields, being performed by women (Whitaker 1981, 150).

serves as a kind of antonym to the gun: while the family places the gun in Stevan's hands again and again, she herself steals the doll from her sister and even hides it and lies to deny her theft. At the end of the film Stevan breaks her oath in order to flee with Mijat to America, presumably leaving the patriarchal oppression of life as a sworn virgin behind.³ Western critics have pointed out that the conclusion, in which Stevan reclaims her female identity as wife and mother, is hardly feminist (Iordanova 1996; Daković 1996). The film is thus less about the transvestite figure causing gender trouble than about reaffirming essential gender difference. In a crucial scene she says she wants to leave in order "to live my life as I want"—and Paun, also a sworn virgin, understands and supports her. As he dies, Stevan's father realizes that he has been wrong to insist on her remaining a man, giving her the best compliment he can with his dying breath: "I now have a son, the best!" (Karanović 1998, 320)—a woman who claims her identity as essentially female is thus worthy of the highest compliment, being called a son. And Stevan's last line confirms her chosen identity as wife and mother, as she agrees to go to America as Mijat's wife, taking her infant sister with them as their daughter.⁴

Though hegemonic gender constructions are challenged neither by the sworn virgin tradition, in which women are raised as men to preserve the patriarchal family, nor in Karanović's film about them, in which the transvestite reclaims her essential female identity at the conclusion, another film from Yugoslavia—Želimir Žilnik's *Marble Ass*—proves much more radical in its critique of culture. Žilnik's heroine, Merlinka, is a male to female transvestite prostitute. In the traditional world of *Virgina* female to male transvestism was motivated by the pressures of gender inequality in rural Balkan society. Male to female transvestism, on the other hand, was viewed in the Balkans as deviant and regulated with hatred and ridicule. Because female work and female dress were con-

³ Interestingly, Alice Munro's story, "The Albanian Virgin," concludes much the same way. In it, a British woman is captured by Albanians and becomes a sworn virgin to avoid marriage to a Muslim. She is eventually smuggled out of the country with the help of a Franciscan priest, who abandons his own vows to marry her and move to Canada (Munro 1994).

⁴ In her otherwise excellent study of sworn virgins, Antonia Young misreads the conclusion, or had it described to her incorrectly: she claims Stevan's sister is a boy and that she gives the child away to Paun, thus confirming Stevan's own status as household head; (Young 2000, 63). In the film Stevan says, "I will be your wife, but you know, we already have a daughter" (Karanović 1998, 322). The *virgina* tradition appears in two more recent films, Karin Michalski's documentary short, *Pashke and Sofia* (2003), which includes scenes from an earlier Albanian film, and Nicholas Kinsey's disastrous Canadian feature film, *Women Without Wings* (2002).

sidered shameful for a man, dressing men in female garb and parading them through the town was even used as a form of punishment, especially for those who refused to go to war (Vukanović 1961, 106–107).⁵ Žilnik inverts this practice by making the heroine of his anti-war film a transvestite.

The star of *Marble Ass* is Vjeran Miladinović, alias Merlin or Merlinka. Merlinka was a real transvestite prostitute played by Vjeran in real life. I use the word "played" here advisedly, because according to Miladinović's autobiography *Terezin sin*, which he published in 2001, his performance was exactly that, calculated to get him laid and to earn some extra deutschmarks (Miladinović 2001). Miladinović gives an account of Žilnik meeting Merlinka at her workplace and being so intrigued that he decided to make a film about her. Žilnik claims that when they met on the street during the war in Bosnia, Merlinka said, "Hey, I used to be the weirdest person in Beograd, but now everything here is so weird that I'm the only one who is normal!" That's when he decided to shoot a film. According to Miladinović, Žilnik first wanted to make a documentary, but Merlinka refused, insisting on a full-length film instead.

What resulted was indeed a full-length feature film, but one that had substantial input from Merlinka and some of her transvestite prostitute friends, which means there is a good bit of reality to the depiction. Merlinka and Sanela, the two lead trans characters, play themselves and use their real names. Much of the dialog, according to Merlinka, was improvised or written by her. Yet at the same time the film is much more political than Miladinović's autobiography. The film is a subversive romp, its style completely in keeping with the sensibility of the drag queens who are its heroines. The moral is "make love, not war," sex is better than violence, and Merlinka's tricking is shown to be much more moral than her soldier lover Johnny's murderous plots.

The most interesting scenes in terms of transvestism occur with the appearance of Ruža, a biological woman who knew Merlinka before her current incarnation as a female. As the transvestites are referred to throughout the film in the feminine gender, it is striking when Ruža uses the masculine and Merlinka's male name: "Dragan, what have you done?"⁶ But in an inversion of the Hollywood staple of the gay/transvestite trying to act butch (*La Cage aux Folles*, France, 1978; *The Birdcage*, USA, 1996; *In and Out*, USA, 1997), here it is Merlinka who tries to teach

⁵ The practice recalls classical Greek themes from Achilles' youth on Skyros disguised as a girl to avoid the Trojan war to Pentheus' punishment in Euripides' *Bacchae*, in which he is paraded through the streets dressed as a woman.

⁶ "Dragane, šta si to uradio?"

Ruža how to act as a woman and a prostitute.⁷ Merlinka dresses Ruža and explains how to pick up clients, but Ruža eventually fails the condom test and goes back to her domestic role—cooking.

Transvestism is also a central plot device in a more recent film from the region, Ahmed Imamović's *Go West* (Bosnia, 2005). *Go West* focuses on a mixed gay couple in Sarajevo: Kenan, a Muslim, and Milan, a Serb. Though set in the '90s, when some sort of gay community surely existed in Sarajevo, there is no evidence of any such community. Kenan (Mario Drmač) reads as convincingly gay, unlike his partner Milan (Tarik Filipović). There is no chemistry whatsoever between the two supposed lovers. The two plan to emigrate to the gay-friendly Netherlands, but the war strands them in Serb-controlled territory, and Kenan adopts female drag to avoid being found out as a circumcised Muslim. They escape to Milan's village, where the disguise is maintained through a traditional wedding. These two men barely kiss onscreen, though Kenan, who is bisexual, is shown having sex at least twice with Ranka, the village prostitute. Ranka eventually outs the gay men to Milan's father, while Milan is drafted into the Serbian army and killed. Though firmly anti-Serb and anti-war, the film reads as ultimately misogynistic. The sole woman among the leads is the cause of all conflict, while Milan's father and best friend accept his gay affair with equanimity.

The connection between violence and gender in the Balkans is captured in a saying quoted by Kenan: "Ako ne nosiš suknu, onda nosiš pušku" (If you don't wear a dress, then you carry a gun). Kenan wears a dress and, unlike Milan, is spared being drafted into the army. Stevan in *Virginia* is given a gun to symbolize his manhood. In *Marble Ass* Merlinka wears a dress, but her boyfriend Johnny lives and dies by the gun. During the wars nationalists derided homosexuals as traitors to the nation. Anyone against the war was "not a real man" because a real man is a "čovjek s puškom" (a man with a gun) (Čolović 2000, 75).

Violence is central to the other three recent feature films from ex-Yugoslavia, though they show lesbian, rather than gay male, desire: Maja Weiss's *Guardian of the Frontier* (*Varuh meje*, Slovenia, 2002), Dalibor Matanić's *Fine Dead Girls* (*Fine mrtve djevojke*, Croatia, 2002), and Dragan Marinković's *Take a Deep Breath* (*Diši duboko*, Serbia, 2004). *Guardian of the Frontier* is the first Slovene film directed by a woman and the first to show lesbian desire. Three women take a canoe trip down the Kol-

⁷ This seems to be characteristic of films about real transvestites, as opposed to the Hollywood version: Willy Ninja of *Paris is Burning* went on to teach models how to walk the catwalk.

pa, which divides Slovenia from Croatia. Like *Heart of Darkness* crossed with *Deliverance*, the film itself straddles the boundary between realistic thriller and fantasy, as the girls confront a man who is either a right-wing family-values politician, or a rapist murderer, or the king of the forest. Alja leaves her boyfriend at home and Žana, who is confrontational and butch, and good-girl Simona vie for her allegiance. At one point the girls cross to the other side, where they find a male couple, one of whom is a famous actor. Simona runs away, spooked by the gay household because "it's not natural,"—which presages her reaction to finding Žana and Alja entwined later in the tent. Homophobia and sexism are incarnated in guardian of the frontier / the mayor, who criticizes the girls for being too independent and for swearing. The mayor's speech makes it clear that homosexuality is not a part of Slovene nationality—he wants to defend his country from it, to draw a boundary between good and evil, Slovene and foreign, straight and gay. He and his two male followers may or may not rape Simona in the forest, but the threat is felt by all.

In *Fine Dead Girls* Iva and Marija move into an apartment building that is home to a rogues' gallery of characters: a war veteran suffering from post-traumatic stress, a prostitute paid to break up the couple by one girl's religiously-motivated father, a homophobic gorgon landlady, and her son, a slacker mama's boy who rapes one of the pair to prove his masculinity. The film takes aim at the brutality and amorality of contemporary Croatian society, targeting patriarchy, nationalism, and the Catholic Church, as well as homophobia. It obviously struck a chord, becoming the audience favorite at the Pula festival in '02 as well as Croatia's nominee for an Oscar the following year. Though convincingly anti-homophobic, *Fine Dead Girls* still hews to some stereotypes: the women are shown making love for the titillation of the audience, and the more butch of the pair is murdered, while her femme girlfriend (conveniently bisexual) marries and has a child.

Take a Deep Breath portrays a younger generation that blames parents for the dire situation of contemporary Serbia. Here we have a middle-aged conservative judge who attempts to retain patriarchal control over his family. His wife has a secret affair with a younger man, while his daughter Saša plans to leave the country with her boyfriend. When the boyfriend is hospitalized after a car accident, Saša switches her affections to his sister Lana, who has come from Paris to help out. This film, too, presents a soft-focus playful eroticism in the affair between the two women, but the father eventually has his way and uses his power to disrupt the girls' idyll. When Lana tells Saša's father she is her lover, Saša chides her, saying, "This is not Paris, Lana," echoing *Another Way's*

“We are not in America.” Lesbianism is a foreign phenomenon. Disturbingly, the film not only ends with vignettes of happy straight couples, leaving the fate of the lesbian affair open to speculation, but it also hints at the evil father’s latent homosexuality, presumably caused by a childhood molestation in an orphanage. The film thus argues for tolerance of lesbian love, but reinstates homophobia in the form of paedophilia as a root cause of the father’s psychological trauma that drives the plot. All three films are by straight directors, two by men, and all three show a world in which lesbianism is a choice. The three lesbian pairs are totally isolated, with no representation of any lesbian community. All confront the nationalist homophobic conflation of lesbianism with the foreign—it is an import, a choice, a contagious disease, and while the films contest this construction, they do show it to be the dominant discourse in the region, especially among nationalist ideologues.

EXPLOITING GAY RENT BOYS IN PRAGUE

Wiktor Grodecki’s three films about Czech rent boys, *Not Angels, but Angels* (*Andělé nejsou andělé* 1994), *Body without Soul* (*Tělo bez duše* 1996), and *Mandragora* (1997) purport to be objective, honest documentaries in which (in the language of the video box) the boys’ “frankness and need to talk become the engine that drives the film.”⁸ In reality, Grodecki’s films are both highly manipulated and highly manipulative in ways that serve to enforce “normal” sexuality while demonizing various “abnormal” sexual practices (Moss 2006b). At the same time they portray these practices as an import from the colonizing capitalist West.

The first film, *Not Angels, but Angels*, comes the closest to being a documentary, with interviews with the rent boys arranged by theme to tell the story Grodecki wants us to learn: these are innocent straight children exploited by gay men from Western Europe. Religious music and intercut shots of statues of angels emphasize by contrast the evil of what is happening. Grodecki never asks if the boys are gay or why they left home for the streets of Prague. The second film, *Body without Soul*, introduces us to a pornographer as well. It is obviously partially scripted, and Grodecki takes advantage of the pornographer’s other job performing autopsies in a morgue. If *Not Angels, but Angels* juxtaposed the experiences of the boys with *contrasting* spiritual statues and music, *Body without Soul* employs montage to shock by *association*, almost like aversion therapy. Grodecki cuts from Rousek directing naked boys in the film to

⁸ Produced by Miro Voštiar, packaging © 1995 Water Bearer Films.

Rousek dissecting naked bodies in the morgue. The parallels are brilliant and effective. In Grodecki's world the boys are invariably sucked into a cycle of sex, drugs, AIDS, and death: they will end up in the morgue themselves.

With his last film in the trilogy, *Mandragora* (1997), Grodecki gives up all pretense of making a documentary—though the box still claims that “all the events in this film actually occurred, and were photographed just as the street kids described them.” *Mandragora* is in fact a feature film, scripted by Grodecki and one of the rent boys, David Švec. It is the dramatization of Grodecki's fantasy of the boys' experience, this time with no messy testimony by the boys themselves to get in the way of the director's interpretation of their lives. A boy, Marek, comes to Prague from a provincial town after committing a petty theft. In the main station (which we already know as a site of prostitution) he is robbed and beaten himself and falls into the clutches of a pimp. He is drugged and raped, then beaten again. Another boy, David, befriends him, and they try to move out on their own, but keep falling back into the cycle of beatings, crime, drugs, prostitution and pornography. The villains are either foreign—like the rich British queen who first puts Marek on a pedestal—literally—then beats him, or quasi-foreign, like the returned Czech émigré who wears a cowboy hat and rapes David with a pool cue. In the end a nightmare suggests Marek may have contracted AIDS, and his father's attempts to save him fail, as we see Marek overdose in a toilet stall. Still, there are some scenes of what are supposed to be gay bars in Prague, complete with drag queens and backroom orgies, but they are all grotesquely exaggerated.

Another film from Prague, David Ondříček's *Whisper* (*Šeptej*, 1996), also includes prostitution as a secondary plot motif in a film that is mostly about amoral Czech youth. The film centers on Anna, who comes to Prague from the provinces and falls in with Filip, whose male lover Kytka picks up tricks at the train station. Filip eventually leaves his boyfriend for Anna. As Andrew Horton points out, the film is not really a serious treatment of what it means to be gay in Prague in the 1990s: “Filip's homosexuality is flippantly passed off as a passing phase, and the audience is meant to breathe a sigh of relief at the film's end, as Filip rightfully assumes his heterosexual role, while his jealous boyfriend is portrayed as a crazed and hysterical anomaly” (Horton 1999b). A similar picture is painted in the Hungarian film *This I Want and Nothing More* (*Nincsen nekem vágyam semmi*, 2000), by Kornél Mundruczó. These films present gay hustling as just one aspect of life in contemporary Prague or Budapest, without entering into the subjectivity of the boy who might be

hustling as much for desire as for money. Aside from cruising, hustling, and isolated affairs in which one of the pair is invariably bisexual, no queer life is represented in these films.

Compared to other parts of Central and East Europe, Prague's gay scene was more fertile ground for prostitution and pornography. While Grodecki's "documentaries" capture some of the ethnographic detail and geography of these worlds, they do so in an extremely moralizing way. They also present a world in which Czechs are innocent straight victims, while gay men are all old, ugly, and Western. In *Mandragora* Grodecki pulls out all the stops, creating some grotesquely bizarre characters to drive his point home even more. Since making these films, Grodecki has returned to Poland, where he directed a screen version of Ignacy Witkiewicz's 1930 dystopian novel *Insatiability* (*Nienasyccenie*, 2003). Here too he distorts the original to emphasize the corrupting influence of sexuality in general, with the gay hunchback cripple Putrycydes shown as a particularly repellent character who wears a wolf pelt when he rapes the boy one night in the forest. Grodecki seems obsessed with sex, particularly gay sex, and his portrayals certainly do not reveal queerness in a realistic light.

FESTIVALS, DOCUMENTARIES, AND THE HEGEMONY OF WESTERN REPRESENTATION

LGBT people in Central and Eastern Europe looking for representation of themselves in feature films would find mostly an image created and presented by straight directors as a metaphor for something else. In this respect, film representation of the LGBT minority is not unlike that of another minority: the Roma. Dina Iordanova has argued that "Balkan films abound with Gypsies, but they are not made by Gypsies or for Gypsies but by and for the dominant groups," (Iordanova 2001, 215) for whom they act as a metaphor for the marginalization of the Balkans. Queer characters appear in most of these films not as themselves, but as a metaphor for political dissidence, or for capitalist exploitation and corruption. Homosexuality is presented as an isolated phenomenon or as an import from the West. With the exception of *Marble Ass*, which features real transvestite prostitutes, these films show only isolated queer characters, not real queer people or a local LGBT community.

Another phenomenon worthy of mention is the use of Central and East European queer characters in films scripted and produced in the West. Eloy de la Iglesia's *Bulgarian Lovers* (*Novios Búlgaros*, Spain, 2003) is set in Spain and Bulgaria, with the Spanish hero Daniel falling in love with a

"straight" Bulgarian Kyril, who dabbles in hustling and organized crime. While a full picture of one Spanish gay community is represented, no equivalent Bulgarian gay life is shown. Kyril's cousin does try to seduce Daniel in the woods, but this is an isolated incident, and the plot in Bulgaria centers on family and Kyril's wedding. Alain Gsponer's *Kiki and Tiger* (Germany, 2003) shows the unrequited love of Tiger, a Serbian immigrant in Berlin, for a straight Albanian illegal immigrant Kiki, but again it is an isolated phenomenon that comes to naught. Nicholas Kinsey's *Women without Wings* (Canada, 2002), with its exploitation of the Albanian *virgina* phenomenon, would also fit into this category. In all cases the queer East Europeans in these films are either imagined exotic others or convenient plot devices. These are not films in which LGBT people from the region would recognize themselves.

Of course in the 21st century access to media representations of queerness is not restricted to local feature films. Not all of the films discussed above received wide distribution in theaters: *Another Way*, *Colonel Redl*, *Fine Dead Girls*, and *Whisper* surely did, but not *Marble Ass* or *Not Angels, but Angels*. Many more films would have been viewable on the festival circuit, particularly at gay and lesbian film festivals, which are increasingly popular. The oldest in the region is no doubt the Magnus festival, now called the Ljubljana Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, which started in 1984. Now there are similar festivals in Prague, Brno, Budapest, Zagreb, Bratislava, Sofija, and Skopje. Films shown at these festivals tend to be 90% or more of Western (US or Western European) origin, but there are usually a handful of local and regional films, particularly shorts and documentaries. These are more likely to be made by LGBT directors and for LGBT audiences.

In Hungary films by and about real lesbians have been produced by the Budapest Lesbian Filmcommittee, notably Katrin Kremmler's short spoof *Puszta Cowboy* (2004) and her *Pink Ferret* (*Rózsaszín Görény*, 2003). Also interesting are two Slovak films by Vladimír Adásek, *100% Pure Love II* (*100% Čista laska II*, 1996) and *Hannah and Her Brothers* (*Hana a jej bratia*, 2000). These show queer characters in Bratislava in an oblique and very stylized light: the hero of *Hannah* is Martin, an 18 year old queer boy who at the end of the film finds a kindred soul in the leader of a queer cabaret act. It is a kind of queer culture, but there is little or no queer desire or explicit self-identification involved. There is no sex between the two queer characters, though Martin earlier makes an unsuccessful pass at his girlfriend's lover. Queerness is reduced to flamboyant gender-bending performance.

Documentaries about real queer characters include several from the Czech Republic: Vladislav Kvasnicka's *Forbidden Love (Zapovezena Las-ka, 1990)* includes interviews with gays, gay rights leaders, and homophobes; Iveta Kratochvílová and Tereza Kodíčková's *My Body Is (Moje tělo je, 2003)* presents eight lesbian women and their views on body image. Karin Michalski's *Pashke and Sofia (2003)* presents real Albanian *virginas* on their own terms. A Serbian short film, Marko Popović's *Intolerance – Ivan (Netrpeljivost – Ivan, 2002)* portrays the gay-bashing of a student in Beograd. Another short from Serbia, Milica Mitrović's *Flower and the Band (Cvet i kaiš, 2004)*, deals with lesbians and the homophobic reaction of a small town.

A few new feature films from the region also show queer characters. Albert Vlk's *Supper Man (2004)*, from Slovakia, is a coming out film in which the parents put their son into a sanatorium in an attempt to cure his gayness. The latest film to show queer desire comes from Romania: Tudor Giurgiu's *Love Sick (Legături bolnăvicioase, 2006)*, based on Cecilia Stefanescu's novel of the same name. Two young women are infatuated with each other, and in the film one also has an ongoing incestuous affair with her brother. Though the film has been shown at gay and lesbian festivals and was in the running for a Teddy at Berlin in 2006, when I asked the distributor for a review copy, I received the characteristic reply, "Please note that *Love Sick* is not viewed or intended to be a gay film, but a different kind of Romanian film."⁹ Again, so they say, it's not really about gays or lesbians. Grodecki makes a similar claim for his films, even acknowledging that they tend to be excoriated at gay and lesbian festivals. He confesses that "homosexual prostitution became for me a metaphor of many other things" (Volchek 1999) and laments that many people failed to understand this.

In this age of globalization, it seems much more likely that LGBT people anywhere will get their media representations of LGBT identities from the same sources: predominantly US and Western European media. US television programming now receives wide distribution all over the region on cable, satellite, and regular networks. If American gay youth get their image of gayness from *Will and Grace*, so do gay youth in Budapest and Beograd. *Six Feet Under, Queer as Folk, Sex & the City, The L Word*, even *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* have been shown in Hungary, Slovenia and elsewhere on both state and commercial networks. The question of local media representation may thus be moot, given the overwhelming volume of foreign productions. An American reporter once claimed that

⁹ Personal email from Transilvania Film, 7 August 2006.

"gay culture is absolutely uniform across the world. A gay bar in Ulan Bator is no different from one in Chicago or Berlin or Buenos Aires. You'll hear the same vapid dance music, smell the same cologne, hear the rustle of the same neatly pressed Polo shirts, and touch the same tanned, well-moisturized skin."¹⁰ In the mid-90s a gay bar in Brno was named Philadelphia (it closed in 2002)—obviously a reference to the 1993 American film of that name that won an Oscar for Tom Hanks' portrayal of a man with AIDS. It would not be surprising to see clubs called Babylon (after the club in *Queer as Folk*) opening across Eastern Europe. While the claim that a gay bar in Ulan Bator (if there even were such a thing) is no different from one in Chicago is still far from true, globalization of US media images is helping to make it so.¹¹

The hegemony of a predominantly American media representation of LGBT identity is a mixed blessing for local communities. Already market-tested, these media images are easily sold to local media outlets and will at least show that LGBT people exist. But US media images are highly contested even on their home turf: they tend to present gay identity as sanitized, upper-middle-class, white, and consumerist. They promote a certain body image and fashion. They perpetuate the youth culture, marginalizing gays over 30. Most also marginalize lesbians. For LGBT viewers from Central and Eastern Europe as well, these images may provide a model attainable by some, but not by all. They may also be accepted too easily: as with gay rights presented top down to comply with EU standards instead of being won by grassroots lobbying, LGBT communities will not have a stake in producing or pushing for airtime for these shows.

Another danger is that the US model of gay identity may eclipse local LGBT models. For example two recent memoirs from Beograd, Vjeran Miladinović's *Terezin Sin* (Miladinović 2001) and Uroš Filipović's *Staklenac* (Filipović 2002) show two distinct models of gay identity. (Moss 2006a) Miladinović favors what Eve Sedgwick calls a gender-transitive model, where men interested in men perform femininity to attract partners who are "real men," while Filipović prefers a gender-separatist model. Gender transitivity encodes same-sex desire in terms of "the trope of inversion, *anima muliebris in corpore virili inclusa*—'a woman's soul trapped in a man's body'—and vice versa." (Sedgwick 1990, 87) (Today this sounds to us much more like a transperson than a homosexual.) The

¹⁰ Windy City Times columnist "G" quoted in Wockner (1995).

¹¹ Dennis Altman discusses the globalization of American lesbian and gay representation in his article "On Global Queering" (Altman 1996) and his book *Global Sex* (Altman 2001).

contradictory counterpart is the trope of gender separatism, according to which nothing is more natural than that people of the same gender should bond sexually as well as socially. Gay men should be hypermasculine, less like women, since they like women less. The distinction is in part one of class, since Miladinović and his circle are working class, while Filipović is a university professor. Yet to put a different spin on the same phenomenon, Miladinović and company are less colonized by hegemonic Western models of homosexuality. While Miladinović travels outside Yugoslavia only once to visit his mother in Berlin, Filipović and his friends travel frequently and immerse themselves in gay culture abroad, so it is no accident his conception of homosexual identity resembles the gender-separatist model more common in the West. Sasho Lambevski describes a similar juxtaposition of two models of male homosexuality in Macedonia (Lambevski 1999). If the US media representation of LGBT identity becomes pervasive, it may be the US model that will prevail.

Yet another danger of the spread of US media representations of LGBT identity is that the identity itself will be branded as an import from the West. Nationalist and homophobic discourse in Central and Eastern Europe has consistently claimed that homosexuality is not a native phenomenon, but instead something learned from the West. (As we hear in the films, “We are not in America,” or “This is not Paris.”) Construction of homosexual identity is homologous with the construction of national identity, which makes it a particularly easy target of nationalists. While homosexualities certainly existed in the region, the outlines of the construction of homosexuality *as an identity* have indeed been strongly influenced by the US model, and increasing inroads of US media representation of LGBT identities may make this both more true and more visible to the right wing ideologues who see it as a danger.

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