

ILUMINACE

Časopis pro teorii, historii
a estetiku filmu

The Journal of Film Theory, History,
and Aesthetics

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Na obálce / Front cover:

Políčko z filmu / Film Still from: *Things I Could Never Tell My Mother* (Humaira Bilkis, 2022)

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Ročník / Volume 37

SPECIAL ISSUE:
A CONVERSATION BEYOND THE SCRIPT

Guest Editors:
Jan Černík and Jan Trnka

OBSAH

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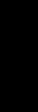
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Shifting Screenwriting — The Past, Present and Future of the Craft

An Introduction to a Special Issue “A Conversation Beyond the Script”

Abstract

Although the status of screenwriter and screenplay was always uncertain, today's precipitous technological and economic changes are affecting its essence - however, history teaches us that no crisis is so deep that it cannot be turned into opportunity. Bunch of detailed analysis forming the core of this special issue of *Illuminace* can be read as illustration of this overarching simple idea, an invitation to one of the less explored territories and as call for both another adventurous journeys to the roots of screenwriting and erudite reflections of current screenwriting practices made by scholars, screenwriting teachers and authors. In this text, we offer a perspective on how to view the articles in this special issue in the context of the current challenges facing screenwriting. At the same time, we find in these articles a vision for overcoming the crises of the present. The fact that we are experiencing changes in screenwriting means that it will be with us for years to come.

Keywords

screenwriting, screenplay, screenwriter, Screenwriting Research Network, artificial intelligence, Writers Guild of America, cinema, television, virtual reality, sound

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Since *Illuminace*'s last issue on screenwriting (4/2014), the field has shifted from professional challenge to almost existential crisis. Especially the recent Writers Guild of America (WGA) strike was less a dispute over remuneration than a battle for the nature of screenwriting work, fueled by anxieties central to a screenwriter's career: declining job opportunities, the reduction of the number of screenwriters in the writer's room that prevent

on-set experience, and the erosion of apprenticeship pathways.¹⁾ This dismantles the traditional ladder of advancement, leaving writers stranded in a gig economy that values speed over mentorship. Looming over all of this is the rise of artificial intelligence (AI). We now face a possible future where generative AI could flood the market with formulaic scripts, devaluing human creativity.

Although screenwriting is going through turbulent uncertain times once again, academic research of this unique craft continually flourishing — as authors of *The Palgrave Handbook of Screenwriting Studies*, one of the most representative, essential overviews of current directions in screenwriting research area, aptly summarized:

In the last two decades, screenwriting scholarship has investigated non-conventional textual/scripting practices, discussed serial/multistrand drama formats, and approached screenwriting for animation and newer media such as videogames and VR. The screenplay has been theorized as proof of concept, database, boundary, liminal, or transitional object. Scholars have carried out ethnographies; developed screenwriting pedagogies; studied particular national and political contexts; elaborate postcolonial, transcultural and transnational approaches; considered ethics and morality, and discussed screenplays and screenwriting with regard to gender, race, and sexual identities. They have also proposed a range of new research tools and methods.²⁾

And we can add that traditional approaches such as representation theory then take on a new dimension when presented by theorizing screenwriters, becoming a means of reflecting on their own approach to writing and enabling them to formulate assumptions about how to write in a different way.

As one of the major outlets for the growing body of research and effective device for boosting interest in screenwriting history, theory and practice for many years serve annual Screenwriting Research Network Conference which took place in Olomouc, Czech Republic, in 2024. Its topic was broad, labeled “A Conversation Beyond the Script,” and the

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- 1) As evidenced by the summary of negotiations between the WGA and AMPTP dated May 1, 2023, just before the strike began, producers completely rejected proposals to set a minimum number of screenwriters in the writers’ room and the duration of their employment on the project. “WGA Negotiations — Status as of May 1, 2023,” *wga.org*, accessed September 10, 2025, https://www.wga.org/uploadedfiles/members/members_info/contract-2023/WGA_proposals.pdf.
 - 2) Rosamund Davies, Paolo Russo, and Claus Tieber, “Introduction,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Screenwriting Studies*, eds. Rosamund Davies, Paolo Russo, and Claus Tieber (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 3. From academic literature published since 2014, see for example bunch of other accounts from Palgrave Macmillan publishing house such as Kathryn Millard, *Screenwriting in a Digital Era* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Chris Pallant and Steven Price, *Storyboarding: A Critical History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Adam Ganz and Steven Price, *Robert de Niro at Work: From Screenplay to Screen Performance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Alexandra Ksenofontova, *The Modernist Screenplay: Experimental Writing for Silent Film* (London: Palgrave, 2020); Craig Batty and Stayci Taylor, eds., *Script Development: Critical Approaches, Creative Practices, International Perspectives* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021); Stayci Taylor and Craig Batty, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Script Development* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021); Kath Dooley and Alex Munt, eds., *Screenwriting for Virtual Reality: Story, Space and Experience* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024); or Eva Novrup Redvall, *Writing and Producing for Children and Young Audiences: Cases from Danish Film and Television* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024).

current issue of *Iluminace* follows up. In the context of all shifts affecting the present screenwriting (and sketching its possible futures), our goal was among other things to stress the importance of different types of dialogues, discussions and transfers between people, institutions, artistic domains and technologies. Despite the fact that situating screenwriting to multi-leveled crossroads of this kind represents specific research challenge on its own, given complex perspective repeatedly confirmed its potential and is still able to generate valuable results: bring new knowledge that change our understanding of the screenplay and screenwriter, of what happens during the development of any non/narrative content, and which is able to portray screenwriting into considerable extent also as art of constant, ongoing negotiations (usually democratic in nature), not only about each detail of future work. The theme of in-between, transgressive topics and connecting is expressed in an even more abstract form by the theme of the Screenwriting Research Network Conference 2025 in Adelaide, Australia — The Hyphen.³⁾

It is vitally important to stress that screenwriting history and theory, at least as conducted in the context of screenwriting studies, attempts to produce knowledge that is useful even for professional practitioners as emerging research outputs can provide an understanding of the craft from the perspective of the individual writers, offer context for evolving industry practices, and contribute to understanding of concepts shared with fellow writers and industry professionals. While theoretical approaches may seem distant from practical work, they can inspire creativity or inform storytelling choices. This combination of scholarship and practice is made possible first of all thanks to the efforts of screenwriting teachers, who seek out and refine methods for educating a new generation of screenwriting students.

In line with “open ended” calls of the last two Screenwriting Research Network Conferences and in accordance with diverging trajectories of screenwriting research, the special issue of *Iluminace* gathers a colorful range of intents and approaches. It brings examination of the the working conditions and shifting status of the screenwriter. Martin Kos offers an article clarifying key features of screenwriting practice in a locally specific silent era environment, tracing negotiations about artistic autonomy and how the role of the screenwriter changed in sense of authorship as demonstrated by the case study of development of a Czechoslovak film adaptation *Father Kondelík and Bridegroom Vejvara* (Otec Kondelík a ženich Vejvara; Karel Anton, 1926). Complementing this historical perspective, scholar and screenwriter Maria Chiara Oltolini provides insiders reflection on a contemporary children’s TV series *The Sound Collector* (Sběratel zvuků; Lisa Arioli, Andy Burns, Barry Purves, and Chris Tichborne, 2023) and its genesis, focusing specifically on the function of the sound used as innovative storytelling device playing crucial role in the whole creative process. Given explorations of concrete projects — past and present screenwriting labor in mutually different creative industries —, raises also general questions about (dis)continuities and fundamental distinctions or similarities regarding screenwriters tasks and their creative inputs.

3) “CFP — 17th Annual SRN Conference — Adelaide, Australia,” *screenwritingresearch.com*, accessed September 10, 2025, <https://screenwritingresearch.com/2025/01/24/cfp-17th-screenwriting-research-network-conference/>.

Following these accounts, other contributors thoroughly investigate how screenwriting is adapting to new technologies and further exploring sensory dimensions beyond the visual. Rosamund Davies's article on virtual reality (VR) screenwriting looks at the unique challenges regarding audience engagement with VR narratives in terms of presence-immersion into the fictional world. Drawing inspiration from theater, videogames or prose fiction Davies emphasizes particularly the importance of strategic employment of the direct addressing of the viewer — i.e. use of the second person pronoun (in English) *you*. Similarly, Cecilie Levy's practice-based research seeking answers, how speech and sound can guide attention, stimulate interest and make the inner world of VR characters accessible to recipients. While Levy mainly scrutinizes dramaturgical device of voice-over and its practical applicability for current VR storytelling, Claus Tieber's historical inquiry concentrates on the specific screenwriting technique of rhythmization and musicalization of everyday noises, which can be traced in the USA and German screenplays from the early sound film era. His findings demonstrate how writers have long experimented with sound to create a more layered audiovisual experience. All three studies imply that for screenwriters the audience's sensory perception can be as important as the storytelling.

The issue also tackles the broader theoretical assumptions about the script as a non-static, constantly evolving text. Imran Firdaus's article about documentary movie *Things I Could Never Tell My Mother* (Humaira Bilkis, 2022) introduces the concept of the "living script" — the entity which changes dynamically during the production process (writing, shooting, editing), capable flexibly and fruitfully interact with unpredictable reality which raises manifold ethical dilemmas and fostering profound emotional shifts. In addition to the above-mentioned peer reviewed studies is included Lucian Georgescu's interview with acclaimed filmmaker Cristi Puiu. The conversation reveals Puiu's observance and sensitivity to details from everyday life, which allows us to understand his approach to filmmaking and his work with style. Moreover, offers a filmmaker's personal reflections on death, the central theme of all of his artwork.

While the challenges outlined in the beginning of our editorial may paint a grim picture for the future of screenwriting, articles in the issue provides us with a crucial sense of perspective. The creative industries have faced similar shifts before — as Kos and Tieber explore: turn to adaptations and the advent of sound — and each time, storytellers have adapted, innovated, and endured. The anxieties of the past can give us hope that the profound problems of the present will also, in time, be solved.

A certain kind of screenwriting, perhaps the one defined by the golden age of streaming, may indeed be over. But new opportunities are already emerging — Davies and Levy implies that the fields like virtual and augmented reality demand a new kind of spatial and narrative logic that is deeply human. Furthermore, the very limitations of AI highlight the irreplaceability of the human screenwriter (at least for now). A large language models can mimic structure, but they cannot truly grasp the intricate experience of audience sensory perception — the subtle interplay of sight, sound, and pacing that elicits a visceral, emotional response, that reflects living of everyday life as can be seen in texts by Oltolini and Georgescu. It is this embodied, empathetic understanding that will remain the screenwriter's unique domain. As opportunities on established streaming platforms diminish, we

may be on the verge of a new wave of innovation, from micro-dramas⁴⁾ on emerging platforms to narrative forms we can't yet even imagine.

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- Things I Could Never Tell My Mother* (Humaira Bilkis, 2022)

4) “2024 Micro-Short Drama Industry White Paper: Over 36,400 New Series, Accounting for More Than 60% of Heat Value,” *awnchina.cn*, accessed September 10, 2025, <https://awnchina.cn/2024-micro-short-drama-industry-white-paper-over-36400-new-series-accounting-for-more-than-60-of-heat-value/>.

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Fascinating Rhythm

The Screenwriting of Sound Symphonies for American and European Film of the 1930s

Abstract

This paper examines the role of rhythm in screenwriting in the 1930s. By analyzing how the transformation to sound enhanced the musicality of screenplays, the study highlights the emergence of so-called “sound symphonies” and the rhythmic integration of noises in American and German films from that decade. Focusing on the development of this device from the advent of sound until the end of the 1930s, the article reflects how broader shifts in film production shaped screenplay notation practices.

The Austrian screenwriter Walter Reisch, who had to migrate to the United States in 1936, serves as a guiding thread throughout this short history of the Sound Symphony. Analyzing several case studies reveals that the evolution of this device and its notation in screenplays was transnational and did not follow a linear path. While early sound films often featured the musicalization of noises as standalone musical numbers, later years saw these elements integrated into larger musical sequences. Despite this shift, screenplay notation continued to vary until the end of the decade, depending on production modes and filmmakers’ backgrounds. Ultimately, this investigation demonstrates that analysis of screenplays can offer valuable insights into film and production history.

Keywords

screenwriting history, sound film, film rhythm, film music, musical numbers

Rhythm, Film, Screenwriting

I use tons of camera directions, all for rhythm.
William Goldman¹⁾

The importance of rhythm for the aesthetics of film has been a topic of discussion since the 1920s. Film rhythm was mainly seen in the context of avantgarde or “abstract” film, and it is predominantly connected with editing and cutting. But, as Lea Jacobs writes, “narrative films can also be considered rhythmic insofar as filmmakers need to exercise control over the tempo with which the narrative events unfold and engage in the subtle process of timing short lengths and the performances of the actors.”²⁾ This approach to film rhythm, which conceives of the concept of rhythm in a more abstract and theoretical way, goes beyond editing and opens a way to examine the topic on different levels. One of the aesthetic challenges of early sound films — to return to the historical timespan this article deals with — was maintaining a film’s tempo, keeping narration, camera movement, performance, sound, and music “in time.”

When the accompanying music in the cinemas of the silent era was played live, it could be adapted and adjusted to the projected film. The images on the screen set the rhythm, and musicians in the cinema followed it. Once the acoustic elements were added to the film material itself (or played from a disc in sync with it), the relationship between images and sound shifted: an anchor was needed, and rhythm seemed to fulfill this need. The issue of film rhythm thus became a practical concern, not just a theoretical topic. But what is film rhythm in a broader sense? On which levels besides editing can it be detected and analyzed? And how does it relate to the screenplay?

Tempo and Rhythm

Before delving deeper into these questions, it is useful to clarify some terminology by distinguishing between tempo and rhythm. Tempo refers to the speed with which information is delivered, pictures are shown, music is played. In screenplays, tempo is usually not noted, contrary to sheet music.³⁾

Rhythm, however, is a method of structuring time based on repetition and accentuation. Rhythm is a term used “to describe all processes that involve periodically repeating units,”⁴⁾ as Alexandra Ksenofontova states. Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell put it

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- 1) William Goldman, *Adventures in the Screen Trade: A Personal View of Hollywood* (London: Abacus, 1983), 66.
 - 2) Lea Jacobs, *Film Rhythm After Sound: Technology, Music and Performance* (Berkeley: California University Press, 2015), 24.
 - 3) See Adam Ganz, “We Come to Realize: Screenwriting and Representations of Time,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Screenwriting*, eds. Rosamund Davies, Paolo Russo, and Claus Tieber (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 131–150.
 - 4) Alexandra Ksenofontova, *The Modernist Screenplay: Experimental Writing for Silent Film* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 194.

very bluntly in their book *Film Art*: “[...] rhythm involves, minimally, a beat or pulse, a tempo or pace, and a pattern of accents, or stronger and weaker beats.”⁵⁾ Film rhythm is the result of the combination of sound rhythm and image rhythm. This cooperation of the two main aspects of film can take different forms, mostly one element sets the rhythm and the other follows. Again, in screenplays, rhythm is an aesthetic quality; the term functions as an analogy to music but cannot be applied in its precise musical meaning. In its strictest sense, rhythm is a property unique to music. However, when incorporated into film, music can impose a sense of tempo and rhythm on the moving image.

The writing of music in screenplays can be extremely varied. Screenwriting manuals from the 1930s, although published only rarely in this period, pointed out the problem.⁶⁾ Screenwriter Tamar Lane’s manual *The New Technique of Screen Writing, A Practical Guide to the Writing and Marketing of Photoplays* (1936) dedicates a whole chapter to the issue.⁷⁾ In chapter 6, “Tempo and Rhythm,” she starts with a distinction of the two terms:

Tempo is the relative speed or rate of movement of the story as it unfolds from beginning to end. In some respects, it may also be defined as the characteristic pace in which the situations or plot are told.⁸⁾

Rhythm, by contrast, “is a regular or harmonious beat or accent to movement or sound; movement or sound marked by some regularly recurring accent or quantity.”⁹⁾ It is worth emphasizing that although these definitions are neither precise nor proper in a musicological or any other sense, Lane

1. adds musical terms like *pace* and *beat* to her definitions, and
2. that tempo and rhythm are detected
 - a. within the narration, meaning the amount and flow of narrative information over the duration of a film or within a certain scene or sequence. Lane argues that certain scenes — mostly those with what later will be called plot points — are faster than others.
 - b. within movements — those of the characters or the camera and within sound, especially, but not exclusively in music, also in sound effects and speech/voice.

Lane concludes that “rhythm [...] is a much overtalked and little practiced theory.”¹⁰⁾ Her manual was published in 1936 and represents the state of the discourse at a time when the transition to sound was already completed.

5) Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, *Film Art: An Introduction* (Boston et al.: McGraw-Hill, 2003), 359–360.

6) For an analysis of these early screenwriting manuals, see, among others, Steven Curran, *Early Screenwriting Teachers 1910–1922: Origin, Contribution and Legacy* (Feltham: Accelerated Education Publishing, 2019).

7) Tamar Lane, *The New Technique of Screen Writing: A Practical Guide to the Writing and Marketing of Photoplays* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1936).

8) *Ibid.*, 65.

9) *Ibid.*

10) Lane, *The New Technique of Screen Writing*, 65.

In another manual that was published in 1930, when sound was at its very beginning, the authors Walter Pitkin and William Marston paradoxically “advise all writers to ignore” rhythm, just to continue to write about it for the following eight pages of the manual.¹¹⁾

They define the term as follows: “rhythm is an experienced recurrence of time patterns. The source of the experience may be sights or sound and perhaps even odor.”¹²⁾ They further distinguish four different forms of rhythm in film:

1. the ordinary rhythms of music
2. the ordinary rhythms of march and dance
3. the ordinary rhythms of language, especially singing and dialogue
4. the extraordinary rhythms of total picture tempo, now within a sequence; and again between sequences.¹³⁾

They also add the importance of “rhythmic units of story movement,”¹⁴⁾ which might be understood as another term for “acts.”¹⁵⁾ Film rhythm is by no means reduced to editing in this manual, and its emphasis on music and dialogue represents the influence of the earliest sound film.

Adding a transnational perspective to these American voices, the German critic and screenwriter Willy Haas wrote in 1929 that the screenplay of the future will be characterized by the “organic permeation of image rhythm and sound.”¹⁶⁾ According to Haas, the combination of picture and sound via rhythm is therefore a crucial function of the screenplay.

Today, rhythm in film is a rarely discussed issue, and it is even less prominent in screenwriting studies. Among those who have recently written or discussed film rhythm are Yvette Biro, who discusses the relationship between narrative and rhythm at a theoretical level;¹⁷⁾ Laurent Guido examines the theoretical discourse on rhythm in film during the silent era.¹⁸⁾ Domietta Torlasco theorizes about rhythm in film more broadly¹⁹⁾, whereas Karen Pearlman concentrates on editing when discussing film rhythm.²⁰⁾ The most recent publication to my knowledge is by Steven Shaviro, who regards rhythm as “an organizing principle [...] visually as well as sonically” in his examination of music videos.²¹⁾

11) Walter Pitkin and William Marston, *The Art of Sound Pictures* (New York and London: D. Appleton Company, 1930), 119.

12) Ibid., 119.

13) Ibid., 120.

14) Ibid.

15) Ibid.

16) Quoted in Wolfgang Mühl-Benninghaus, *Das Ringen um den Tonfilm: Strategien der Elektro- und der Filmindustrie in den 20er und 30er Jahren* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1999), 224.

17) Yvette Biro, *Turbulence and Flow in Film: The Rhythmic Design* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

18) Laurent Guido, *L'âge du rythme — cinéma, musicalité et culture du corps dans les théories françaises des années 1910–1930* (Lausanne: Éditions Payot, 2007).

19) Domietta Torlasco, *The Rhythm of Images: Cinema Beyond Measure* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021).

20) See among others: Karen Pearlman, *Cutting Rhythms: Shaping the Film Edit* (Amsterdam: Focal Press, 2009).

21) Steven Shaviro, *The Rhythm Image: Music Videos and New Audiovisual Forms* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 2.

Whereas most research on rhythm in film focuses on editing, Shaviro hints at the fact that “rhythms cross over between the soundtrack and the image track,”²²⁾ therefore emphasizing the relation between sight and sound that this paper is most interested in. Needless to say, none of these works deals even peripherally with screenwriting.

Rhythm in screenwriting is a topic often mentioned in passing, but seldom examined in detail. One of the reasons for this circumstance is the close connection of film rhythm with editing and the assumption that editing is largely independent of the screenplay. Australian scriptwriting scholar Helen Carmichael points out the importance of rhythm in screenwriting in her manual: “A good script is like a good poem [...] it has rhythm, like music.”²³⁾ Famous screenwriter William Goldman (*Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, 1969) hints at the connection between technical suggestions, the visual design or format of a screenplay, and rhythm. He explains: “I use the phrase *cut to* the way I use *said* in a novel — strictly for rhythm. And I am perfectly willing to let one sentence fill a whole page.”²⁴⁾

A look at the screenplay in question demonstrates how this works. Goldman uses the standard screenplay format to deliberately create rhythm. The repetition of “cut to” on the page creates the desired editing rhythm. The rhythm of the scene becomes visible on the page of the screenplay, which is structured by the formation of these notations.²⁵⁾

The screenplay is also a visual medium, meaning not just that it is written to be translated into an audiovisual result, but that its format also has a visual meaning on its own. This is why some of the rhythms created within the screenplay can be detected first and foremost visually — on the page of the screenplay. This example is by no means exceptional or unusual, quite the opposite: it demonstrates how the very structure of the screenplay format — specifically its requirement to mark scene transitions — can be employed to create various types of rhythm. More precisely, we can identify three distinct forms of rhythm related to filmmaking:

- (a) rhythm as it is prescribed in the screenplay
- (b) rhythm as it appears in the film and sometimes even
- (c) rhythm as a visual/textual quality in the screenplay itself, that may or may not transfer to the film.²⁶⁾

Goldman’s example belongs to category (c), and in this article, my primary focus lies on the forms outlined in (a) and (c). Since the argument centers on forms of rhythm rooted in the screenplay, rhythm manifesting exclusively in the moving images falls outside the scope of this discussion.

22) Ibid.

23) Quoted after Steven Maras, *Screenwriting, History, Theory and Practice* (London: Wallflower Press 2009), 69.

24) Quoted after Claudia Sternberg, *Written for the Screen: The American Motion-Picture Screenplay as Text* (Tübingen: Stauffenburg Verlag, 1997), 85 [emphasis in the original].

25) A reprint of some pages from Goldman’s screenplay can be found in his chapter “The Screenwriter,” in *The Movie Business Book*, 3rd ed., ed. Jason E. Squire (Berkshire: McGraw-Hill, 2006), 63–65.

26) Thanks to the anonymous reviewer who suggested this categorization.

The Transition to Sound

The addition of sound and music to film production, although experimented with since the invention of the medium in the late 19th century, faced new aesthetic problems based on new technical solutions. The evolving screenplay tried to provide a foundation for addressing these challenges. The integration of sound led to the breakdown of the screenplay into smaller components, creating formal units that could be repeated and varied, including audible elements, some of which were inherently rhythmic.

As Lea Jacobs writes, the topic of film rhythm was heavily discussed in the early years of sound film when filmmakers tried to find solutions for connecting image and sound. Jacobs distinguishes three different approaches:

- to closely connect sound to the movements in the image (“mickey mousing”),
- to connect film/visual rhythm to dialogue, whose tempo and pace seemed to be too slow in the first years,
- to connect film/visual rhythm to its editing pace and to use music as a structuring rhythmic device.²⁷⁾

According to Jacobs, the aesthetic problems introduced by sound were resolved along these three lines until filmmakers achieved “virtuosic control” by the mid-1930s. Film is “above all, a rhythmic art.”²⁸⁾ The sound symphonies discussed in this article can be read as a form of mickey mousing, but their editing pace follows the rhythm of the visualized sounds. As we will see, the screenplay plays an even more important role in linking sound and image in a rhythmic way than has thus far been realized. The screenplay itself was heavily affected by the transition to sound, and its format was changed.

Sound in cinema comes in the form of voice (dialogue), music, and sound effects. Although the continuity script of the silent era was not completely free of suggestions for dialogue, (diegetic) music, and (diegetic) sounds, a new screenplay format was needed that was able to include all the different acoustic elements that synchronized sound entailed.

Dialogue, sound, and music do alter the screenplay format inevitably. In most cases, the appearance of sound and music is visible at first glance on the page of a screenplay. The format makes the newly added sonic elements visible. The most obvious example of this phenomenon is the two-column screenplay, which puts the visuals on one side and the acoustic elements on the other side of the page, thus making the audible aspect of film visible. Austrian screenwriter Walter Reisch described the format as follows: “[...] just look at a so-called screenplay. On a formal level, the language is divided into two parts. Everything we can hear is on the left, and what we can see is on the right.”²⁹⁾

The sides would be switched occasionally, and not all screenplays were written in this format, but it was a heavily used model in Europe as well as in Hollywood, especially in

27) Lea Jacobs, *Film Rhythm after Sound: Technology, Music, and Performance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 20.

28) Ibid.

29) Günther Krenn, *Walter Reisch: Filme schreiben* (Wien: Verlag Filmarchiv, 2004), 61.

scenes in which sound and music played an important role. After 1934, the two-column or parallel format can be found only in notations of musical numbers in American screenplays; it was consistently used in Europe, in some countries as late as the 1990s.³⁰⁾ In screenplays for documentaries, the format is still in use. The two-column format makes the sonic aspects visible at a glance. This effect is even strengthened when the screenplay changes from an overall one-column format to a two-column one for the length of a musical number, as in some screenplays for Hollywood musicals of the 1940s.³¹⁾

The early years of sound film, between 1927 and 1932, led to a confusion of screenplay formats. In Hollywood, each studio had its own format, and sometimes there was not even consistency within the same studio. The impact of sound led to a brief crisis of format, which was solved with the dominance of the master scene script. In the following case studies, I am focusing on one device of using rhythm that became popular in the early years of sound film — the rhythmization and musicalization of noises, especially in the form of so-called “sound symphonies.” My aim is to analyze the notation within the screenplay of some of these sound symphonies. They offer insights into the production process, the roles and functions of the screenplay beyond narration, which were overlooked so far.

In Hollywood, Germany, and France, the Sound Symphony was used to emphasize the new technology, to make sound musical, and, most importantly, to make it visible. Sound symphonies were a demonstration, a showcase of the possibilities of synchronized sound.

In my case studies, I want to demonstrate how this device, which has a long history in popular music and theater, was further developed in the early years of sound film and became firmly established in Classical Hollywood cinema. The transnational examples are largely linked through the Austrian screenwriter Walter Reisch, who began his career in silent cinema and, alongside actor-director Willi Forst, played a key role in developing the popular subgenre of the Viennese film. This genre situates its narratives in a stylized, historical Vienna and centers on themes of art and love, with music serving as an essential and defining element.³²⁾ Reisch was a “musical” writer, meaning that music and musicality played an important role in his screenplays. He penned the lyrics for the songs in many of his films. The Viennese film was a subgenre of the German-language music film for which Reisch wrote a number of screenplays (and directed a few). Reisch was forced to emigrate to the United States in 1936 due to his Jewish heritage, making him a fitting example of a screenwriter for whom music plays a crucial role. The influence of the operetta tradition is evident in his work, as it is in the work of other émigrés, particularly in their contribution to the American film musical and the development of musical numbers.³³⁾

30) In the Czech Republic for example, two-column screenplays were used until the 1990s, see Petr Szczepanik, “How Many Steps to the Shooting Script? A Political History of Screenwriting,” *Iluminace* 25, no. 3 (2013), 73–98. Italy is another example for the late use of the two-column format, see Adam Ganz and Steven Price’s analysis of *Once Upon a Time in America* (1994) in Adam Ganz and Steven Price, *Robert de Niro at Work: From Screenplay to Screen Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 11.

31) See Steven Price, *A History of the Screenplay* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 149.

32) See, among others, Robert Dassanowsky, *Screening Transcendence: Film Under Austro-Fascism and the Hollywood Hope, 1933–1938* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), 67–83.

33) See also Claus Tieber, “Walter Reisch: The Musical Writer,” *Journal of Screenwriting* 10, no. 3 (2019), 295–306.

The Sound Symphony is neither Reisch's invention nor is he the sole screenwriter who used this device. Rhythmizing and musicalizing everyday sounds have their origins in live theater. There is a direct link from director Rouben Mamoulian's use of the technique in his 1927 stage production of "Porgy" — based on the play by DuBose and Dorothy Heyward, which later served as the basis for Gershwin's famous opera — and his celebrated opening sequence of *Love Me Tonight* (1932).³⁴⁾

In *Porgy*, Mamoulian used noises for a scene in which a village wakes up: "Mamoulian fastidiously listed eighty-four characteristic outdoor sounds he encountered"³⁵⁾ in his copy of the script. In this director's script, "Mamoulian's noises accumulate one by one in the course of the next four minutes. The governing meter shifts from 4/4 to 2/4 to 6/8 — in effect, an *accelerando*."³⁶⁾ It is noteworthy that Mamoulian notes exact rhythmic time. A couple of years later, he incorporated the device into his film *Love Me Tonight*. The film starts with the waking up of Paris, using noises that get rhythmized and lead to the first song of this film musical.

The screenplay for the film merely summarizes the idea without giving too many details, because by that time, Mamoulian himself had already delivered the scene's blueprint on stage, and it had been used in a number of Hollywood and European films:

A-1 — 20

(Twenty scene numbers
are tentatively allowed
for a symphonic opening
depicting rhythmically
the awakening of Paris,
working down to an intro-
duction of Maurice
Courteline (MAURICE
CHEVALIER) and including
two singing numbers, the
first about Paris and
its rhythm, sung by
Chevalier as he dresses,
and the second dialogue
number, "How Are You,"
taking him down the street
toward his shop. Maurice
is dressed roughly, pic-
turesquely, with sweater and
neckerschief. At the

34) Joseph Horowitz, "On my Way": *The Untold Story of Rouben Mamoulian, George Gershwin, and Porgy and Bess* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013), 53.

35) Ibid.

36) Ibid., 54, an excerpt of Mamoulian's amended script can be found in Horowitz (2013), 237–240.

finish of the number,
DISSOLVE TO:)³⁷⁾

Given the technique's long history in live theater, it is highly unlikely that Mamoulian's theatrical "noise symphony" was the first of its kind. But his experience on the stage obviously played into his direction of *Love Me Tonight* and might also be the reason for the short description in the screenplay. The following examples demonstrate that the notation of these sound symphonies depended more on modes of production and the writers' experience within them. The variety of descriptions in the early sound years is also due to the transformation or crisis of the screenplay format in general.

Broadway Melody

The Sound Symphony itself is not just a transformation of a theatrical or musical gimmick. Film adds an important element: editing. Screenplays in which one can find such sound symphonies either explicitly note or imply shots and cuts and can therefore be seen as "blueprints" for these sequences. Sound symphonies on screen became possible with synchronized sound. The first screenplay in which I could find the device is *Broadway Melody* (USA 1929, Harry Beaumont). The screenplay is dated September 1928.

FOUR OR FIVE QUICK DISSOLVES

Getting over the idea of myriad sounds orchestrated into this vast symphony.

Suggestions for these are:

CLOSEUP POLICEMAN'S WHISTLE TRAFFIC SIGNAL

CLOSEUP SHOT TICKET SPECULATOR; BALLYHOOING

CLOSE SHOT BLIND FIDDLER WITH CUP, PLAYING

CLOSE SHOT NEWSBOY SCREAMING THROUGH THE CROWDS HEADLINES OF
TABLOID'S LATEST MURDER³⁸⁾

This short description lists a number of visible sounds, written as quickly-cut close-ups. The term "symphony" is explicitly mentioned, as it is in many other (later) screenplays. The device is no longer a theatrical one; it is a filmic one that synchronizes image

37) Samuel Hofferstein, Waldemar Young, and George Marion, Jr., *Love Me Tonight*, First White Script, April 19, 1932, Paramount, Paramount Pictures scripts, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, no page number. For a detailed analysis of the number as realized in the film, see Michael Slowik, *Defining Cinema: Rouben Mamoulian and Hollywood Film Style, 1929–1957* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 134.

Note: Screenplays are copyrighted, and it is not permitted to photograph or scan them in most archives. Therefore, I am unfortunately not able to provide any figures for these examples. However, I have tried to reconstruct the formatting as detailed as possible.

38) Edmond Goulding (Story), Sarah Y. Mason (Continuity): *The Broadway Melody*, September 18, 1928, Margaret Herrick Library (Academy of Motion Pictures Art and Sciences), Special Collections.

and sound for the purpose of impressing the audience. It demonstrates that these (every-day) sounds can now also be heard in the cinema. Sound symphonies at the beginning of a film further functioned as a new form of overture during the first years of the sound film.

The screenplay of *Broadway Melody* documents the intention to include a Sound Symphony at the film's start, while the final film itself opens with an aerial view of Manhattan, and only two of the mentioned noises are actually heard (but not seen).

Meanwhile in Europe, sound symphonies, or at least comparable visual emphasizing of rhythm, can be seen and heard in René Clair's *Sous les toits de Paris* (France, April 1930) and *Le Million* (France, 1931), and Géza von Bolváry's *Two Hearts in Waltz Time* (*Zwei Herzen im ¾ Takt*, Germany, March 1930, screenplay Walter Reisch), among others. In December 1930, another film was released in Germany, for which Reisch had developed a Sound Symphony.

***Ein Herr auf Bestellung* (A Gentleman for Hire) (Germany 1930, Géza von Bolváry)**

The screenplay for *Ein Herr auf Bestellung* (*A Gentleman for Hire* a.k.a. *The Darling of Vienna*), a German musical comedy from 1930, was written by Walter Reisch, directed by Géza von Bolváry, and starring Willi Forst. The transition to sound started in Germany in 1929, a bit later than in the United States, but it was carried out in an equally swift manner. The film in question is an example of an early German sound film — now almost forgotten, but highly representative of the period's challenges and solutions.

Austrian actor-director Willi Forst plays a charismatic public speaker, hired to deliver speeches for any occasion, ranging from weddings to funerals, accompanied by the pianist Lillebill in a love story with a happy ending. The main plot revolves around Forst acting as the unseen voice for a professor with speech difficulties, offering a fresh take on the classic *Cyrano de Bergerac* tale.

Reisch's screenplay for *Ein Herr auf Bestellung* is 164 pages long, while the film runs only 85 minutes. This fact alone highlights how in the early years of sound cinema, screenwriters were experimenting with the new technology, seeking a format that could address its challenges.

Before the story even begins, the first line in the screenplay notes: "No orchestra is seen during the whole film."³⁹⁾ The film was released in December 1930, and this note underscores that extra-diegetic film music was not yet established as a norm, and that a film employing non-diegetic music in this way was still a novelty in 1930s Germany.⁴⁰⁾

Rhythm as an organizing principle is emphasized in this script (and in other screenplays of the time). The terms "rhythm," "rhythmic," etc., can be found 11 times in Reisch's screenplay. The terms "syncopation," "syncopating," etc., 4 times. This quantitative evidence alone is reason enough to stress the importance of rhythm in screenplays of the early sound years.

39) Walter Reisch, *Ein Herr auf Bestellung*, Screenplay, without a year (1930) hold at Filmarchiv Austria, 2.

40) See also Michael Slowik, *After the Silents: Hollywood Film Music in the Early Sound Era, 1926–1934* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 180.

The role and function of rhythm in screenwriting becomes clearer in the following variation of the previously mentioned Sound Symphony. In this case, Reisch combines a song by the female lead character with an “animal symphony,” emphasizing the end of each line in a kind of call-response structure:

(after each line the animals living in the kitchen are
syncopating Lillebil's singing:)
1st line: the woof woof of the poodle
2nd line: the meow of the cat
3rd line: the tweet of the canary
4th line: the cuckoo clock strikes
5th, 6th, 7th line without syncopation
8th line syncopated with the quack quack of the tree frog⁴¹⁾

Reisch created his first Sound Symphony (“Geräuschsymphonie”) in his screenplay for *Two Hearts in Waltz Time* (1930). He used lifeless objects as sources of sound for this film, whereas in this case, animals are “singing,” meaning that their typical noises are musicalized. In less than a year, the stand-alone Sound Symphony, the musicalization of noises, became part of a song; the novelty was still an attraction in its own right, but it became integrated into an otherwise conventional musical number.

The musical number is first constructed in the screenplay. The way in which it is written down on the pages of the script already implies the rhythm of the scene as well as the editing rhythm. “The animals are syncopating Lillebil's singing,” writes Reisch in his screenplay, although “syncopating” is not the proper musical term here. Reisch frequently used musical terms very loosely, but what he intended in this case was that at the end of each line of (human) singing, there was a cut to a musicalized noise of an animal. As the screenplay implies, each animal had its close-up. The musicalization of the animal noises is designed to fit the rhythm of the song. “Syncopation” signifies a type of synchronization here. The screenplay suggests more than it explicitly states. Each line describing an animal's sound corresponds to a cut. Reisch describes an idea of how the scene should work, not a precise description of it. In a public lecture in 1936, he referred to these specifics of (his) screenwriting:

The screenplay needs descriptions of situations. “A man is leaving a door, he rushes through a long corridor, the girl steps out into the corridor, her face expresses fear. [...]” This is a purposeful description. What we actually read is: close-up, long shot, the camera moves, pans. trick included; numbers added. You see: This is what makes a film good or bad. Every film consists of 5-600 of such shots.⁴²⁾

41) Reisch, *Ein Herr auf Bestellung*, 85.

42) Walter Reisch, “Manuskript und Drehbuch (1936),” in *Walter Reisch: Film schreiben*, ed. Günther Krenn (Wien: Verlag Filmarchiv Austria, 2004), 62. Translation CT, Original German: “Das Drehbuch braucht Situationsbeschreibungen. ‘Der Mann verlässt eine Tür, er eilt auf den langen Gang, das Mädchen tritt aus einer Tür auf den Gang, ihr Gesicht drückt Entsetzen aus. [...]’ Das ist Zweckbeschreibung. Da ist zu lesen: Nah, Totale, Kamera fährt, schwenkt, Trick dabei; dabei Nummern. Sehen Sie: Das ist es was einen Film gut

What Reisch is trying to explain in this lecture is that screenplays include proposals for camera positions and movements as well as for editing, even if they are not explicitly written into it. The format of a script can also reveal such information.

The Great Waltz (USA 1938, Julien Duvivier)

In the United States, the so-called Sound Symphony did not disappear with the standardization of synchronized sound becoming the norm. Throughout the era of Classical Hollywood cinema, traces and elements of this device continue to appear in various films. European immigrants with their musical and theatrical experience and expertise played a crucial role in the genealogy and development of this device.

This influence is evident in the screenplay for the Johann Strauss Jr. biopic *The Great Waltz*, directed by Julien Duvivier and written by Walter Reisch, who shares screenwriting credits with Samuel Hoffenstein. The original story was provided by Gottfried Reinhardt, son of the famous Viennese theater director Max Reinhardt. The screenplay also credits John Meehan as co-writer, although he is not listed in the on-screen credits of the finished film. The European influence on the project is unmistakable.

At the center of the screenplay is an extraordinary musical number that builds on the tradition of rhythmizing sound — the device developed in the early days of sound film. While most of the screenplay is formatted in a single-column layout, this particular scene shifts into a two-column format. The left column, labeled “SOUND TRACK,” is noticeably narrower, emphasizing the synchronization between visual action and musical or rhythmic sound design.

Johann Strauss Jr. takes a coach ride into the Vienna woods with opera singer Carla Donner.

127 SOUND TRACK Singing of birds. Irregular rhythm of horse's hooves and carriage noise. Yodel in distance.	CLOSE SHOT CARLA AND SCHANI Both of them gaze out at the landscape morosely in opposite directions. They hear yodel, both look off in the same direction. CUT TO:⁴³⁾
--	--

The beginning of the sequence establishes the realistic sounds that soon become rhythmized. “Irregular rhythm” is in fact no rhythm at all, just the normal, irregular, realistic repetitions of the animals’ noises. Rhythm explicitly mentioned here foreshadows the blurring of realistic sounds and music (organized sounds) in the following musical number. The sequence continues with the addition of a musical instrument embedded in the narrative setting: a diegetic flute.

oder schlecht macht. Jeder Film besteht aus 5-600 solcher Einstellungen.”

43) Samuel Hoffenstein, John Meehan, and Walter Reisch, *The Great Waltz* (Los Angeles 1938, screenplay held at UCLA Arts Special Collections, Collection 73, Box F-461), 70.

127-A MOVING SHOT OF PANORAMA (idyllic country
SOUND TRACK side) CAMERA PICKS UP shepherds and their
Duet of the herd.
Shepherds. Theme #1.
Flute and English
Horn. Bells of
Sheep.

The screenplay refers to “Theme #1,” the first of the waltzes used by Strauss in this composition. As is typical of Strauss’s work, the composition consists of a series of waltzes; in this case, four distinct waltz themes are used, with some being repeated. Reisch was most likely aware of this particular musical structure and responded to it within his notation of the musical number. He was known for working closely with composers — particularly Robert Stolz — when writing screenplays, and he often contributed lyrics for the films’ songs. In the case of *The Great Waltz*, however, the original compositions were arranged and altered by composer Dimitri Tiomkin. I have no information regarding the nature of the collaboration between Reisch and Tiomkin.

The shift to a two-column format in the screenplay attempts to “synchronize” sound and image, with rhythm as the dominant element — explicitly mentioned in the screenplay itself:

Neighing of hrose. The horse pricks up its ears and neighs.
Horse's hoove
louder, in 3/4 temp.⁴⁴⁾

The sounds of the Vienna woods — the animal's calls and the shepherd's music — form the prelude to the musical number. As in the Viennese film tradition, the motif of an animated, musical environment inspiring the composer appears here in its most explicit form.

Strauss imitates frog.	He imitates a frog in a funny way. She
Carla laughs.	laughs. He looks at her. She looks away.
Strauss hums.	He looks at her again and begins to hum a
	tune. At first he hums with assurance then
	He becomes uncertain as to the melody and hums
	slowly, hesitantly as if composing.

Birds, and even frogs, join the sonic landscape until Schani (Strauss) begins to whistle. He “imitates a frog,” and only when Carla joins in — transforming the rhythmized and musicalized sounds of nature into refined, artistic singing — does the melody take shape. As the screenplay notes, she sings the “proper continuation” of the theme “in coloratura,”⁴⁵⁾

44) Ibid. (The typo “hrose” appears in the original text).

45) Ibid., 71.

prompting Schani to realize that he has found the inspiration for his next composition: “Yes, that’s it. Schani sings.”⁴⁶⁾

The device of rhythmizing and musicalizing everyday sounds — in this case, the sounds of nature — was widely used in the early days of sound film, as discussed earlier. In this 1938 musical number, we still find clear traces of the Sound Symphony technique that Reisch had employed in earlier works, such as in *Two Hearts in Waltz Time* and *A Gentleman to Hire*. By this point, however, the musicalization of everyday sounds no longer functions as an attraction in and of itself, but has become an integrated component of the musical number. This sequence not only exemplifies the seamless blending of realistic sounds and music, dissolving from natural ambient sounds to artistic singing, but also reflects Reisch’s deep familiarity with the structure of the waltz, upon which the entire number is built. He constructs the sequence directly around the musical form.

When Schani finally “ends the music like a conductor of an orchestra” (*ibid.*), Reisch inserts another *sync point* (in the sense used by Michel Chion),⁴⁷⁾ further emphasizing the synchronization of sound and image in the screenplay.

Strauss himself famously drew inspiration from natural sounds in his compositions, continuing a long-standing musical tradition of using nature as a creative source. The cinematic device of the Sound Symphony goes beyond this tradition in music and theater. It transforms the device into a “musical moment,” to use Amy Herzog’s term — an instance in which the conventional hierarchy of sound and image is inverted, and music takes the lead. In such moments, editing, camera movement, and even the physical movements of actors are guided by musical structure, rather than subordinating music to narrative progression.⁴⁸⁾

Such musical moments can be found not only in finished films but can already be embedded in screenplays. Screenplays often do not merely suggest specific musical themes and compositions; they prescribe a specific relationship between music and image, anticipating musical dominance in the scene’s audiovisual construction.

The sequence in question thus serves a dual purpose: it functions as the obligatory musical number in a composer biopic while also offering a cinematic solution for representing the act of composing a famous waltz, without resorting to the clichéd image of the solitary genius at his piano. Indeed, the screenplay deliberately subverts this trope with the note that Strauss appears “as if composing” when he finally finds the melody.

The number also shows Vienna as the “city of music,” where the artist is deeply influenced and inspired by its natural and cultural surroundings. This portrayal stands in contrast to the National Socialist myth of the misunderstood, isolated genius. Here, the artist is shown as being in dialogue with his environment, not apart from it. The music itself — originally composed by Strauss but arranged by Dimitri Tiomkin and set to new lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein — epitomizes the transformation into a typical Hollywood musical number, visually and aurally dramatizing the creative process.

46) *Ibid.*

47) See Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 59.

48) Amy Herzog, *Dreams of Difference: Songs of the Same: The Musical Moment in Film* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 7.

***Shall We Dance* (USA 1937, Mark Sandrich, screenplay by Allan Scott and Ernest Pagano)**

The description of “Tales from the Vienna Woods” in Reisch’s screenplay is noteworthy for its richness of details, especially at this point in history, when the Sound Symphony device at the start of the number — the musicalization of environmental sounds — had been in use for almost ten years. Around the same time, traces of the Sound Symphony can be found in American film musicals, as we can see in the screenplay for *Shall We Dance* by Allan Scott and Ernest Pagano.

The scene in question takes place on a ship and uses the ship’s engines as the everyday noises that become rhythmized and that eventually dissolve into the musical number: George and Ira Gershwin’s “Slap That Bass.” Fred Astaire plays Russian ballet dancer Petrov, who falls in love with an American tap dancer (Ginger Rogers). The soundscape of this setting is established a few scenes before the actual musical number begins:

Throughout the following scenes can be heard the familiar sounds of dock atmosphere: trucks rolling along, steamship WHISTLES, ad libs. Of porters, and so forth.⁴⁹⁾

A brief scene follows in which “the entire Ballet Company is practicing.”⁵⁰⁾ The screenplay constructs the dualism between the high art of ballet and the folk art and entertainment of Jazz and tap dance, typical for the American film musical.⁵¹⁾ The musical number in question takes place in the “ship’s engine room.”⁵²⁾ The screenplay notes:

Over the scene can be heard improvised MUSIC. CAMERA PULLS BACK to disclose the mammoth engines, which are clean, bright and shiny.⁵³⁾

In the film, the music develops slowly from the sound and rhythm of these engines to a full song. A group of people of color

utilize various parts of the huge engine as musical instruments, and now slap away rhythmically as they and Petrov vocalize: “Slap that Bass.”⁵⁴⁾

The noises are rhythmized to fit the Gershwin song; this musicalization of noise serves as a prelude and staged inspiration for the following number, intended to make it appear more natural. By 1937, the standards and conventions of a Hollywood sound screenplay

49) Allan Scott and Ernest Pagano, *Stepping Toes*, December 7, 1936, UCLA Arts Special Collection, Collection 73, Box 791, 26. (The working title for the film that was released as *Shall We Dance*).

50) Ibid., 34.

51) See also Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1992).

52) Scott and Pagano, *Stepping Toes*, 31.

53) Ibid.

54) Ibid., 32.

were firmly established, especially if a unit was at work that had collaborated on successful film musicals before: screenwriter Allan Scott wrote *Top Hat* (1935), *Follow the Fleet* (1936), and *Swing Time* (1936) among others, director Mark Sandrich made *The Gay Divorcee* (1934), *Top Hat* (1935) and *Follow the Fleet* (1936), and producer Pandro S. Berman was responsible for *Top Hat*, *Follow the Fleet* and *Swing Time*, all starring Fred Astaire. A seasoned creative team was at work on these films, and by the time *Shall We Dance* was written and produced, it is reasonable to assume that they had developed a working rapport that allowed them to collaborate efficiently without the need for extensive explanation.

The mentioned opposition between (European) high art and American popular forms takes center stage when the ballet dancer Petrov (Astaire) joins a group of black workers and musicians, marking a pivotal moment of cultural convergence and transformation.

CAMERA FOLLOWS Petrov around the large boiler room as he dances to the sound of the musical machinery. As he approaches the various whirling parts of the machine, his feet rap out a counterpart to the beat of that particular machine. Around and around he goes – faster and faster up a landing and down again, the ring of the iron steps changing pitch. The shafts of one motor beat out a counter tempo to the other motors. All these things Petrov takes advantage of as he leads up to the spectacular climax.

FADE OUT⁵⁵⁾

Hermes Pan, Astaire's choreographer in many films, remembers the inspiration for the number:

Fred and I were walking on the lot one day and there happened to be a cement mixer. They were building something and there were all kinds of chugging rhythms, you know, construction noises. And we just started dancing against them – something dancers automatically do – all the way down the street. That became the basis for the number in the film.⁵⁶⁾

This anecdote might be part of a mythologizing and/or marketing strategy, or not, but it fits perfectly into the picture Hollywood films are constructing: artists take their inspiration from their environment, everything is music, just like in the discussed number in *The Great Waltz*.

The musical number “Slap that Bass” from *Shall We Dance* exemplifies the tendency for the musicalization and rhythmization of non-musical noises to become more refined and integrated only a few years after their initial use in sound films. Here, the device serves only as a point of departure (briefly revisited during the number), but no longer as the primary attraction.

55) Ibid., 33.

56) Joe Collura, “He Danced with Fred Astaire: Hermes Pan,” in *Classic Images* 91, (January 1983), 10–12, quoted in John Francheschina, *Hermes Pan: The Man who Danced with Fred Astaire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 87.

Conclusion

The rhythmization and musicalization of everyday noises have a long-standing tradition in theater and music. With the advent of synchronized sound, film transformed this device into a genuinely cinematic one. These “sound symphonies” were not merely sonic attractions; rather, they were combined with film’s visual devices — particularly editing — to create sequences in which image and sound are synchronized through rhythm. In these scenes, rhythm forms the organizing principle, linking the auditory and visual elements into a cohesive filmic moment. Screenwriters sought to notate this combination of image and sound through various methods, most notably through the use of the two-column format. This format became a practical solution for the visual representation of the interplay of image and sound on the page of a screenplay — a solution that lasted relatively long, in any case longer than the general transition from the silent continuity script to the master scene script still in use today.

These sequences demonstrate how rhythm can function not only as a musical element, but also as a cinematographic quality — a way of organizing and synchronizing image and sound. As Lea Jacobs has shown, filmmakers in the early years of sound film actively sought ways to integrate these elements into a coherent formal system. These sequences are thus evidence for the growing importance of rhythm as a cinematic quality in sound film. The aim of this article has been to show the role and function of the screenplay in creating and shaping these sequences.

As we have seen, the notation of “sound symphonies” in screenplays varies depending on historical period, individual writers, and mode of production. In early examples such as *Broadway Melody*, *Two Hearts in Waltz Time*, and *A Gentleman for Hire*, the descriptions are highly detailed and suggest a high level of musical expertise. In the Hollywood musical *Shall We Dance*, by contrast, the descriptions are shorter and more efficient than in the other examples. This is mostly due to the specific mode of production, the Hollywood unit system,⁵⁷⁾ in which long-standing creative teams worked with an implicit understanding of each other’s methods. This stands in contrast to *The Great Waltz*, whose production team was largely composed of European émigrés, including Austrian Walter Reisch, French director Julien Duvivier, and Russian composer Dimitri Tiomkin. The extraordinary richness of musical details in this screenplay can be attributed in part to Reisch’s knowledge and experience in music and theater, especially to his deep familiarity with the Viennese traditions of waltz and operetta. The European influence on the development of musical numbers in Hollywood film musicals and in the screenplays is unmistakable.

The Sound Symphony was a transnational phenomenon, appearing in films from Hollywood, France, Germany, and Austria. Even if some influences can be traced (director and Reisch-collaborator Willi Forst was a great admirer of René Clair), there is no evidence of direct, linear development from one Sound Symphony to another. Nonetheless, it is striking that some screenwriters use the same term — Sound Symphony, Geräuschsymphonie — to describe this device.

57) David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge, 1985), 320.

What can be observed is a gradual shift: the musicalization of everyday sounds, once a stand-alone attraction of early sound cinema, became integrated into broader musical numbers in later years.

The screenplays of these films offer valuable insights into both the transition to sound and the history of screenwriting. They reflect evolving attempts to develop a format adequate to the new technology, the mode of production, and the screenwriter's musical knowledge — all these influences can all be traced on the pages of these screenplays.

The screenplay as text is still rarely analyzed for its aesthetic features, and even more rarely for its “non-representational signs” (Dyer).⁵⁸⁾ In focusing on these formal elements through the lens of the Sound Symphony, this article has sought to draw attention towards these qualities that are essential to the screenplay medium. The development of the Sound Symphony is just one case study that demonstrates the centrality of rhythm in screenwriting — not simply as a musical concept, but as a formal, cinematic principle.

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58) Richard Dyer, “Entertainment and Utopia,” in *Only Entertainment* (London: Routledge, 1992), 20.

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Copyright, Credits, and Write-for-Hire Creativity

Authorship and Authority in Czech Silent Screenwriting

Abstract

This article examines the professional status and creative labor of screenwriters in Czech silent cinema, using the 1926 adaptation of Ignát Herrmann's novel, *Father Kondelík and Bridegroom Vejvara*, as a case study. Drawing on Jonathan Gray's and Matt Stahl's concepts, the research analyzes how work-for-hire practices and copyright defined creative control and artistic recognition, examining authorship and authority within regional "authorial clusters." The article reveals screenwriters' working conditions and their innovative contributions to cinematic storytelling and style under the constraints of corporate and contractual forces. In so doing, it uncovers overlooked work patterns and professional challenges faced by silent-era screenwriters, contributing new perspectives to regional screenwriting studies on authorship and creative labor in unique industrial contexts.

Keywords

Czech silent cinema, *Father Kondelík and Bridegroom Vejvara*, regional screenwriting, copyright, work-for-hire creative employment

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When we study authorship and artistic creativity in filmmaking, especially in screenwriting, our analysis usually starts with the final film or the surviving script versions. We look at them through the lens of industry conventions, aesthetic norms, and production systems — the very things that shape, challenge, or are negotiated by the writer's creative choices. But what about areas of cinema that didn't operate within a clear, established system? What about places and times where collaborations and authorial contributions were worked out informally and varied wildly from one project to the next? The aim of this article is to offer some possible answers to this question by examining the relationship between authorship and authority in screenwriting practice within Czech silent cinema,

which represents one variant of the regional cinemas of the era that lacked robust film industry production structures. This paper will focus on the development of the popular Czech film *Father Kondelík and Bridegroom Vejvara* (Otec Kondelík a ženich Vejvara; Karel Anton, 1926) since it provides an excellent opportunity to explore the specific work on an individual project and the broader factors conditioning local screenwriting, with particular attention paid to the legal and contractual frameworks of creativity and employment that help to achieve the most complete and comprehensive picture possible.

February 18, 1926 has been largely overlooked by scholars, although it marks a pivotal moment in Czech silent cinema history.¹⁾ On this date, the Czech distribution company Biografia finally concluded a contract with the prominent local writer Ignát Herrmann and acquired the film rights for Herrmann's novel *Father Kondelík and Bridegroom Vejvara* and its sequel *Father-In-Law Kondelík and His Son-In-Law Vejvara*.²⁾ Biografia rightly viewed this agreement as a significant achievement, proudly publicizing it,³⁾ as the novel had become a bestseller since its initial publication in 1898.⁴⁾ In addition, driven by the novel's commercial success, Biografia found itself in a serious contest with several other film companies that were also attracted by the economic potential of a film adaptation and sought to capitalize on its distribution in a regional market.⁵⁾ Ultimately, closing the deal with Herrmann led to the development of the two-part picture that became one of the most successful local silent film projects and played a crucial role in defining key characteristics of Czech popular cinema during the interwar period. The creative process behind the development of this title was notably shaped by the organization and dynamics of the relationships between the distributor, the novelist, and the hired screenwriters with regard to negotiating the individual authorship, artistic credit, and public authority over the film product.

This research investigates the extent to which screenwriters in a regional film industry, heavily reliant on adapting popular local literature, enjoyed authorship and artistic autonomy, given the prominent role of film rights.⁶⁾ Furthermore, the research explores the degree to which their professional reputations and authorial credit were suppressed by intra- and inter-industrial forces. Examining the existing copy of the agreement offers an excellent opportunity to address these questions, bringing to light crucial aspects of screenwriting in Czech cinema. First, it reveals the active nature of the distributor's oper-

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- 1) Although the founding of Czechoslovakia united the inhabitants of the Czech lands, Slovakia, and Subcarpathian Rus into a single state, regular film production occurred only in Prague, the state's capital. There were no professional film studios in Slovakia, and less than ten feature films were made there during the entire silent period, all under rather improvised production conditions. As a result, film business activities were concentrated mainly in the areas of distribution and exhibition. Václav Macek — Jelena Pašteková, *Dejiny slovenskej kinematografie: 1896–1969* (Bratislava: Slovenský filmový ústav, 2017), 87–90; Eva Dzuriková, *Dejiny filmovej distribúcie v organizácii a správe slovenskej kinematografie* (Bratislava: FOTOFO, 1996), 6–29.
 - 2) "Contract with I. Herrmann," February 18, 1926, sign. III, inv. č. 27, k. 1, fond Sdružení kinomajitelů Biografia a. s., National Film Archive (NFA), Prague, Czech Republic.
 - 3) Anon., "V. karneval čsl. filmového herectva v 'Lucerně,'" *Český filmový zpravodaj* 6, no. 9 (1926), 2.
 - 4) Dagmar Mocná, *Případ Kondelík: Epizoda z estetiky každodennosti* (Praha: Karolinum, 2002), 25.
 - 5) Dagmar Mocná, "Kondelík a 'kondelíkovština,'" *Illuminace* 10, no. 4 (1998), 48–50.
 - 6) I would like to thank Coraline Refort and Yuki Irikura, my fellow collegians at Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, for the invaluable comments they generously provided on this article's manuscript.

ations in initiating the film's development, thus directing scholarly attention towards its role in shaping the composition of the local film production and in planning the output of the domestic cinema. Second, it suggests the fundamental elements of the central screen idea around which a cluster of creative forces formed, as well as the parameters of the entire film project, the fixation of which through a legal document became a priority for the involved parties. Third, the contract outlines the ways in which the mutual signing of the official document materialized the creative competencies, allocation of privileges, and types of artistic autonomy and authority related to adapting popular local literature for the screen. Collectively, these contractual features significantly conditioned both the position of screenwriters and the range of available creative options for exercising individual authorial contributions with regard to the film's style and narration.

Analyzing the development stage of *Father Kondelik and Bridegroom Vejvara*, this article aims to address various issues related to adapting the local best-seller which tells the story of Vejvara's courtship of Kondelik's daughter and, through a series of episodes, unfolds the relationship between the father and his future son-in-law, under the conditions of regional cinema. It explores the complex interplay between authorship and authority, as well as the collaborative and competitive dynamics within the screenwriting process of a specific project. This case study provides broader insights into the patterns, conventions, and principles of artistic and industrial practices in production cultures that are alternative to robust studio systems. In addition, using the case of *Father Kondelik and Bridegroom Vejvara*, the article delves into successful commercial and creative models, as well as the forms of collaboration and writing techniques behind such products. Considering the contractual dimension of writing for the screen, film authorship, and employing the screenwriting services, the paper also examines questions related to the division and management of labor as well as hierarchy and distribution of power within creative collectives. Moreover, it considers paratextual practices connected to claiming and assigning authorship credit, and the position of screenwriters vis-à-vis corporate regulations, intellectual property ownership's power, and the public image of the popular novelist.

Although this article explores screenwriting practices in adapting local novels for the screen, it does not primarily align with the objectives of adaptation studies. Instead of explaining the relationship between the literary source and the finished film, it is concerned with the impact of adapting domestic literature on screenwriting practices, types of creative work, and screenwriters' employment and working conditions. Hence, it mainly approaches the adaptation as a specific situation faced by Czech screenwriters under the conditions of regional cinema, illustrating broader issues of mediating authorship, authority, and artistic autonomy within creative collectives. Though adaptations were the most common case of such negotiations in the local environment, dealing with external "non-writers" was not unusual for screenwriters when developing screenplays for historical dramas and biopics (e.g., historians and clergymen in the development of *St. Wenceslas* / *Svatý Václav*; Jan S. Kolár, 1930/)⁷⁾ and star vehicles. Thus, it adopts the perspective of Eva Novrup Redvall and Claus Tieber and examines the adaptation as a condition of collabo-

7) Martin Kos, "Too many hands: A bureaucratic screenwriting for the Czech silent national epic *Svatý Václav* (St. Wenceslas) (1930)," *Studies in Eastern European Cinema* 12, no. 2 (2021), 121–135.

rative creative practice which required screenwriters to find and solve assigned artistic problems within limits imposed by agents with greater decision-making power in screen idea development.⁸⁾ For this purpose, I follow a relatively broad copyright definition of adaptation, presented by Jack Boozer, as a “derivation that recasts, transforms or adapts a previous work,” one that significantly affects individual artistic choices concerning narrative and style, and collective dynamics.⁹⁾

Consequently, the article demonstrates that studying often overlooked issues of contracts, copyright, and employment regimes provides an opportunity to rethink important industrial configurations and inter-medial relationships in film environments rooted in different types of sociocultural traditions and business models. Therefore, this article contributes to regional screenwriting studies by proposing a novel way of analyzing screenwriting creativity and authorship in cinemas operating under diverse industrial logics. Specifically, it highlights the value of examining screenwriting through legal documents and employment records to illuminate the work and profession of screenwriters in silent-era production cultures, which often lacked institutionalized production and administration, leading to fragmentary archival sources and making other types of historical research challenging.¹⁰⁾

Examining Authorship and Work Conditions in Regional Screenwriting

The proposed approach to analyzing the development of *Father Kondelík and Bridegroom Vejvara* and conceptualizing local creativity is primarily rooted in the scholarly framework of the poetics of regional cinemas. This research approach is based on the premise that films produced in regional cinemas, such as Czech cinema, cannot be fully understood using concepts derived from the examination of the aesthetic output of strong film industries such as Hollywood or French cinema. In fact, regional cinemas do not principally absorb the stylistic and narrative norms of transnationally dominant productions, but rather draw from long-term cultural and creative traditions prevalent in a given region across diverse media and art forms.¹¹⁾ Correspondingly, regional cinemas are characterized by their own unique logics of labor organization, employment agreements, production models, and types of creative collaboration. For instance, to understand their speci-

8) Eva Novrup Redvall, “Scriptwriting as a creative, collaborative learning process of problem finding and problem solving,” *MedieKultur: Journal of Media and Communication Research* 25, no. 46 (2009), 34–55; Claus Tieber, “A story is not a story but a conference: Story conferences and the classical studio system,” *Journal of Screenwriting* 5, no. 2 (2014), 225–237.

9) Jack Boozer, “Introduction: The Screenplay and Authorship in Adaptation,” in *Authorship in Film Adaptation*, ed. Jack Boozer (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 13.

10) In many ways, this is also the case of *Father Kondelík and Bridegroom Vejvara*. Not only is there a shortage of primary archival sources with regard to the film’s production, but we also lack direct comments on the creative process and final product from the writer and filmmakers. To my understanding, neither the novelist nor the screenwriters publicly expressed their (dis)satisfaction with the adaptation. However, Herrmann continued to sell the adaptation rights for his other novels after the adaptation’s release, and the screenwriters accepted other adaptation commissions in the late 1920s and the early 1930s.

11) Radomír D. Kokeš, “Česká kinematografie jako regionální poetika,” *Illuminace* 32, no. 3 (2020), 13–14, 22–24.

ficity, it does not seem productive to apply Janet Staiger's findings on the corporate mechanisms of development, detailed division of labor, long-term in-house employment, or screenwriter specialization in the Hollywood mode of production, since Czech cinema never came close to achieving such a level of professionalization and standardization within which local screenwriters would perform their creative work.¹²⁾

The production practices of Czech cinema, which shaped the conventions of artistic work in the spirit of Howard Becker's thinking,¹³⁾ were distinctly different even from those of major European film industries. At least for a certain period of the silent era, the film-making practices in countries like Germany, Denmark, Italy, Sweden, France, and the Soviet Union were connected to the activities of large companies and institutions. There, creative possibilities were more firmly defined by corporate strategies and interests, long-term processes, and official structures. Although the position of screenwriters was largely limited within the production machinery of these cinemas (whether in configurations resembling the Hollywood director-unit system or the central producer system), the types of working methods, division of labor, and power hierarchies were — despite some internal variations — fundamentally stable. This stability contributed to the long-term development of corporate activities, simultaneous work on multiple film projects, more predictable planning, and more efficient execution.¹⁴⁾ Consequently, top-down corporate interests and demands, though not always in a favorable form, were significantly reflected in the daily reality and working conditions of screenwriters.

When considering screenwriting work under regional conditions, contrasting patterns, conventions, and practices of Czech cinema come to the fore. Despite local filmmakers' stated desires for greater centralization of domestic capital and local companies — which would have contributed to higher aesthetic standards and stable employment for creative talent — the development and production of films in the Czech film industry was determined primarily by short-term project management, not by strong, long-term corporate management.¹⁵⁾ This was dominant in the first half of the 1920s, but remained present until the end of the silent era. This outlined project-based production, therefore, typically contributed to creating temporary work collectives, a package-driven assembly of financial, human, and technical resources, or the informal nature of semi-permanent

12) David Bordwell – Janet Staiger – Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 134–140.

13) Howard S. Becker, "Art as Collective Action," *American Sociological Review* 39, no. 6 (1974), 767–776.

14) Kristin Thompson, "Early Alternatives to the Hollywood Mode of Production: Implications for Europe's Avant-Gardes," *Film History* 5, no. 4 (1993), 388–401; Anne Bachmann, *Locating Inter-Scandinavian Silent Film Culture: Connections, Contentions, Configurations* (Stockholm: Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis, 2013), 228–249; Isak Thorsen, *Nordisk Films Kompagni 1906–1924: The Rise and Fall of the Polar Bear* (East Barnet: John Libbey, 2017), 143–145; Silvio Alovio, "The 'Pastrone System': Italia Film from the origins to World War I," *Film History* 12, no. 3 (2000), 252–254; Richard Abel, *French Cinema: The First Wave, 1915–1929* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 7–22; Hans-Michael Bock and Michael Töteberg, "A History of UFA," in *The German Cinema Book*, ed. Tim Bergfelder (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 285–296.

15) For instance, in 1922, the ambitious Czech screenwriter and director Jan S. Kolár formulated the idea of merging domestic capital into one or two "super production companies," believing their existence would enable the development of local practices in a form that conspicuously resembled the Hollywood director-unit system, a counterpart of which also operated in German cinema, with which Kolár was well acquainted. Jan Kolár, "Práce v českém filmu," *Film* 2, no. 2 (1922), 3.

work groups. Such a bottom-up configuration, where creative efforts were generally focused on one film after another across different production firms rather than on simultaneous operations within a single institution, inevitably affected how screenwriters navigated their professional careers and the types of negotiations they had about authorship and authority in relation to the loosely defined boundaries of the division and organization of labor and decision-making hierarchies.¹⁶⁾

As most Czech pictures originated from temporary film projects with creative teams that disbanded after shooting, individual roles, creative competencies, and personal responsibilities were frequently being re-arranged and re-negotiated. In this respect, Ian W. Macdonald's concepts of *screen idea* and *screen idea work group* (SIWG) are particularly useful. Due to the project-based nature of the Czech film industry, development was frequently determined by a proposed individual feature film idea, whether written or pitched orally. This idea became the key initial point of the subsequent project and the core of the artistic endeavor. This led to the formation of a SIWG, comprising diverse members who shared the screen idea and collaborated on its development.¹⁷⁾ Once the screen idea was transformed into the final product ready for release, these collectives usually dissolved. This configuration, thus, significantly impacted the development of these films, the relationships between screenwriters and other collaborators, and the very nature of the screenwriting process itself. Given the constant re-assembling of labor within the outlined regional film industry, it is crucial to analyze each project individually, examining its unique work organization and collaborative structures. Such an approach allows for a nuanced understanding of the division of labor, the hierarchy of power, and ultimately, the complex dynamics and tensions between authorship and authority.

Regarding the issues of authorship and screenwriting labor in project-based Czech silent cinema, I take great inspiration from Jonathan Gray. His approach redefines authorship by adding a temporal dimension, urging us to examine the numerous figures and institutions involved in authoring an audiovisual work across its lifespan. In this respect, Gray highlights collectivity, authorship, authority, power, and labor management. Ultimately, instead of a single author, Gray proposes "authorial clusters" — multiple nodes of authorship operating at specific times within a film's lifecycle.¹⁸⁾

Within these clusters, Gray notes the authorship is constantly under negotiation. This notion encourages us to examine the social tensions, power differentials, management, and collaboration between authors as well as to look more closely to the interactions between authors of the "same" film and to production cultures. From Gray's perspective, authorship "is not only about meaning, but also, and importantly, about authority, control, and power, [the] question of 'when?' requires that we also ask 'how?' Who gives authority? Who claims authority? And how is authority managed, distributed, hoarded, and

16) Martin Kos, "Hra o svatováclavský velkofilm: Producentké přístupy a funkční proměny audiovizuálních představ ve vývoji Svatého Václava (1926–1929)" (Unpublished PhD dissertation, Masaryk University, 2024), 18–27, 68–72.

17) Ian W. Macdonald, *Screenwriting Poetics and the Screen Idea* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 4–5, 11.

18) Jonathan Gray, "When is the author?," in *A Companion to Media Authorship*, eds. Jonathan Gray and Derek Johnson (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 88–111.

shared? How, too, is it effectively challenged, taken away, and contested?”¹⁹⁾ By systematically answering these questions, it is possible to both provide a more comprehensive explanation of the origin of specific choices and decisions made at a particular time and place in relation to individual films, and also more accurately describe the general nature of project-based film production and explain the particular SIWG dynamics. This is because it helps to identify institutions and individuals, such as distribution companies or renowned novelists, who, under certain circumstances, possess the authority to demand and enable certain choices, or conversely, to restrict and prohibit them.

One of the characteristic features of the outlined regional production culture was that above-the-line workers operated as freelancers, typically participating in film projects on the basis of work-for-hire contracts.²⁰⁾ Since filmmakers did not operate under permanent or long-term in-house contracts, but rather the financial or creative conditions of their work were the result of individual negotiations with employers for each project, contractually defined relationships between independent contractors and corporations significantly conditioned labor procedures as well as the limits of authorship and creativity. In this regard, I adopt the perspective of Matt Stahl who concentrates on the aspects of working conditions, copyright, corporate contracts, and other legal frameworks in media industries while examining the issue of authorship.

Exploring the working conditions related to work-for-hire agreements as typical legal configurations for employing creative workers, Stahl suggests that “authorship is not a simple function of creativity: copyright’s doctrine of ‘work for hire’ allocates authorship and ownership of intellectual property produced in the workplace to employers, alienating employee media workers and also enabling the dispossession of most freelancers.”²¹⁾ Moreover, he points out that the work-for-hire model designates employers as authors, even though these employers might lack any traditional creative talent and could even be corporations rather than individuals.²²⁾

To examine authorship and creativity with respect to screenwriters operating in film industries characterized by project-based production and work collectives organized around these projects through a work-for-hire employment regime means two things. One, we need to explore the extent and intensity of the bargaining power with which screenwriters achieved artistic autonomy and certain types of privileges in decision-making about the aesthetic aspects of the developed picture in each project in relation to the remaining stakeholders. Two, it draws our attention to their position and role in the process of granting and distributing authority over the screen idea and in communicating the authorial contributions towards audiences in the context of product ownership and corporate interests. The limits and opportunities that affected both exercising and claiming the authorship of screenwriters and the recognition of their professional position within

19) Ibid., 107–108.

20) Jan S. Kolár, interview by Jaroslav Brož, Zdeněk Štábala, Myrtil Frída, Luboš Bartošek, and Stanislav Zvoníček, n. d., Oral History Collection, NFA, Prague, Czech Republic.

21) Matt Stahl, “Privilege and Distinction in Production Worlds: Copyright, Collective Bargaining, and Working Conditions in Media Making,” in *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*, eds. Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John T. Caldwell (New York: Routledge, 2009), 55.

22) Ibid., 56.

business structures were thus manifested in the types of contracts and agreements entered into, as Stahl outlines:

Rhetorically, authorship begins in the personality; however, socially, politically, and economically it culminates and is fully certified in the hiring, organization, and management of capital, facilities, technological resources, and, finally, labor services. Authorship is anchored in the control of the labor processes and the legal structures that condition the relations between hiring and hired parties.²³⁾

Industrial Shifts and Impact of Adaptations on Screenwriters

The development of *Father Kondelík and Bridegroom Vejvara* as a potential regional box office hit, addressing both local urban and rural audiences, as well as its later great revenues in movie theatres benefited from favorable industrial shifts and business consolidation that occurred in Czech cinema in the mid-1920s. Recovering from a production crisis in 1923–1924 when the amount of produced Czech films significantly dropped due to several economic and industrial factors,²⁴⁾ members of the domestic film community were encouraged to further creative endeavor by the positive results of their recent output. The film journalist Quido E. Kujal, for instance, reported on a significant popularity of several adaptations of local literary sources among the domestic population during 1924 and saw in their commercial success an opportunity to increase the overall volume and financial potential of Czech films.²⁵⁾ Later testimony attributed a similar effect to *White Paradise* (Bílý ráj; Karel Lamač, 1924), starring Anna Ondra and Karel Lamač, which, despite its modest production costs, broke through to the German market, where it achieved unexpectedly positive results. This film's success not only allowed the duo Ondra–Lamač to expand their careers to Berlin, but it also manifested to Czech entrepreneurs that even a picture created under regional conditions can function as a good business commodity able to more than return the invested capital.²⁶⁾

In the following year, the demonstration of the profitability and competitive position of Czech film production in the local market was further strengthened by two highly successful film adaptation projects: *Into the Genteel State of Life* (Do panského stavu; Karel Anton, 1925) and *The Wedding of Nanyinka Kulichová* (Vdávky Nanyinky Kulichovy; Miroslav J. Krňanský, 1925). The former was based on the novel by Popelka Biliánová, the most popular Czech female writer of the period and Herrmann's female counterpart in the regional genre of idyllic literature. This genre drew heavily on vernacular culture and often

23) Matt Stahl, *Unfree Masters: Recording Artists and the Politics of Works* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), 207.

24) Michal Večeřa, "Na cestě k systematické filmové výrobě: Rozvoj produkčního systému v českých zemích mezi lety 1911–1930" (Unpublished PhD dissertation, Masaryk University, 2018), 21, 70.

25) Quido E. Kujal, "Příhodná doba," *Český filmový zpravodaj* 5, no. 10 (1925), 1.

26) Kolár, interview by Brož, Štábla, Frída, Bartošek, and Zvoníček; Václav Wasserman, "Pro film zrozený," in *Karel Lamač: Filmový režisér, herec a technik*, ed. Václav Wasserman (Praha: Státní pedagogické nakladatelství, 1958), 32–34.

featured stories set in an idealized past.²⁷⁾ The latter marked the very first film adaptation of any of Ignát Herrmann's literary works. As the title suggests, the story revolves around the preparations for the wedding of the central female character, Nanyňka Kulichová, and the efforts of her parents and supporting characters to ensure a perfect wedding day. While the filmmakers behind these projects managed to acquire the rights to both novels for low prices,²⁸⁾ the combination of the authors' renowned names and the casting of popular local stars, with Antonie Nedošínská being particularly effective in her roles as good-natured mothers, attracted large numbers of local spectators.²⁹⁾

Although domestic literature constituted one of the frequent sources of Czech film production in the previous period (until 1923, it accounted for approximately a quarter of the utilized source material), the years 1924–25 became a turning point and for the rest of the silent era, with almost a 50% share in production, it turned into the dominant domestic model.³⁰⁾ With the growing interest of film circles in popular literary or dramatic works and the endeavor to replicate successful formulas, several crucial aspects of the filmmaking practice came to the fore:

- the price of rights and other conditions specified by adapted authors (or their heirs), derived from the previously demonstrated profitability of their individual works in the market;
- locating and accumulating, within the constraints of the regional film industry, sufficient financial capital to acquire the highly demanded rights and manage the subsequent execution to achieve marketable products;
- the ability to staff each temporary film project with a highly skilled team possessing the necessary technical and creative expertise;
- the efficient management of power crucial for effective coordination of hired personnel, the efficient utilization of purchased/rented equipment and production values, the distribution of specific tasks, and the division of labor in the development of central screen ideas.

While the production sphere continued to face the problems of an underfinanced and highly decentralized structure, resulting in numerous small production companies operating primarily on the basis of short-term and irregular operations and transactions,³¹⁾ the economic stability and prosperity of the distribution sector enabled well-established distribution companies to initiate new projects and, therefore, exert a more significant influence on the production and tailor it to their business interests. In 1927, Jan S. Kolár commented on this shift in the local industrial organization quite positively:

27) Mocná, *Případ Kondelík*, 62–154.

28) Mocná, "Kondelík a 'kondelíkovština,'" 50.

29) The November advertisement for *The Wedding of Nanyňka Kulichová* proudly announced that the picture was, just in a couple of months since its release, already seen by more than 110 thousand patrons. *Český filmový svět* 3, no. 12 (1925), 10 [Advertisement for The Wedding of Nanyňka Kulichová].

30) Večeřa, "Na cestě k systematické filmové výrobě," 107.

31) *Ibid.*, 72–73.

Since that time [1925–26], *the domestic film production has been operating on a more viable commercial basis*. In most cases, production has been financed by business companies (film distributors), resulting in significantly higher sales compared to previous years. Moreover, cinema owners, especially those operating in the countryside, are able to attract larger audiences when Czech pictures are on their program and they cheer for the growth of the domestic production *since it is lively in absolutely every way*.³²⁾ [Emphasis in original]

In alignment with Kolár's remarks, we find, for instance, a brief note on the planned production of an adaptation of František Langer's play, *Getting a Camel Through the Eye of a Needle* (Velbloud uchem jehly; Karel Lamač, 1926). It announced that the production firm Bratři Deglové, with the playwright's involvement in writing the scenario, would produce the picture on demand of the distribution company Kinema.³³⁾ Apart from Biografia's operations, which are documented by references to their development and production of another Herrmann adaptation — *The Story of One Day* (Příběh jednoho dne; Miroslav J. Krňanský, 1926) — mentions of distribution companies involved in developing screen ideas exist also for these Czech projects: *A Self-Willed Girl* (Svéhlavička; Rudolf Měšťák, 1926), initiated by Republicfilm (with production credited to Favoritfilm); *Military Secrets of Prague* (Válečné tajnosti pražské; Václav Kubásek, 1926) and *Mrs. Katynka from the Egg Market* (Paní Katynka z vaječného trhu; Václav Kubásek, 1927), both linked to the distribution company Iris Film (though production is credited to Vraný Kubásek Michálek Praha and Elekta-Journal, respectively); *In the Summer Place* (Na letním bytě; Vladimír Slavínský, 1926), associated with the distribution company Lloyd Film (officially credited to Bratři Deglové); and *Řina* (Jan S. Kolár, 1926), allegedly filmed by Reiter for the distributor Elektafilm.³⁴⁾

As the following sections will elaborate in greater detail, these historical traces fundamentally challenge the previous understanding of the relationships and industrial dynamics between the fields of production and distribution in regional cinema. While the financial participation of distributors in covering the costs of certain film projects has been already known, the historical narrative has primarily emphasized the operations of production companies which, to secure funding for their pictures in the making, contacted the distributors and negotiated with them for advance payments on future distribution rights.³⁵⁾ Apparently, this kind of interpretation is inaccurate, as distribution companies were undoubtedly not just passive buyers that engaged with filmmaking processes in their later stages and did not care about individual film products and their aesthetics until they were almost finished. On the contrary, Czech distribution companies were active in initiating the development of screen ideas they were interested in, made investments necessary to launch the projects connected to a specific film title, and commissioned production

32) Jan Kolár, *K filmu* (Praha: Fechtner, 1927), 126–127.

33) Anon., "Co nového v českém filmu," *Český filmový zpravodaj* 6, no. 16 (1926), 3.

34) Anon., "Co nového v českém filmu," *Český filmový zpravodaj* 6, no. 36–37 (1926), 4; Anon., "ČESKÝ FILM," *Český filmový svět* 4, no. 3 (1926), 12; J. Snížek, "Řina," *Filmová hvězda* 1, no. 7 (1926), 2; Anon., "Biografie," *Film* 6, no. 2 (1926), 11.

35) Večeřa, "Na cestě k systematické filmové výrobě," 114.

companies to execute given screen ideas according to their conditions. Within the context of long-term business planning, this strategy was instrumental for distribution companies to incorporate individual titles into their distribution catalogs, with the assumed functions these films were intended to fulfill (e.g. to serve as vehicles for the method of block booking).

The growth of this hands-on approach exercised by distribution corporations and their representatives toward film development, especially adaptations, against the regional backdrop of the industrial reconfiguration, inevitably affected screenwriters' professional lives and screenwriting practices. On the one hand, freelance screenwriters seemingly benefited from the industry's inclination towards commercially viable adaptations of domestic popular literature. This trend provided them with significantly more employment opportunities, allowing them to hone their craft, develop their individual screenwriting techniques, and contribute to sustaining shared aesthetic standards in terms of narrative and stylistic conventions. Therefore, it enabled the screenwriters to minimize the unfavorable effects of the precarious working conditions and validate their professional status in the local environment.

On the other hand, this situation changed their role in the development stage and position in the hierarchy of power within project-based collectives. In contrast to the previous period, where screenwriters often acted as solitary project initiators, with their own original screenplays at play, and were able to hold and perform a significant degree of control in the decision-making process,³⁶⁾ they transitioned into screenwriting service providers, largely commissioned to adapt local literature for the screen within the constraints of corporate interests.³⁷⁾ Consequently, due to the work-for-hire arrangements and copyright matters, their bargaining power became limited and they were usually denied public recognition as authors, with the focus instead placed on promoting the names of the original book authors.³⁸⁾ All these factors significantly intersected during the development of *Father Kondelík and Bridegroom Vejvara*, resulting in the interplay of Biografia's distribution corporate logic, the commissioned service production company Elekta-Journal's agenda,

36) Kos, "Hra o svatováclavský velkofilm," 20–26.

37) These conditions are eloquently illustrated by Radomír D. Kokeš's reconstruction of the collaboration between the director Karel Lamač and the screenwriter Václav Wasserman while adapting Jaroslav Hašek's famous novel *The Good Soldier Svejk and His Fortunes in the World War* for the screen in 1926. Radomír D. Kokeš, "Kinematografický výskyt Josefa Švejka aneb Osudy románových taktik ve třech adaptacích s jednou britskou zacházkou," in *Fikce Jaroslava Haška*, ed. František A. Podhajský (Praha: Ústav pro českou literaturu AV ČR, 2016), 281–288.

38) Problems related to professional status, working conditions, and public visibility were by no means unique to the situation of Czech silent-era screenwriters. On the contrary, these challenges were also encountered by their peers in Hollywood, Great Britain, or France when adapting literature for the screen, as the production/distribution companies regularly decided to promote the names of novelists or playwrights instead of attributing the credit to screenwriters. See, for instance, Steven Price, *The Screenplay: Authorship, Theory and Criticism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 1–5; Ian W. Macdonald, "Screenwriting in Britain 1895–1929," in *Analysing the Screenplay*, ed. Jill Neldes (London: Routledge, 2010), 60–61; Annie Nissen, *Authors and Adaptation: Writing Across Media in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 157–200; Andrew Watts, "The currency of adaptation: Art and money in silent cinema," in *The History of French Literature on Film*, eds. Kate Griffiths and Andrew Watts (New York: Bloomsbury, 2021), 19–62; Janet Staiger, "'Tame' Authors and the Corporate Laboratory: Stories, Writers, and Scenarios in Hollywood," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 8, no. 4 (1983), 41–43.

the novelist's personal concerns, and artistic choices mediated within the screen idea work group.

Adapting Kondelík: Permission Granted, Authorship Denied

Several key aspects of exercising authorship, asserting authority over the development of the central screen idea, and conditioning the screenwriting practices, were defined long before the adaptation process itself began. In addition, these aspects were, within the structures of the regional film industry, negotiated outside the field of above-the-line personnel, with whom film authorship is typically associated.³⁹⁾ At the very outset of the project, marked by the conclusion of the rights acquisition agreement, a crucial confrontation emerged between the distribution company and the novelist regarding the extent of their future authority over the film. Correspondingly, the official contract explicitly defined the limits of their respective competencies and obligations, within the context of their bargaining power, concerning specific attributes of the project. This resulted both in establishing the initial set of artistic constraints and other types of conditions for the screenwriting creativity and outlining the hierarchy of power in the decision-making process with regard to seeking cinematic solutions suitable for the given adaptation and executing particular choices while dealing with specific artistic problems related to the narration and style. Biografia had formally committed to fulfilling the following points:

I.

Mr. Ignát Herrmann gives the other contracting party his consent to film his books: Father Kondelík and Bridegroom Vejvara and Father-In-Law Kondelík and His Son-In-Law Vejvara, For this right to use the author's artistic work for the Czechoslovak Republic, the Association of Cinema Owners 'Biografia', a joint-stock company in Prague, paid Mr. Ignát Herrmann before signing this contract

CZK 100,000 (one hundred thousand). [...]

II.

In the interest of the artistic execution of the film, [Biografia] unconditionally submits to the fact that Mr. Ignát Herrmann, after submitting the libretto, photographs, performers, text of the titles and communicating the method of advertising, will decide on their admissibility for the execution of the film and that further Mr. Ignát Herrmann will be allowed to monitor the filming and that the actors must submit to his instructions both in terms of performance and masks and that changes or adjustments must be made to the film, which Mr. Ignát Herrmann considers necessary from an artistic point of view. [...]

39) John T. Caldwell, "Authorship Below-the-Line," in *A Companion to Media Authorship*, eds. Jonathan Gray and Derek Johnson (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 349–351.

V.

Mr. Ignát Herrmann grants the operating right to [Biografia] for a period of 5 (five) years, i.e. from the date of completion of the production of the films *Father Kondelík* and *Bridegroom Vejvara* and *Father-In-Law Kondelík* and *His Son-In-Law Vejvara*. [...]

VI.

Mr. Ignát Herrmann undertakes that before November 18, 1926, he will not grant, except in cases of mutual agreement with [Biografia], the right to film any of his literary works to any other film company and [Biografia], on the other hand, undertakes that the film *Father Kondelík* and *Bridegroom Vejvara* will be finished by November 18, 1926, at the latest, so that Mr. Ignát Herrmann can, without prior agreement with Biografia, grant the right to film any of his literary works after this period.

However, if [Biografia] stated serious reasons for the impossibility of finishing the film *Father Kondelík* and *Bridegroom Vejvara* by November 18, 1926, Mr. Ignát Herrmann undertakes to extend the deadline by a period, the length of which will be agreed upon by both contracting parties. In such a case, Mr. Ignát Herrmann will not grant the right to film any of his literary works sooner to another film company.⁴⁰⁾

Apparently, Herrmann, as the writer of the bestselling local novel, possessed considerable bargaining power, which he appropriately exercised during negotiations with Biografia, seeking to acquire the rights. Not only did he notably raise the sum demanded for the rights, compared to the adaptation of *The Wedding of Nanyinka Kulichová* from the previous year (a twenty-fold increase for both books featuring the characters Kondelík and Vejvara), he also evidently leveraged his prominent position to dictate terms related to the future film's aesthetic elements and claim specific mechanisms of power that could be activated by him to control them. Therefore, Herrmann apparently granted permission for the adaptation, tied to a time-bound exclusivity for the Czech film industry, and delegated a significant amount of business authority over the screen idea and the film as a commodity in exchange for substantial approval rights, regarding the narrative and stylistic aspects.

However, the act of signing the agreement transferred the main production responsibility to the shoulders of Biografia. It also marked the official relocation of intellectual property ownership into the corporate structures, as Biografia became the exclusive holder of film copyright which played a crucial role in the period's industrial configuration and business logic of regional cinema. Consequently, this copyright-conditioned shift in the allocation of privileges and competencies was also reflected in the publicity surrounding the project. Indeed, reports in the film trade press presented Biografia as the owner of the film and the sole organization responsible for its production, even though historical testimony demonstrates that the tasks associated with the conception and execution of the pic-

40) "Contract with I. Herrmann."

ture were carried out by the company Elekta-Journal.⁴¹⁾ Put differently, the contract served as the first instance in defining the forms and hierarchy of stratification, as well as the limits of future artistic autonomy.

Balancing Individual Creativity, Contractual Frameworks, and Cinematic Conventions

The closed contract became the fundamental legislative framework for creative work, defining (a) the set of conditions of what was permitted and forbidden in shaping the screen idea, (b) the working position of hired screenwriters in relation to other members of the SIWG during various phases of development, and (c) the degree of their control over particular narrative and stylistic techniques. As the following sections will elaborate in more detail, the central screen idea was most notably shaped by screenwriters Václav Wasserman and Josef Neuberger.⁴²⁾ However, the services of this tandem were employed within the outlined legal framework and according to the principal corporate assignment: to adapt the novel for the screen and to adjust its key features to the requirements of cinematic storytelling and the specifics of the film medium. Additionally, their labor was subject to the priorities and instructions of other involved figures who participated in the screenwriting process. First and foremost, František Horký, the director of Elekta-Journal, who was also officially credited as a screenwriter, fulfilled an important function. In the initial phase, Horký ordered Wasserman to collaborate on the screenplay with director Miroslav J. Krňanský,⁴³⁾ who was creatively involved in the Herrmann adaptation from the previous year and who was to work with Karel Anton, the director of *Into the Genteel State of Life*, in the position of co-directors of *Father Kondelík and Bridegroom Vejvara*.⁴⁴⁾ Horký also, according to available information, acted as a company script editor, who supervised the conception of films carried out by Elekta-Journal and provided comments on the developing screenplays, which the hired screenwriters were to incorporate into the scripts.⁴⁵⁾

Furthermore, it is likely that Anton, who, in addition to his directorial position, was integrated into the corporate structures of Elekta-Journal,⁴⁶⁾ had a say in the form of the

41) Jan Trnka, "Dobry scénarista Josef Neuberger: Procesy psaní a vývoje scénáře v české kinematografii 1919–1965" (Unpublished PhD dissertation, Masaryk University, 2018), 56.

42) Although this section mainly focuses on the role of screenwriters, its objective is not to foreground their creativity at the expense of other SIWG members. This contrasts with papers utilizing the "restorative approach" in the historiography of screenwriting, as observed by Steven Maras. Instead, it avoids this fallacy by focusing on the complex interplay of interests and decisions among all parties, including the novelist and film companies, whose legal authority over the screen idea is emphasized. See Steven Maras, "Some attitudes and trajectories in screenwriting research," *Journal of Screenwriting* 2, no. 2 (2011), 276–277.

43) Trnka, "Dobry scénarista Josef Neuberger," 56.

44) Anon., "Režisér filmu 'Vdávky Nanyňky Kulichovy,'" *Kino* 1, no. 1 (1926), 5.

45) Trnka, "Dobry scénarista Josef Neuberger," 56.

46) That was probably due to Anton's close contacts with Oskar Kosek, an influential local cinema owner and one of the managers at the powerful local production company Elektafilm. Kosek's business operations extended to the filmmaker's previous projects, and he allegedly provided capital necessary for the founding of Elekta-Journal. Kolár, interview by Brož, Štábla, Frída, Bartošek, and Zvoniček; Michaela Storchová, "KAREL SMRŽ, filmový novinář," *Panoráma* 7, no. 1 (1980), 56.

screenplay. Nor can it be ruled out that the screenwriters had to defend the results of their work before Julius Schmitt, the leading figure of Biografia, who initiated the *Father Kondelík and Bridegroom Vejvara* project and who later regularly realized his own screenwriting ambitions.⁴⁷⁾ Apart from that, Herrmann contractually reserved the privilege of artistic authorization and the right of veto, through which he ensured that he also had a say with regard to the form of the screen idea and could force the screenwriters to make greater or lesser changes if the screenplay went in directions other than those desired by the novelist.⁴⁸⁾ The explanation of the interplay of work and creative relationships and/or priorities among individual members of the complex SIWG is further complicated by the unofficial nature of Neuberg's involvement in the screenwriting process. As Wasserman's apprentice, Neuberg worked on the script uncredited, undergoing creative training under his master and learning the craft of screenwriting from him.⁴⁹⁾ Historical evidence thus demonstrates that the degree of acknowledged screenwriting authorship was, despite documented individual creative involvement and participation in the development of the given screen idea, primarily a result of the hierarchy and distribution of power both on the official level between (a) contractual partners, (b) the corporate client and the service contractor, and (c) employers and employees, as well as in informal relationships among the collaborators.

Although the screenwriters held, from an employment perspective, the status of service providers under a work-for-hire arrangement in the SIWG,⁵⁰⁾ with their work subordinate to corporate interests or the instructions of individuals with a higher degree of allocation of decision-making privileges or artistic autonomy, the process of writing and the shape of the screen idea were molded by their indispensable and irreplaceable creative know-how within the context of the SIWG. The nature of their creativity was evident in a series of problem-solving innovations related to both storytelling and style as they adapted the logic of written text to the specifics of film media. The practices they employed stemmed from their familiarity with aesthetic conventions, their absorption of reliable screenwriting techniques, and their knowledge of traditions in which the adaptations of local popular novels were culturally rooted.

Considering the storytelling, the screenwriters essentially respected the design of Herrmann's novel and the order of the narratively most important events associated with the pattern of Vejvara's courtship of Kondelík's daughter. However, the basic structural principle they followed in the narrative dimension of the screen idea was driven by knowledge

47) Trnka, "Dobry scénarista Josef Neuberg," 118–123.

48) Wasserman even recounted that he and Krňanský visited Herrmann several times during his "office hours" while working on the script, and Herrmann consulted with them on their screenwriting ideas. "Ignát Herrmann jako filmový autor," sign. III. b) 1), inv. č. 236, k. 3, fond Wasserman Václav, NFA, Prague, Czech Republic.

49) Trnka, "Dobry scénarista Josef Neuberg," 56.

50) Despite Trnka's statement of a long-term employment contract between Wasserman and Elekta-Journal, Wasserman's in-house screenwriting role at the company lasted only eight weeks, involving just two film projects. Since this temporary, project-based engagement aligns with standard temporary hiring practices for freelance screenwriters, I consider it almost a typical work-for-hire arrangement on a corporate commission.

Ibid., 55–63.

of the technological limitations of local movie theatres, which was a characteristic symptom of Czech film culture and which Czech screenwriters had long considered for innovative work with rhythm, information distribution, causality, and spatiotemporal relationships. Since domestic cinemas were equipped with only one projector, and there were necessary technical breaks between individual film reels during screenings, screenwriters (as in other European film industries) from the late 1910s onwards, conventionally designed their scripts into narrative acts (also called “parts”) that corresponded to the length of the reels.⁵¹⁾

Following the convention of dividing a story into such story units can also be traced in the adaptation work of Wasserman and Neuberg, who transformed selected chapters from the novel into screenplay segments, equivalent to a film reel in length.⁵²⁾ Consequently, the screenwriters sustained a characteristic feature of Herrmann’s novel, which they further amplified through their craft-based work with narrative acts. This choice led to a highly episodic storytelling, which was typical of the local domestic production of that time.⁵³⁾ As a result, they did not shift the plot’s construction towards a causally coherent form following the example of international norms, but on the contrary, by loosening the relationships between the reels, they followed the local traditions of telling stories and the portrayal of fictional characters.

This approach to solving the adaptation problem under the outlined technological conditions led to concentrating the action and characters around a central situation or event — for example, one act is entirely dedicated to the independent segment of Kondelík and Vejvara’s tourist trip, which is broken down into a series of comic episodes resulting from the fact that these characters get lost. However, this situation is completely resolved within the space of the given reel, and the next part establishes a new episodic thread connected with a completely different type of event. The screenwriting creativity, therefore, consisted in constructing an internal narrative structure for each reel separately, the dynamics of which were derived from temporary plotlines, which then escalated and reached their own resolution within the expected timeframe of the film reel. Moreover, this writing method allowed the screenwriters to organically incorporate gags and other visual attractions into the narrative — elements that did not directly develop the central plot — and to strategically plan audience reactions at the climax of each episode, such as building suspense or stimulating spectators’ curiosity. Correspondingly, the screenwriters needed to be innovative, either elaborating on condensed situations from the novel or eliminating certain novel features such as environmental or atmospheric descriptions in order to translate Herrmann’s book into effective cinematic storytelling.⁵⁴⁾

Stylistically, Wasserman and Neuberg anticipated the functions of *mise-en-scène*, editing, and framing in service of the narrative. Beyond materializing comic elements rooted in local grotesque and cabaret traditions, the screenwriters frequently suggested using close-ups to emphasize key gestures or objects, highlighting important set-design ele-

51) Martin Kos, “Reel by reel: Jan Stanislav Kolár’s poetics in the context of transition to feature-length format in Czech silent cinema,” *Journal of Screenwriting* 10, no. 3 (2019), 280–281.

52) Jan Trnka, *Psát pro film: Dobrý scénář a scenárista 20.–50. let* (Praha: Národní filmový archiv, 2025), 373–380.

53) Kokeš, “Česká kinematografie jako regionální poetika,” 37.

54) Trnka, “Dobrý scenárista Josef Neuberg,” 63.

ments, and employing crosscutting to direct audience attention and distribute information. On the other hand, their authorial contributions proved essential in adapting the source material to the demands of the film medium, as the creative solutions fundamental to the film's central idea are readily located within their script. Ultimately, their writing choices opened up space for other specific effects stemming from the performative aspects of the actors, the strengthening of gender or generational contrasts between characters, the development of their individual characteristics through the costumes used, and the enhancement of the features of the idyllic literature associated with the family environment, the tranquil setting of Prague and its picturesque surroundings.

The screenwriters, therefore, exercised a number of authorial decisions, which demonstrably anticipated particular stylistic techniques, visualized the narrative action and characters' behavior across individual scenes, and divided the plot into larger blocks according to the logic of film reels. As a result, they visibly shaped the narrative structure of the adaptation and utilized causality and spatiotemporal relations as cinematic means to contribute to its coherence. Nevertheless, their creativity was subject, within the context of copyright and their work-for-hire employment status, to the authority of the novelist, who, in the project SIWG's configuration held an authorial position partially parallel to that of Renaissance masters in painting. Renaissance masters oversaw the creative process undertaken by their workshops, adding final touches to ensure stylistic unity and maintain the design's tone, their signature serving primarily as a form of product authentication.⁵⁵⁾ Analogous to this model, Herrmann contractually secured his authority over the film in key creative questions, and during completion, personally adjusted the form of the intertitles, ensuring their literary quality met his artistic demands,⁵⁶⁾ before he finally decided to guarantee the adaptation and its value.

This type of creative organization and hierarchy was also evident in the actions of Biografia, which initiated the project and commissioned the filmmakers to produce the picture. Biografia practically denied the screenwriters access to claim authorial credit, concentrating it exclusively into the single hands of the novelist, who thus fulfilled the *author function* as introduced by Michel Foucault.⁵⁷⁾ The company systematically foregrounded Herrmann's name as an effective means in paratexts to declare and promote the product's creative coherence and artistic value, while addressing cinema-goers as well as cinema owners,⁵⁸⁾ and to distinguish *Father Kondelík and Bridegroom Vejvara* from other films on the market.

55) Anabel Thomas, *The Painter's Practice in Renaissance Tuscany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1–4; Peter Burke, "The Italian Artist and his Roles," in *History of Italian Art*, ed. Peter Burke, trans. Ellen Bianchini and Claire Dorey, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 3.

56) Mocná, "Kondelík a 'kondelíkovština,'" 50.

57) Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?," *Screen* 20, no. 1 (1979), 19–23.

58) *Český filmový svět* 4, no. 3 (1926), 14 [Advertisement for Father Kondelík and Bridegroom Vejvara]; *Kino* 1, no. 4 (1926), [6f–6g], [Advertisement for Father Kondelík and Bridegroom Vejvara]; *Zpravodaj Zemského svazu kinematografů v Čechách* 6, no. 3 (1926), 8 [Advertisement for films distributed by Biografia in 1926–1927 season].

Conclusion

The fact that the screenwriters were entirely overshadowed by Herrmann in the promotional discourse, despite their numerous innovations and creative decisions regarding the film's narration and style, eloquently highlights the everyday reality of creative work for Czech screenwriters. It also amplifies the general problems they faced when adapting popular local literature. The adaptation project's nature and dynamics were primarily driven by Biografia's business needs and the company clearly prioritized the novelist's name as a stronger marketing asset when promoting the product, linking it to their distribution catalog and corporate brand. Consequently, they diminished the screenwriters' credit in paratexts and completely reframed the communication of authorship. This created a notable tension and a series of frictions, as individual and collective creativity and authorship frequently clashed with business logic and corporate authority. Nevertheless, Biografia, as the principal employer in a work-for-hire model, had the contractual right to appropriate the products of creative or intellectual labor and distribute authority over them asymmetrically as they saw fit, by virtue of their copyright ownership. Therefore, this enabled the company to alienate the screenwriters from any authorship privileges after the script was finished, due to their status as mere craft service providers in the project's hierarchy of power. In contrast, Herrmann's stronger partnership position with the distributor, secured through a formal contract for the film rights to *Father Kondelík* and *Bridegroom Vejvara*, allowed him to enjoy the public image of the author.

The evidence documenting the development of *Father Kondelík* and *Bridegroom Vejvara* provides an excellent opportunity to understand how the increasing trend of adapting popular local novels or plays for the screen affected Czech screenwriters' daily lives, creative conditions and collaborations, personal and group styles, and professional status vis-à-vis the regional industrial structures. In the still decentralized, precarious, and project-based Czech production environment of the late 1920s, screenwriting labor was not connected to long-term in-house employment and individual negotiations with corporate commissioners were the norm. This, therefore, meant an almost constant flow of work opportunities for domestic screenwriters within the constraints of the regional cinema. As a result, this benefited Czech screenwriters by offering more stable working conditions, supporting craft and aesthetic standards, and enabling the regular training of new writers. Nevertheless, the central case study suggests that screenwriters working with this kind of literature had significantly low bargaining power regarding authorship. A wide range of their creative options was often limited by copyright/ownership issues and work-for-hire employment regimes, while the artistic privileges and final authorization were contractually granted to more powerful members of the SIWGs. These practices resulted in the downplaying of screenwriters' contributions, damage to their reputation within the film community, and their marginalization in public discourse. Consequently, despite their crucial craft knowledge and aesthetic qualifications, screenwriters became nearly invisible film workers, while corporate brands and other artistic figures were promoted.

This article argues that claiming authorship in Czech silent cinema was not simply a matter of originality or creativity, but was deeply intertwined with the distribution of responsibilities, allocation of privileges, and competition for prestige within established au-

thorial clusters. The analysis of the screenwriting process for *Father Kondelík and Bridegroom Vejvara* illuminates crucial conditions and practices connected to the production trend that was apparently common across regional European cinemas in the 1920s, as research on Finnish, Romanian, and Hungarian silent film cultures has demonstrated.⁵⁹⁾ The presented findings, therefore, offer a starting point for regional screenwriting studies, particularly in examining screenwriting creativity, labor models, aesthetic conventions, and collaborative and competitive dynamics with regard to film production that were typical for local environments.

In this respect, the case of *Father Kondelík and Bridegroom Vejvara* suggests that comparative analyses of screenwriting practices in this period can greatly benefit from focusing on the issues of contracts, copyright arrangements, product ownership, and employment regimes that affected screenwriters adapting local popular literature and the forms of their work. Studying these legal and corporate frameworks, which significantly conditioned screenwriters' artistic choices and the working patterns of their employment, can help us to rethink the roots and nature of screenwriting individual decisions and techniques, the position and daily routines of screenwriters within local production cultures, the division and management of creative labor, and the public as well as industrial functions of authorship. Exploring these frameworks and aspects of creative work not only contributes to understanding the historical configurations of screenwriting and filmmaking creativity but also remains highly relevant. Conditions related to copyright, contractual relationships, and employment regimes play a crucial role in understanding the workings of contemporary production cultures, as demonstrated by recent discussions on authorship and authority in media industries of both global and local scope.⁶⁰⁾ Ultimately, by examining the challenges faced by Czech screenwriters, this paper calls for new approaches to historical research and innovative methodological frameworks in the study of regional creativity, opening up crucial avenues for future investigation into the historiography of silent screenwriting.

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59) John Cunningham, *Hungarian Cinema: From Coffee House to Multiplex* (London: Wallflower Press, 2004), 27; Dominique Nasta, "Romanian Silent Films from the 20s and the European Aesthetic Canon: Rhetorical Figures and Cognitive Markers," *Ekphrasis* 11, no. 2 (2018), 149; Jaakko Seppälä, "Finnish Film Style in the Silent Era," in *Finnish Cinema: A Transnational Enterprise*, ed. Henry Bacon (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 56.

60) Taylor Elizabeth Costello, "'A Sea of Red Ink and Broken Dreams': Copyright, Gatekeeping, and the Curtailing of Creativity and Creators' Rights in the Age of Streaming" (Unpublished MA thesis, Philadelphia, Temple University, 2025), 44–75; Petr Szczepanik et al., *Studie vývoje českého hraného kinematografického díla* (Praha: Státní fond kinematografie, 2015), 276–278; Petr Szczepanik, *Screen Industries in East-Central Europe* (London: BFI, 2021), 71.

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- White Paradise* (Bílý ráj; Karel Lamač, 1924)

Biography

Martin Kos is an independent researcher with a PhD degree in Theatre and Cinema Studies from Masaryk University, Brno. His main research interests concern screenwriting in the Czech silent cinema along with studies of regional creativity, paratextuality, and film authorship. As a researcher, he participated in a research project examining the history of film culture in Zlín and contributed to a volume of essays focused on film studios and film festivals located in this city. He publishes his research outcomes in the Czech peer-reviewed film studies journal *Illuminace*, and his articles on the Czech screenwriting practice in the silent era were published in the special issues of *Journal of Screenwriting and Studies in Eastern European Cinema*.

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Talking to You

Addressing the Viewer in Virtual Reality Narratives

Abstract

A recurring feature of virtual reality (VR) narratives, in addition to the ‘spatialized storytelling’ approach that has been extensively discussed in recent screenwriting literature, is the less examined but frequent use of both fictionalized address of a textual narratee/character and direct address of the viewer. This article investigates the different ways in which such forms of address might be used to script aspects of VR experience such as presence, emotional engagement and empathy. It focuses, in particular, on the ways in which they might serve to highlight and creatively exploit the tension between immersion and self-consciousness in the viewer’s experience. Drawing on analysis of VR narratives and on discussions with the writers/directors of these narratives, it employs the concepts of metalepsis and double deixis to offer new insights into this particular feature of VR storytelling.

Keywords

screenwriting studies, scripting, narrative, Virtual Reality, VR, second-person narration, narrative *you*, direct address, pronouns of address

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Introduction

Virtual Reality (VR) narratives are a developing form of content, which offer the viewer a simulated experience of being inside a world, rather than watching a story play out on a screen. Scholarship and practice in this area is multidisciplinary. My own inquiry, however, is situated within the field of screenwriting studies, which might be defined as “concerned with studying the screenwriting process [...] and the screenplay text (in all its

manifestations).¹¹⁾ This article focuses on the use of pronouns of address in the scripting of VR narratives, as part of a wider consideration of their role in VR narrative design.

Within screenwriting studies, discussions of scripting VR experiences more often concern VR narratives than VR games. Such narratives, which are strongly underpinned by cinematic conventions and concerned minimally, if at all, with gameplay, are sometimes, but not exclusively, referred to as cinematic virtual reality narratives (CVR).²⁾ Within these discussions, the centrality of *spatialized narrative* has been emphasized,³⁾ pointing to the necessity of scripting a space and the viewer's encounter with it, rather than simply telling a story. Significant attention has also been paid to the implications of particular roles assumed by the viewer within the story,⁴⁾ including those of "silent witness, participant or protagonist."⁵⁾ It has been acknowledged, however, that in all these roles the viewer has a first-person experience of the world in which the story takes place.⁶⁾

Within game studies, this first-person positioning of the viewer has been equated to the way that second-person narration (i.e. the address of a narrative *you*) within literary fiction and other prose texts positions the reader/narratee⁷⁾ in relation to the diegesis.⁸⁾ Harrigan and Wardrip-Fruin, suggest that the function of both the first-person perspective of game experiences and the "textual second person"⁹⁾ is "simulated immediacy."¹⁰⁾ Other scholars, meanwhile, have pointed to different effects. Jill Walker Rettberg (as Jill

1) Rosamund Davies, Paolo Russo, and Claus Tieber, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Screenwriting Studies* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 2.

2) Kath Dooley, *Cinematic Virtual Reality: A Critical Study of 21st Century Approaches and Practice* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

3) See e.g. *ibid.*; Miriam Ross and Alex Munt, "Cinematic virtual reality: Towards the spatialized screenplay," *Journal of Screenwriting* 9, no. 2 (2018), 191–209; Joakim Vindenes and Lars Nyre, "Prototyping first-person viewer positions for VR narratives with storyboards and pilot productions," *Journal of Screenwriting* 14, no. 3 (2023), 251–269.

4) See e.g. Mads Larsen, "Virtual sidekick: Second-person POV in narrative VR," *Journal of Screenwriting* 9, no. 1 (2018), 73–83; Katy Morrison, "Scripting the silhouette: Writing around the participant in interactive virtual reality experiences," *Journal of Screenwriting* 14, no. 3 (2023), 271–287; Cristina Ruiz-Poveda Vera and Julia Sabina Gutierrez, "The blurred lines between spectator and character: Narrative integration of the user in cinematic virtual reality," *L'Atalante: Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, no. 35 (2023), 109–124; Simon Weaving, "The Nature of Narration in Cinematic Virtual Reality," in *Screenwriting for Virtual Reality*, eds. Kath Dooley and Alex Munt (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024).

5) Kath Dooley, "A question of proximity: Exploring a new screen grammar for 360-degree cinematic virtual reality," *Media Practice and Education* 21, no. 2 (2020), 82.

6) See e.g. Dooley, *Cinematic Virtual Reality*.

7) The narratological term 'narratee,' as defined by Wolf Schmid, designates "the fictive entity to which the narrator directs his narration." Peter Hühn, John Pier, Wolf Schmid, and Jörg Schönert, eds., "Narratee," *the living handbook of narratology*, accessed March 7, 2025, <http://lhn.sub.uni-hamburg.de/index.php/Narratee>.html. Although the narratee is distinguished from the actual reader in that they are, together with the textual narrator, a product of the text, the narrator and the narratee constitute a "fundamental link and relay between real author and real reader" (Gerald Prince, "Reader," *the living handbook of narratology*, June 8, 2011, accessed March 7, 2025, <https://www-archiv.fdm.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/node/52.html>). Since the narratee is the entity to whom the narrator is telling the story, the reader tends to identify closely with the narratee.

8) See e.g. Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin, eds., *Second Person: Role-Playing and Story in Games and Playable Media* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2010); Jill Walker, "Do you think you're part of this? Digital texts and the second person address," in *Cybertext Yearbook* (Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä, 2001), 34–51.

9) Harrigan and Wardrip-Fruin, eds., *Second Person*, xiv.

10) *Ibid.*

Walker) suggests for instance that the “feeling of being part of the text,”¹¹⁾ engendered in the reader by the narrative *you*, might be considered a form of “forced participation,”¹²⁾ which she likens to the conventions of contemporary capitalist culture:

Where looking into your eyes, pretending to see *you* rather than yet another customer is the way to ensure a shop’s (or a book’s or a game’s) existence. Where stories, whether in tabloids, hypertext fictions or games, must seem to be about *you*.¹³⁾

Ensslin and Bell discuss similar concerns in their analysis of an interactive digital fiction that “problematizes neoliberalist subjection to commodity capitalism.”¹⁴⁾

Within screenwriting studies, meanwhile, although second-person narration has been touched upon,¹⁵⁾ the discussion has not, to date, been much expanded, and it is my aim within this article to do so. Drawing on theorizations and analyses of the use of second-person narration within literary theory, games, interactive digital fiction, and contemporary theatre, and on concepts of presence and immersion, I seek to understand how these insights might relate specifically to VR narratives that are not games, and which tend to be informed by cinema conventions. I discuss two examples of VR narratives devised and produced by contemporary theatre companies, which, I argue, provide illuminating case studies of the potential uses of second-person narration, with regard to the positioning of the viewer in relation to the story and the story world in VR narratives.

Immersion and Presence

The concept of immersion is central to much discussion of both VR experiences and videogames,¹⁶⁾ as well as to immersive theatre, which seeks to immerse an audience “in an alternative medium where all the senses are engaged [...] placing the audience at the heart of the work.”¹⁷⁾ Equally, reading a novel can also be understood to be a deeply immersive experience. According to narratologist Marie-Laure Ryan, the *a priori* for such immersion is that the reader mentally relocates from the time and place in which they find themselves to the imaginary timespace of the story¹⁸⁾. This imaginative leap, or deictic shift, as it is

11) Walker, “Do you think you’re part of this?” 48.

12) *Ibid.*, 45.

13) *Ibid.*, 47.

14) Astric Ensslin and Alice Bell, “Click = Kill’: Textual You in Ludic Digital Fiction,” *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies*, no. 4 (2012), 70.

15) See e.g. Larsen, “Virtual sidekick,” Simon Weaving, “Evoke, don’t show: Narration in cinematic virtual reality and the making of *Entangled*,” *Virtual Creativity: XR and Creativity: Transformative Technologies for Good* 11, no. 1 (2021), 147–162.

16) See e.g. Gordon Calleja, *In-Game: From Immersion to Incorporation* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2011).

17) Josephine Machon, *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 22.

18) Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2003).

termed within narratology, has become an integral and naturalized process through which audiences engage with narratives. Narrative techniques, such as suspense, dramatic tension, and emotional identification with characters, are employed to encourage the narrative receiver to accomplish this imaginary transportation from their own reality to within the diegesis.

‘Immersion’ is also often used interchangeably with other words such as ‘presence’ and indeed definitions of both terms overlap, differ and sometimes disagree, including in the field of cognitive psychology, from which much of the discussion either originates or draws. This is likely due to the range of contexts to which both notions may be applied, as well as to the close links between them. With regard to ‘immersion,’ the term may be used to refer to audience engagement in very different forms of media with different affordances, as well as to intense states of concentration, absorption or ‘flow’¹⁹⁾ in a variety of tasks. The concept of presence, meanwhile, is used to refer both to real life situations, in which one is physically present, and to situations of ‘telepresence,’ such as in VR experiences, in which the experiencing subject has the feeling of being present in one environment, while actually being physically located in another²⁰⁾.

One disagreement relates to whether ‘immersion’ is a property of a system or technological apparatus, as proposed by Mel Slater and others²¹⁾, or whether it is a psychological state, a “perception of being enveloped” as proposed by Witmer and Singer²²⁾. Slater understands a system’s immersive capacity to consist in its ability to deliver a convincing alternative environment to reality, whether this be through a VR headset or a quadraphonic sound system. This proposition might be extended to the experience of immersion in a novel or a film, if the narrative techniques these deploy are understood to constitute a system. However, it seems less applicable to the experience of immersion in a task such as writing, drawing or solving a problem.

Slater’s concept of immersion is closely tied to his understanding of (tele)presence as “a ‘response’ to a system of a certain level of immersion,”²³⁾ wherein people behave as if they are in an equivalent real-life situation. Indeed, much discussion of immersion in cognitive psychology is closely linked to the concept of (tele)presence and many definitions of presence have resulted, as discussed by Lombard and Ditton in their influential survey and analysis, in which they also produced their own definition of presence as “the perceptual illusion of nonmediation.”²⁴⁾

19) Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990).

20) For further discussion of this see e.g. Marvin Minsky, “Telepresence,” *Omni Magazine*, (June 1980); Calleja, *In-Game*; Matthew Lombard and Theresa Ditton, “At the Heart of It All: The Concept of Presence,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 3, no. 2 (1997).

21) See e.g. Mel Slater and Sylvia Wilbur, “A Framework for Immersive Virtual Environments (FIVE): Speculations on the Role of Presence in Virtual Environments,” *Presence: Teleoperators and Virtual Environments* 6, no. 6 (1997) 603–616; Mel Slater, “A Note on Presence Terminology,” *ResearchGate*, January 2003, accessed August 7, 2025, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242608507_A_Note_on_Presence_Terminology; Mel Slater, “Immersion and the Illusion of Presence in Virtual Reality,” *British Journal of Psychology* 109, no. 3 (2018), 431–433.

22) Bob G. Witmer and Michael J. Singer, “Measuring Presence in Virtual Environments: A Presence Questionnaire,” *Presence* 7, no. 3 (1998), 225.

23) Slater, “A Note on Presence Terminology,” 3.

24) Lombard and Ditton, “At the Heart of It All: The Concept of Presence.”

However, the definition of presence that I want to draw on here is the sense of “being in a world that exists outside the self.”²⁵⁾ Not only does this sense of presence stem from close attention to the external environment, it also involves a sense of self as both distinct from and connected to that environment.²⁶⁾ This definition, which points to a level of self-awareness and proprioception, most effectively delineates both a relationship to and a distinctness from the notion of immersion that I am working with here. This notion encompasses both immersion as absorption, wherein the reader/spectator/participant is engaged “fully in terms of concentration, imagination, action and interest,”²⁷⁾ and immersion as transportation, wherein they are “imaginatively and scenographically reoriented in another place.”²⁸⁾ I understand both immersion and presence to be distributed processes that happen between people and the texts/systems/worlds they engage with, rather than residing wholly in one or the other.

Immersion and Presence in VR Narrative Design

We can certainly recognize some shared cross media techniques of immersion. The narrative immersion techniques of suspense, dramatic tension and emotional identification with characters, for instance, discussed by Ryan with regard to the novel²⁹⁾, were core to the theatre before the novel emerged as a genre, and have become central to film and television drama. However, when it comes to a more detailed analysis of precise techniques and effects, we can identify many that are medium specific. The way in which a player may become immersed in a game through “kinesthetic involvement”³⁰⁾ is not open to the reader of a novel, for example. Nor is the visual language of shot composition, editing, mise en scène, sound etc., which can give the film or television spectator the sense of being transported into a scene, directly available to the novelist, who may in their turn employ textual immersion techniques that are untranslatable to the screen.

It is nevertheless important to recognise that the distinctive affordances that may characterise one particular medium need not necessarily preclude the use of immersive techniques that are typically deployed in other media. It is possible to expand the immersive possibilities of one medium by applying or adapting the techniques that are used in another.

This tension between recognizing medium specificity and drawing on techniques from other media is exemplified in much of the discussion of VR narratives within screenwriting studies, which is often concerned with developing strategies for VR narrative design. Scholars have extensively debated the extent to which both narrative immersion techniques common to theatre, film and television drama — such as suspense, dramatic ten-

25) Giuseppe Riva et al., “Affective interactions using virtual reality: The link between presence and emotions,” in Kat Dooley, *Cinematic Virtual Reality: A Critical Study of 21st Century Approaches and Practices* (New York: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 32, 42.

26) Ingvar Tjostheim and John Waterworth, *The Psychosocial Reality of Digital Travel: Being in Virtual Places* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 62.

27) Machon, *Immersive Theatres*, 62.

28) Ibid., 63.

29) Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*.

30) Calleja, *In-Game*, 54.

sion, character identification — and the specific visual language of cinema, can be combined with the design of a meaningful spatial encounter for the viewer within a virtual world.³¹⁾ Larsen³²⁾ and Vera and Gutierrez,³³⁾ for instance, suggest that the development of a central character arc, which underpins much mainstream drama, is tricky to import into a VR narrative, because the voyeuristic observer position assumed by the screen spectator is not the same as the viewer/participant's embodied sense of presence in a VR world. If the viewer takes up the silent witness (passive observer) position with regard to what in games would be called a non-player character, they may feel insufficiently engaged as a bystander to the character's journey, without the use of the cinematic language of shot composition and montage to direct their attention and promote their identification. To employ such language would, however, interfere with the viewer's sense of their own embodied presence and freedom to look wherever they want within the virtual world, which are the unique properties of the medium.³⁴⁾

On the other hand, the positioning of the viewer/participant as a first-person protagonist can be equally problematic. In many VR narratives, contrary to the forms of agency accorded to the first-person player of a videogame, the first-person protagonist is consigned to a passive role in which things happen to them, without their being able to influence events, beyond whatever emotional response they might have internally.³⁵⁾ Larsen refers to this position as “catatonic mode.”³⁶⁾ Furthermore, if the viewer is assuming the POV of a defined character, rather than a virtual version of themselves, their sense of their own powerlessness and passivity as a viewer can interfere with their ability to identify with this protagonist, into whose virtual body they have been transported. This passivity is a more extreme version of the “forced participation” alluded to by Walker,³⁷⁾ with regard to the way in which interactive texts script the reader/player's actions as *you*. The passive first-person protagonist of many VR narratives is denied even the illusion of agency.

Both the silent witness and the protagonist positions, Larsen proposes, fail to incorporate within the viewer's narrative experience the intense sense of embodied presence that results from VR's first-person spatial immersion effect. This sense of presence, he argues, prompts the viewer to expect interactivity and kinetic agency within the virtual world, something they do not expect from a cinema, television or reading experience. When such agency is lacking, this can induce feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction, negatively affecting the viewer's sense of both narrative and spatial immersion.

Theories and practices developed for videogames, within which first-person POV protagonists are numerous and interactively engaged in gameplay, world exploration and to

31) See e.g. Dooley, *Cinematic Virtual Reality*; Larsen, “Virtual sidekick;” Ross and Munt, “Cinematic virtual reality;” Vindenes and Nyre, “Prototyping first-person viewer positions for VR narratives with storyboards and pilot productions;” Weaving, “Evoke, don't show.”

32) Larsen, “Virtual sidekick.”

33) Vera and Gutierrez, “The blurred lines between spectator and character.”

34) Dooley, *Cinematic Virtual Reality*; Weaving, “Evoke, don't show;” Weaving, “The Nature of Narration in Cinematic Virtual Reality.”

35) This is particular true of VR narratives shot on 360 video, which tend to offer limited interactivity compared to that offered by VR environments constructed through real-time simulation.

36) Larsen, “Virtual sidekick,” 75.

37) Walker, “Do you think you're part of this?”

some extent narrative construction, have much to offer here, regarding the role of interactivity in promoting immersion. However, the concern for many CVR creators is that the level of agency bestowed on a first-person protagonist in games is incompatible with the kind of tightly crafted narrative they want to employ.³⁸⁾ Larsen nevertheless seems to draw on game design in his proposal of the sidekick character³⁹⁾ as the solution to the problem of developing coherent and engaging character arcs in VR narratives. VR narratives that engage the viewer/participant as sidekick, such as *The Imaginary Friend* (Steye Hallema 2023), in which the viewer/participant plays the titular role to the eight year old protagonist, incorporate a measure of scripted interactivity. The viewer/participant is repeatedly called on by the protagonist for help or advice, and, in doing so, seems to play a role in advancing and determining the narrative.

Screen media and screenwriting scholars have also proposed other solutions to the positioning of the viewer. Vera and Gutierrez, for instance, suggest making the first-person protagonist's limited agency the central premise of the narrative. Taking the example of the VR narrative *The Baby's Cry* (El llanto del bebé; Jorge Blein, 2017), they explain that it positions the viewer in the first-person protagonist position of a placid baby, who never cries and who is put by its mischievous/diabolic siblings in extreme situations, in order to provoke it to finally cry. In this example, they argue, the viewer's passivity aids their immersion, because it is motivated by entering the subject position of the helpless baby. The viewer's phenomenological experience of the virtual environment thus promotes emotional engagement with the events of the narrative, aligning narrative and spatial immersion.

Such narrative strategies aim to naturalize the viewer's position within the diegesis, in order to increase both narrative and spatial immersion. As such, they also aim to minimize the viewer's sense of ontological boundary transgression. As Vera and Gutierrez put it "In cinema the spectator agrees to believe in the diegesis while in CVR the user is placed within it."⁴⁰⁾ While this induces a heightened sense of presence within the virtual environment, they argue, it can simultaneously provoke self-consciousness, since, even while responding to the sensory stimuli they are receiving that locate them in another 3D environment, the viewer remains aware of their actual location in a different physical reality. This means that a viewer's experience of VR may not always or only be an uncomplicated sense of 'being there.' This may be accompanied or even outweighed by the uncanny sensation of "being somewhere you are not."⁴¹⁾

38) Larsen, "Virtual sidekick."

39) Confusingly for the argument forwarded in this article, Larsen defines this sidekick position as a second-person POV because it "views the world near the action, such that the reader/viewer/participant shares the same space as the main character" (ibid., 79), differentiating it from the first-person perspective of the viewer/protagonist. This definition does not, however, accord with the notion of second person address that I am using here.

40) Vera and Gutierrez, "The blurred lines between spectator and character," 112.

41) Andrews and Roberts, cited in Morrison, "Scripting the silhouette," 282.

Second Person Narration, Pronouns of Address and Metalepsis in Fiction, 2D and 3D Audiovisual Narratives

Whether the narratee position within a VR narrative is as protagonist, sidekick or silent witness, the viewer can be understood to always, at some level, inhabit a first-person perspective. Not only do they take up an embodied position inside the story world, but the events that they participate in or witness are focalized either wholly or partly through this position.⁴²⁾ Vera and Gutierrez point out, furthermore, that it is the norm, rather than the exception for categories such as character, focalizer, viewer and narratee to overlap in VR narratives.⁴³⁾ As raised in the introduction, this first-person positioning of the viewer/reader, while not identical, can be understood to correspond in many respects to the way that second-person address within literary fiction and other prose texts positions the reader. I want now to examine more closely how this works within such texts, before bringing these insights back to the discussion of VR narrative.

Second-person narration in prose fiction involves the narrator's use of the narrative *you*, which positions the narratee within the story's diegesis as I/me. The opening of *The Crimson Petal and the White*, in which the narrator invites the narratee to follow them into the notorious London slum of St Giles, offers an example:

When I first caught your eye and you decided to come with me, you were probably thinking you would simply arrive and make yourself at home. Now that you are actually here, the air is bitterly cold, and you find yourself being led along in complete darkness.⁴⁴⁾

While the narrator never identifies themselves, phrases such as “when I first caught your eye” suggest they are, like the novel's protagonist, a sex worker, an intradiegetic narrator addressing a narratee-client character. At the same time, the choice of words throughout indicates a double meaning, in which the relationship between client and sex worker is made analogous to that of reader and book: “when you first picked me up you were hoping I would satisfy all the desires you're too shy to name.”⁴⁵⁾ This prompts the reader to understand the *you* that is addressed to include their personal identity as reader, prompting them to reflect on their own act of reading.

As narratologist Monica Fludernik points out, the term second-person narration (and by extension the narrative *you*) is actually something of a misnomer. What defines this kind of narration, in fact, is that it employs a pronoun of address,⁴⁶⁾ which will vary according to the language used and might actually be a third-person pronoun (in the polite forms of Italian or German for example). This use of an address pronoun is characterized

42) Dooley, *Cinematic Virtual Reality*.

43) Vera and Gutierrez, “The blurred lines between spectator and character.”

44) Michel Faber, *The Crimson Petal and The White* (London: Canongate, 2003), 1.

45) Ibid.

46) Monika Fludernik, “Second Person Fiction: Narrative ‘You’ As Addressee And/Or Protagonist,” *AAA: Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 18, no. 2 (1993), 217–247.

by “the indeterminacy of the addressee function by which the current reader finds herself addressed but cannot immediately delimit the reference to one specific narrative level.”⁴⁷⁾ In other words, the use of a pronoun of address can be variously interpreted. It might be understood as directed at a narratee/character within the diegesis or equally to the audience outside it. Often it works to ambiguate the distinction between the two, as in the Faber extract above. David Herman uses the term “double deixis”⁴⁸⁾ to describe such cases, where the pronoun of address seems to hover somewhere between a fictionalized address of a textual narratee — often a narratee-protagonist — that exists within the story’s diegesis, and apparent direct address of the reader. In such cases, the story’s narration seems to dissolve the separation between the viewer’s subject position outside the story world, and the textual position of narratee, with which they are aligned, prompting the viewer to become conscious of their own subject position as a mediating force between these two parallel timespaces, between the fictional and the real.

The use of pronouns of address in this way constitutes a form of metalepsis, a narratological term, which designates a transgression of the boundary “between two worlds, the world in which one tells, the world of which one tells.”⁴⁹⁾ Metalepsis may occur across narrative levels within the story’s diegesis, as in the much-quoted example of a short story by Cortazar, in which a reader is attacked by a character in the novel that he is reading. It may also be produced by a breaching of the divide between extradiegetic and intradiegetic levels, on the part of the narrator and/or narratee, as in the introduction of *The Crimson Petal and the White*.

Since, as discussed earlier, narrative techniques routinely aim to prompt a deictic shift whereby the narrative receiver mentally relocates themselves to the timespace of the story, one might conclude that, at some level, all “fictional narrative is by nature metaleptic.”⁵⁰⁾ Such imaginary transportations function to increase immersion, and indeed Ryan cites second person address as a potential technique to achieve this.⁵¹⁾ However, the term ‘narrative metalepsis’ is more often employed to designate anti-immersion devices: aimed at making the narrative receiver aware of the narrative’s construction and their own positioning in relation to it: raising ontological questions with regard to representation and concepts of fiction, reality and truth.

Within drama, film and television narratives, metaleptic address of the audience is frequently referred to as breaking the fourth wall. When it comes to digital games, however, Conway has argued that, in comparison to proscenium arch theatre, film or television, the interactive dynamic between player and game “instigates a completely different relationship between product and audience,”⁵²⁾ in which “the player must be seen as both implied and implicated in the construction and composition of the experience.”⁵³⁾ This problematizes

47) Ibid., 239.

48) Ibid., 349.

49) Gérard Genette cited in John Pier, “Metalepsis,” *the living handbook of narratology*, June 11, 2011, accessed February 4, 2025, <https://www-archiv.fdm.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/node/51.html>.

50) Pier, *ibid.*

51) Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, 134.

52) Steven Conway, “A circular wall? Reformulating the fourth wall for videogames,” *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds* 2, no. 2 (2010), 146.

53) Newman cited in *ibid.*

tises the concept of the fourth wall as a clear dividing line between the diegetic and extradiegetic, when applied to games. He suggests that the interaction between player and game instigates a “magic circle,” which can expand and contract. When the circle expands, through, for instance, an address to the player’s extra game identity, or reference to a website in the real world, this can “further immerse the player, extending the immersion beyond the screen.”⁵⁴⁾

Although VR narratives may not rely on gameplay to involve the viewer in the construction of the diegesis, they do position them within the diegetic world, thus also problematising the concept of the fourth wall. Furthermore, this first-person positioning is not achieved linguistically through pronouns of address and so cannot be understood to be identical to the literary second person. Nevertheless, as we have established, it shares with the latter the ambiguous potential to both effect and impede immersion. Within such narratives, moreover, pronouns of address can be employed to both amplify and counteract such effects.

They can indeed be employed to naturalize the sense of metaleptic boundary transgression that can arise in adopting the first-person position within VR narratives, drawing the viewer into the diegesis. Such address may be to an implied viewer — positioned inside the VR interface but at a level outside the story world itself — as is often the case with onboarding instructions. However, it is very often to a narratee/character within the story, whose role the viewer is encouraged to assume in the narrative: as when the protagonist of *The Imaginary Friend* tells the viewer/narratee/imaginary friend character to *flap your wings to fly*. In another narrative, audio narration might position the viewer as protagonist, telling them *the year is 2040, you are on a mission to the planet Mars*. Pronouns of address may also be used to engage the viewer/narratee/character emotionally. A protagonist character might make a request such as *Help me find a way out! or Don't tell anyone, will you?* This fictionalized address of a character within the diegesis, through whose perspective the viewer is encouraged to experience the story, can encourage viewer immersion, in the sense of both transportation and absorption. The narrative *you* both plays on our instinctive reaction to think *me* when we hear *you*,⁵⁵⁾ encouraging the viewer to identify with the narratee/character, and invites the viewer to participate in the co-creation of the story, giving them agency within the diegesis.

As Walker points out, however, such textual exhortations can still potentially feel like a form of coercion.⁵⁶⁾ In my own experience of *The Imaginary Friend*, I was contrary enough to ignore most of the calls to help the protagonist in the role of sidekick, partly out of reluctance to take orders, and partly out of curiosity to see what would happen. I found that the story for the most part eventually continued along its scripted trajectory without my intervention. The exception was the ending, when the protagonist remained stuck at the bottom of a well, calling endlessly for help, and I was finally prevailed upon to “submit to the code”⁵⁷⁾ and save him, not wanting to experience, even fictionally, the guilt of abandoning a child to such a fate.

54) Conway, “A circular wall?,” 151.

55) Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, 138.

56) Walker, “Do you think you’re part of this?”

57) *Ibid.*, 41.

The sense of “forced participation”⁵⁸⁾ that can characterise first-person character experiences in “catatonic mode”⁵⁹⁾ can thus also be present in narrative constructions that offer the viewer more apparent agency. The narrative receiver’s sense of ‘I’ as more than and potentially resistant to the narrative ‘you’ is not automatically erased by any textual devices or the properties of any medium. The viewer/reader/participant of any text makes the choice to take up (or refuse) the position of narrative *you* in response to the prompts the text offers. The choice made, and the extent to which it is conscious, depends on how the text is constructed, what the viewer/reader/participant expects or wants from it, and how these are negotiated in the act of reading/viewing/playing.

Although the prioritising of viewer immersion and a conceptualisation of presence as immediacy and “the perceptual illusion of nonmediation”⁶⁰⁾ tend to frame viewer self-consciousness as largely undesirable in VR narratives, there is also a line of thinking which focuses on how the metaleptic potential of VR storytelling might be employed to promote reflection and criticality. Scholar-practitioner Katy Morrison, for example, taking postdramatic theatre as her reference, advocates an approach in which “the VR participant moves between modalities of experiencing and performing,”⁶¹⁾ destabilizing the division between audience and performance. In such narrative experiences, Morrison proposes, meaningful action for viewer/participants comes through their embodied engagement with the virtual environment as themselves, rather than through identification with the narrative arc of a fictional character. Rather than attempting to immerse themselves in the virtual world, they pay attention to “the affective interplay of real and virtual,”⁶²⁾ mediated through their own body, as they experience the sensation of existing in and across the real and the virtual simultaneously. The internal reflection and transformation that can result from this experience, Morrison suggests, is ultimately what provides satisfaction to the viewer.

Vera and Gutierrez, meanwhile, highlight the capacity for VR narratives to explore what they call a “multifaceted” subjectivity.⁶³⁾ Pointing to the techniques employed within the VR narrative *Travelling while Black* (Roger Ross Williams 2019),⁶⁴⁾ which prompt in the viewer as silent witness “a simultaneous sense of immersion and of Brechtian distancing,”⁶⁵⁾ they suggest that “this narrative strategy serves to convey collective experiences more accurately, as it challenges the notion of a unified individual subject [...] raises awareness about a social issue as well as about our inability to live directly through the experiences of other subjects impacted by it.”⁶⁶⁾ This chimes with Bollmer’s opposition to the notion of VR as an ‘empathy machine,’ in which a viewer can straightforwardly inhabit the perspective of another, and his counter proposition that “it is not in ‘understanding’

58) Ibid., 45.

59) Larsen, “Virtual sidekick.”

60) Lombard and Ditton, “At the Heart of It All.”

61) Morrison, “Scripting the silhouette.”

62) Ibid., 283.

63) Vera and Gutierrez, “The blurred lines between spectator and character,” 118.

64) A VR documentary about the historical and present experience of people of colour in the USA.

65) Ibid., 119.

66) Ibid.

the other fully through which I come to care for them, but through acknowledging the limits and the infinite inability to grasp another's experience completely."⁶⁷⁾

Discussing VR narratives, Dooley suggests that "perhaps the most powerful aspect of this new medium is its ability to foster different notions of audience identification and empathy."⁶⁸⁾ However, this does not necessarily entail a vision of VR storytelling, in which first-person POV offers the viewer an embodied and unmediated sense of what it feels like to be someone else: a vision, which Bollmer critiques as "a negative annihilation of the Other as their otherness becomes nothing beyond what can be absorbed and experienced by oneself."⁶⁹⁾ VR narratives might rather offer an experience in which the viewer is encouraged to reflect on their own positioning in relation to the diegesis, engaging presence as a distributed and intersubjective relationship with a world and with the other.

As Morrison points out, this interest in audience experience and self-awareness as part of the diegesis is a feature of much contemporary theatre performance, which focuses not on the mimetic recitation of a pre-scripted drama, but on the theatre performance as a "*joint text* [original italics] between actors and audience."⁷⁰⁾ What becomes important is a collective experience, which:

becomes more presence than representation, more shared than communicated experience, more process than product, more manifestation than signification, more energetic impulse than information.⁷¹⁾

This approach to performance also emphasizes the materiality and liveness of theatre as a real event, happening in real time, with audience members as co-participants, blurring the boundaries between staged and lived experience. This can give the audience both the sense of participating in something 'real' and a critical awareness of the processes through which meaning is constructed.

Contemporary theatre practitioners have also employed a range of media, including VR technologies, as part of this work. It is, I propose, instructive to examine how such works engage with questions relating to audience immersion, presence, metalepsis and self-awareness in VR narratives. In particular, I want now to analyse two VR narratives, by two different contemporary theatre companies, in which the narrative *you* is employed within voiceover narration to effect double deixis as a central device.

Adult Children

Adult Children (Ella Hickson — Sacha Wares, ScanLAB Projects 2021) is a virtual play set in Britain, during the Covid 19 pandemic, experienced through a VR headset and headphones. Lidar scanning was used to create a virtual stage set, populated by shadowy fig-

67) Grant Bollmer, "Empathy Machines," *Media International Australia* 165, no. 1 (2017), 74.

68) Dooley, *Cinematic Virtual Reality*, 33.

69) *Ibid.*, 72.

70) Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürss-Munby (London: Routledge, 2006), 17.

71) *Ibid.*, 85.

ures who appear and disappear on different parts of the stage, including two female friends, who are the central characters. The viewer is positioned as a silent witness, a member of a virtual theatre audience in a black box theatre space, and is visually distanced from the characters in the way that a theatre audience member might be. They have 3DoF (three degrees of freedom), i.e they can explore the 360 degree space visually, turning their head etc., but not through any other movement. There are no close ups or other use of filmic language. The impressionistic theatre space around the viewer changes throughout the narrative. People and objects appear and disappear, as well as move around the space. The effect is not photorealism, but something more impressionistic (see Fig. 1). There is no lip sync dialogue. Instead, the story is narrated on the audio track partly through a series of phone conversations between the two female friends, who share their ongoing experiences and difficult moments of lockdown with each other, some of which we see play out on the virtual stage; but also through voiceover narration, in which the narrator has the voice of a child. Although the narrative is constructed around the character arcs of the two friends and the pandemic's impact on them, the voiceover narration draws the viewer into the story, prompting them to reflect on their own experience of the pandemic.

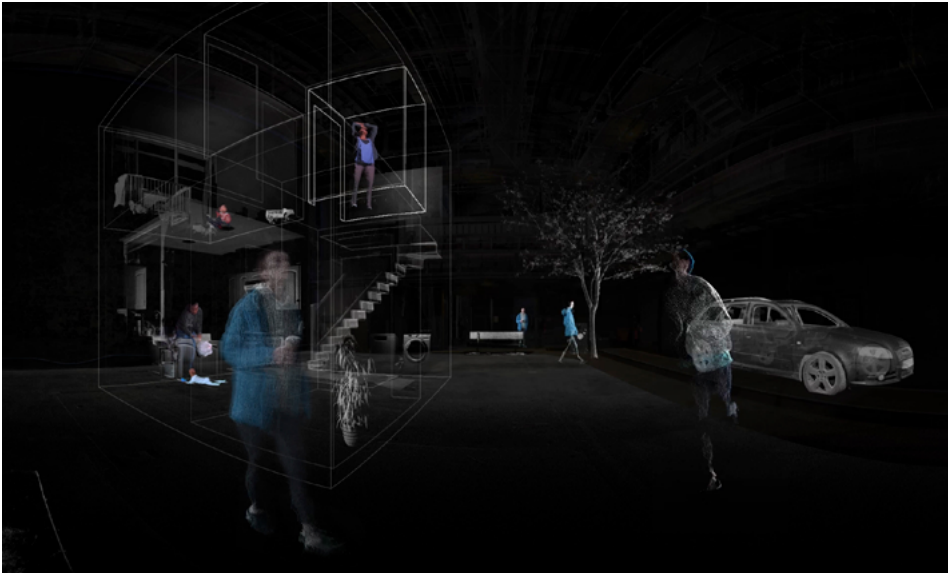


Fig. 1: *Adult Children* © Ella Hickson, Sacha Wares and ScanLAB Projects

The *Adult Children* script opens as follows:

[We are in a scan of an empty theatre]

NARRATOR: Imagine a space, a square —

[It appears]

Four people have lived, almost continuously, inside this cube — for nearly a year.

The cumulative shitting, sweating; the amount of sound released.

Excretions — spit, sex, snot —

[Door slam. Very loud.]

[A appears.]

[A walks and walks and walks and walks]

This is the schooling area.

The eating area.

The fucking area.

The detailed analysis of contracts area.

The hushed phone-call to anyone who will listen area.

This is the place where you have to explain to kids about sickness and death, about violence and threat.⁷²⁾

This opening narration raises a question as to what ontological level the viewer is occupying in this act of imagining, which, it is implied, takes physical form in the first visual they see: a three-dimensional square that slowly materialises and transforms into the transparent cross section of a house, within which most of the drama is staged. Who is the *you* that is addressed here? Is the viewer imagining this space in their role as narratee/spectator/character within the diegesis of the virtual narrative, or is this moment of imagining occurring in their own physical reality, an extradiegetic act, through which they are actually bringing the world into being?

The double deixis of this opening section provides a good sense of the tone and style of this piece and the way that it employs direct address as a narrative device. While, according to director Sacha Wares, the decision to include the voiceover was motivated by the need to engage the viewer in the story, making them feel more present within it,⁷³⁾ these opening words also serve to distance the viewer: setting up the experience as fictional, an act of imagination, rather than something real.

A few lines into the story, after the narrator has enumerated the many activities that must now all take place within the same four walls, evoking the claustrophobia of lockdown, there is the first explicit use of the narrative *you*: “the place where *you* have to explain to kids about sickness and death, about violence and threat.” At one level this *you* seems to be addressed to one of the two central female characters, who is living with her husband and children in the house depicted on stage and likely to be dealing with such challenges (the other character is single). However, since the members of the audience in the initial screenings were themselves going through lockdown or, subsequent to the pandemic, have experienced lockdown, this narrative *you* also resonates with the individual ‘you’ of those viewers, particularly those who have themselves had to explain to their own children about “sickness and death, about violence and threat.” Furthermore, this narrative *you* seems to also address the collective ‘you’ of the communal experience of the Covid lockdown and the virtual theatre audience within the virtual theatre space, making the ‘you’ addressed by the narrator simultaneously singular and plural.

Near the end of the script comes the following voiceover narration and action:

72) Ella Hickson, *Adult Children* (2021), 1.

73) Sacha Wares, personal communication with the author, September 2024.

“NARRATOR: Imagine a place where people can buy tickets to watch the pleasure and pain of strangers from a safe distance. [The audience starts to fill up].”⁷⁴⁾

This invitation to the viewer to reflect on the implications of their own act of viewing recalls the narrator’s opening exhortation to imagine the story into being. While addressing the viewer explicitly in their identity as a member of the virtual audience, it also prompts them to think beyond the here-and-now of the diegesis to their experiences as a member of theatre and film audiences in the real world: to what the words “safe distance” evoke in the Covid and post-Covid era. It invites the viewer, as both an individual *you* and as part of a collective *you*, to consider how the collective experience of going through Covid both together and apart might impact how we as members of a society relate to each other, what we as audiences might want to see represented and how we might want it to be represented.

While the viewer might well assume that the voice of the child narrator belongs to a child of the character in the story, this is not made explicit. Moreover, the words that the child speaks sound very adult and not like anything a small child would say. The voiceover narration therefore takes on a rather unearthly dimension, seeming to speak from both within but also beyond the diegesis. In my own mind, as a viewer, the child narrator seemed to be speaking the words that all the children affected by the covid pandemic might have said if they had been able to articulate them. As Wares points out,⁷⁵⁾ the title *Adult Children*, also prompts us to reflect on how children may have had to grow up too fast during the pandemic, while adults, including those in the UK government who threw illegal parties, had perhaps, sometimes acted like children.

Not only can the narrative *you* in *Adult Children* be understood as doubly deictic, that is to say that it points simultaneously to both the virtual here-and-now of the characters in the virtual performance and to the here-and-now of the viewer, there are, moreover, several dimensions to the viewer’s here-and-now, all evoked simultaneously. The viewer’s sense of presence as silent witness in the virtual theatre is individual, but also part of a collective presence, involving the virtual actors and the other members of the virtual audience. Furthermore, the viewer’s individual experience (I/me) relates to their embodied existence not only within but outside the virtual space. Finally, it relates to their collective experience (we/us) of the covid pandemic and lockdown. The employment of the narrative *you* in the voiceover narration reframes the narrative away from an exclusive focus on the narrative arcs of the characters within the virtual play, engaging the viewer in a more dialogic encounter, and fostering a complex experience of presence, which encourages both empathy and critical reflection.

74) Hickson, *Adult Children*, 7.

75) Wares, personal communication with the author 2024.



Fig. 2-4: *Within Touching Distance* © ZU-UK

Within Touching Distance

Within Touching Distance (ZU-UK 2016–) is a VR narrative experienced through a VR headset and headphones, which also integrates elements of live performance. As with *Adult Children*, the viewer's virtual embodiment is 3DoF, however, the experience incorporates interaction through touch, with performers who occupy the physical space in which the viewer is situated. These performers synchronize their actions with those of virtual actors within the virtual diegesis. Prior to the start of the VR element of the narrative, the viewer is introduced by a performer into a physical bedroom set, where they lie down on the bed with the headset and headphones on (see Fig. 2). At the beginning and end of the narrative, characters in the virtual world address the viewer, while a performer (the same one who has onboarded the viewer) synchronizes their movements to those of the characters in the virtual diegesis, interacting with the viewer through touch in the real environment. The rest of the time the viewer is addressed by an audio narrator (again the voice of a child). The viewer takes the role of first-person protagonist, who at the beginning of the piece is a child.

The first character to address the viewer within the virtual diegesis is a maternal figure who sings to them. The sequence is filmed in 360 video in a setting that matches the physical bedroom set in which the viewer is lying. Synchronized to the mother character's movements in the VR environment, an actor in the physical space takes the viewer's hands. The viewer is then transported within the VR experience into an animated out of body experience (see Fig. 3) and then into a dreamscape (see Fig. 4), in which they are addressed by the voice of an unseen narrator. I will discuss this section more below. At the end of the narrative, the viewer is relocated inside the VR experience into what seems to be the same bedroom set from the opening sequence, although now rendered in 3D simulation rather than 360 video. Instead of the maternal figure, however, a nurse now speaks to them and helps them sit up on the bed. The first-person protagonist has now transformed into an elderly person with limited mobility.

Kesia Guillery, research associate on the project, reports that the writer and director of the work, Persis-Jadé Maravala, describes the live performer as embodying different representations of an amah: "a domestic worker with nursing and childcare duties in various parts of Asia."⁷⁶⁾ The use of touch is an important element in a piece intended to function as a "metaphor of an act of palliative care,"⁷⁷⁾ which "evokes the participant's own mortality and carves out a moment in which profound self-reflective self-care is enabled, in the face of the participant's recognition of their own state of inevitable collapse."⁷⁸⁾

The child narrator can be understood to be essentially narrating the story to themselves as narratee-protagonist, who begins as a child being put to bed, into whose subject position the viewer enters to experience the VR narrative. The questions this child narrator

76) Kesia Guillery, Jorge Lopes Ramos, and Persis-Jadé Maravala, "Goodnight, Sleep Tight: Training performers as palliative carers in an age of system collapse," *Performance Research* 27, no. 6–7 (2022), 212.

77) Ibid.

78) Ibid.

asks, however, reach out beyond this diegetic incarnation:

- Do you miss your childhood or are you glad it's all over?
- Were you closer to your mother or your father?
- Did your family, on some level, disappoint you?
- What is it that was never nurtured in you?⁷⁹⁾

Thus, while the pronoun of address refers to a narratee-protagonist within the diegesis (first child then elderly nursing home resident), the answers to these questions are only available in the viewer's own experience outside the virtual environment in which they currently find themselves. Described by the creators as "the voice in your head,"⁸⁰⁾ the child who speaks to each viewer within the narrative becomes, "a shadow of their childhood speaking to their present selves."⁸¹⁾ It addresses them as a pre-existing subject, with a life and a memory that extends before and beyond their current presence within this narrative, but which they are invited to bring into it. At the end of the narrative, when the viewer experiences an unexpected metamorphosis from child to old person, they are again prompted to imagine themselves not only into this role within the narrative, but also as experiencing their own future end of life. The narrator asks them: "the moment your personal narrative comes to an end what will it be like? where will you be?"⁸²⁾

In evoking and joining the bedtime ritual of childhood with the vulnerability that can come with old age and the inevitability of death, Guillery suggests that the piece not only offers the viewer a way to engage meaningfully with their own mortality, but also functions as a ritual, in which participants (viewers) and performers form a "temporary community" in order to "process the collective trauma we are going through as a collapsing society."⁸³⁾ Maravala notes that the interpellation of the viewer into a relationship with the narrator through the narrative *you* is therefore crucial to the work, because "it's in the reflection of the other that we understand who we are."⁸⁴⁾ In engaging the viewer as the *me* to the narration's *you*, direct address both establishes a sense of "connection and presence"⁸⁵⁾ and makes an important contribution to the "multi-reality structure"⁸⁶⁾ of *Within Touching Distance*, which "allows participants to simultaneously inhabit various roles in relation to themselves and their present moment."⁸⁷⁾ In positioning the viewer as "simultaneously inside and outside the fiction,"⁸⁸⁾ the double deixis of the narration's narrative *you* encourages the viewer's self-awareness and critical reflection, as well as immersion in a dream-scape.

79) Ibid., 214.

80) Ibid., 213.

81) Ibid., 214.

82) Ibid.

83) Ibid., 215.

84) Persis-Jadé Maravala, personal communication with author, September 2024.

85) Ibid.

86) Guillery, Ramos, and Maravala, "Goodnight, Sleep Tight," 214.

87) Ibid.

88) Habermas cited in Herman, *Story Logic*, 344.

Conclusion

VR narratives give the viewer the sensory impression of being bodily as well as imaginatively transported into the world in which the events of the narrative unfold. The viewer is thus always at some level occupying a first-person perspective, with regard to the 3D environment, since they experience an embodied sense of the narrative here-and-now being the same here-and-now that they themselves occupy. While the viewer's perception of a first-person experience can contribute to their sense of immersion, it can also prompt self-consciousness, particularly if they find their placement within the narrative hard to comprehend and/or it does not align with their actual sensations and reactions as viewer. The employment of pronouns of address (in English the narrative *you*) as part of the narration strategy can potentially help the viewer take up a role within the narrative, whether this be as witness, protagonist or sidekick, minimizing such self-consciousness and offering a more involving experience.

However, the first-person perspective afforded by VR narratives can also be incorporated into a narrative design that encourages viewer self-awareness and critical reflection. This approach to narrative design can make creative use of the tension between the viewer's real existence and the position they have taken up within the virtual world, making this part of the story. Such a strategy can only draw to a certain extent on the dramatic conventions and narrative strategies of mainstream cinema and television theory and practice, since these focus on the promotion of audience identification with the narrative arc of a central protagonist, paying no attention to the structuring of the audience's participation or self-awareness. However, strategies employed in other forms of narrative offer interesting possibilities. In this article I have focused, in particular, on the employment of second person (or other pronouns of) address, a technique associated with prose fiction, to encompass variously and simultaneously the fictionalized address of a textual narratee/character and an apparent direct address of the viewer beyond the text. I have also pointed to the ways in which such approaches resonate with contemporary theatre practices that position the audience as part of the performance.

The aim of this article has been, first, to offer new insights highlighting pronouns of address as an important tool within VR narratives, which can be used both to encourage immersion and to prompt in the viewer a sense of layered and mediated subjectivity: encouraging not only self-reflection but also engagement with the other, such as Bollmer⁸⁹⁾ advocates. The two VR narratives that I have discussed in this article offer examples of such an approach. Second, in pointing to VR narratives that employ a technique used in prose fiction within contemporary theatre practice, I contribute new perspectives regarding the value of drawing on techniques developed within these other media, in order to exploit the specific potential of VR as a narrative experience.

89) Bollmer, "Empathy Machines."

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VR Narrative

- Adult Children* (Ella Hickson — Sacha Wares, ScanLAB Projects, 2021)
- The Baby's Cry* (El llanto del bebé; Jorge Blein, 2017)
- The Imaginary Friend* (Steye Hallema, 2023)
- Travelling while Black* (Roger Ross Williams, 2019)
- Within Touching Distance* (ZU-UK 2016–)

Biography

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Subjective Access and Focalization in VR

Abstract

This paper examines the challenges of conveying a character's inner world in virtual reality (VR) experiences, using the production of *Finding Frida* as a case study. It explores how a “constructive dialogue” with film theory, specifically narratology and cognitive approaches, can inform VR storytelling practices. The discussion originates from a practical problem encountered during the making of *Finding Frida*: how to lip-sync the virtual character. What began as a technical issue led to deeper dramaturgical questions about perspective, subjective access, and the role of the spectator in VR. Drawing on the work of Murray Smith, Peter Verstraten, and Michel Chion, the paper investigates how techniques like focalization, voice-over narration, and sound design can be utilized in VR to strengthen dramaturgy. It analyzes the concept of the “acousmètre” — a sound heard without its source being seen — and its potential for generating suspense and facilitating emotional engagement. The paper argues that, unlike traditional film, where subjective access is often achieved through editing techniques like shot-reverse shot, VR creators must rely on alternative methods. It proposes that sound, with its spatial and immersive qualities, can be a powerful tool for guiding the spectator's perspective and providing access to the character's inner world.

Keywords

VR creative documentary, focalization, sound design, diegetic/non-diegetic sound, environmental Storytelling, voice-over narration, practice-based research

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Virtual reality (VR) as a storytelling medium presents unique challenges for creators seeking to convey the inner worlds of characters. Unlike traditional film, where established techniques such as shot-reverse shot sequences and editing can provide spectators with subjective access to character perspectives, VR requires fundamentally different approaches

to achieve similar dramaturgical effects. This paper examines these challenges through the lens of practice-based research, using the author's (my) VR project¹⁾ *Finding Frida* as a case study to explore how insights from film theory — particularly narratology and cognitive theory — can inform VR storytelling practices.

Kath Dooley's extensive review²⁾ lists different approaches that have "contributed to a body of work investigating a new wave of virtual reality entertainment."³⁾ Dooley cites screenwriting and screen-based approaches, as well as approaches from game studies, interactive digital narrative, and human-computer interaction, as examples from the last decade. Her discussion of screenwriting and screen-based approaches includes important questions around templating and formatting the screenplay, as the "presentation of the narrative material has 'organizational impact.'"⁴⁾ Dooley's overview also mentions narration and the positioning of the user/viewer, as well as attempts to apply the hero's journey⁵⁾ to VR narratives. The term "dramaturgy," however, is not included in any of these approaches.

Similarly, in the many development labs, pitch sessions and industry talks that we as a team have attended during the development of *Finding Frida*, dramaturgy — as a "conceptual basis for the organisation of structure"⁶⁾ — was rarely considered explicitly. In my personal experience, influences from game studies and interactive design took a more prominent role in these settings. Terms like "audience experience," "core interactivity," and "narrative architecture"⁷⁾ became the primary vocabulary, while "anagnorisis," "peripeteia," and "catharsis" were remarkably absent. As *Finding Frida*'s writer and conceptualizer, when the project grew in scope and artistic ambition, I found that I struggled with questions of a dramaturgical nature that went beyond the formatting of the script. How could I engage the audience's attention through dramatic tension when the cinematic tools of dialogue, editing, and framing do not function in VR as they do in film?⁸⁾ Screenwriter and professor Paul Gulino describes dramatic tension as something that "plays on an audience's curiosity"⁹⁾ and that "requires an emotional connection between the audience and a character — the protagonist — to achieve its effect."¹⁰⁾

These questions — concerning the organization of story material, the establishment of character, and the provision of pre-story context necessary for that "emotional connection" — prompted a deep dive into film theory on perspective-taking and its implications for audience engagement in VR. Analytical frameworks from Peter Verstraten,¹¹⁾ Murray

1) In this text, VR projects will be referred to as VR "experiences," in accordance with industry terminology.

2) Kath Dooley, "Conceptualizing and Developing Narrative-Based VR Experiences: A Review of Disciplinary Frameworks and Approaches to Research," *Journal of Screenwriting* 14, no. 3 (2023), 229–249.

3) *Ibid.*, 233.

4) *Ibid.*, 233.

5) Campbell in Dooley, "Conceptualizing and Developing Narrative-Based VR Experiences," 233.

6) Kerstin Stutterheim, *Modern Film Dramaturgy: An Introduction* (Berlin: Peter Lang GmbH, Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, 2019), 689.

7) Henry Jenkins, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture," *Computer* 44, no. 3 (2004), 118–130.

8) Paul Joseph Gulino, *The Sequence Approach* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2004), 12.

9) *Ibid.*, 12.

10) *Ibid.*, 12.

11) Peter Verstraten, *Film Narratology*, trans. Stefan van der Lecq (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

Smith,¹²⁾ and Michel Chion,¹³⁾ among others, proved practically relevant to key development challenges in *Finding Frida*. This investigation demonstrates how creative practice can be informed by theoretical insights, using the specific production challenge of lip-syncing a virtual character as a starting point for broader dramaturgical exploration.

Brief Project Description: *Finding Frida*

Finding Frida is an interactive, room-scale VR hybrid documentary currently in the final stage of production.¹⁴⁾ The experience introduces spectators to the legacy of Norwegian textile artist Frida Hansen (1855–1931) through an immersive journey that blends past and present. Beginning in 2025, in Frida's house in Oslo, where parts of the garden she planted in 1905 still thrive — including a pear tree that is a recurring motif — the experience (virtually) transports spectators through time to 1931, for an encounter with Frida's ghost-like presence. The spectator can enter the house, which is depicted through a combination of photogrammetry technique and computer-generated images (CGI). Here, certain key moments from her life story are highlighted through voice-over narration, and the spectator is invited into Frida's dream-world, where memories and art come together. These dreamscapes allow the audience to take the perspective of the Frida character, as she looks back at her life.



Fig. 1: Pear tree at Bestumhus, 2024 Oslo. Photogrammetry. Copyright: RippleX/Steffen Aaland

12) Murray Smith, "Altered States: Character and Emotional Response in the Cinema," *Cinema Journal* 33, no. 4 (1994), 34–56.

13) Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

14) Production funding received from the Norsk Filminstitutt (Norwegian Film Institute) in February 2025.

Background and Inspiration for *Finding Frida*

Before examining the theoretical implications of this project, it is important to understand how this biographical story became the inspiration for a VR production. On an early morning in 1889, a woman from the small Norwegian town of Stavanger boarded a ship. Her husband had been against this trip since she first told him of her plans, and she had already postponed it once, when her daughter fell sick. At this point in her life, she had already experienced the loss of two of her three young children and suffered a devastating bankruptcy. When her husband left the country in search of new opportunities,¹⁵⁾ she had engaged in handicraft work, consisting of embroidery and the mending of wedding dresses, which led her to a newfound interest in textile and weaving. Later in life, she was to say that it was the work that saved her, not only by providing a meager income, but also by giving her agency.¹⁶⁾

It was this agency that helped her overcome both inner and outer resistance to go forth with her endeavor: to travel by herself to the innermost valley of the Sognefjord and look for someone who could teach her about an old, traditional weaving technique that was on the verge of being forgotten.¹⁷⁾ Well underway, the ship ran aground along the rugged western coast of Norway. As the passengers around her erupted in panic, the woman sat quietly below deck, accepting God's punishment for being overly ambitious and, in her own words, "egotistical."¹⁸⁾ The woman's name was Frida Hansen — my great-great-grandmother.



Fig. 2: Frida Hansen, ca. 1880. Copyright: Privat

15) And, according to family lore, hiding from the shame of taking Stavanger's financial infrastructure with him in the fall, after having monopolized the town's shipping industry.

16) Anna Rogstad, *Kjente menn og kvinner* (Oslo: Dybwad, 1926); "Obituary," by S. Mundal, 1931, Nasjonalbiblioteket, Oslo, Norge.

17) This weaver was Kjerstina Hauglum, as referenced in Anniken Thue and Frida Hansen, *Frida Hansen: (1855–1931): Europeeren i norsk vevkunst* (Oslo: Kunstindustrimuseet, 1973), 20.

18) "Obituary," Mundal.

In this anecdote lies the seed of what would become a successful career for Frida Hansen, one of Norway's most prominent and innovative textile artists.¹⁹⁾ As an independent scriptwriter, I recognized all too well the feeling of being "egotistical" when pursuing an artistic career. Writing, like weaving, absorbs time and resources that are not always reflected in the income it generates. As one of the few in my family to depend on creativity to make a living, it was a relief for me to discover that Frida, over the course of her life, had "come to see these things differently."^{20) 21)} I was curious as to how she had moved beyond this initial feeling that pursuing art is egotistical. As I so often do, I turned writing to find an answer. Perhaps, on some level, I began working with my great-great-grandmother's story to justify my own choice of career; if Frida could rise from financial ruin through the practice of "women's art," perhaps filmmaking could stand a chance, too. At the heart of the story was also something genuinely feminist which appealed to me: in the way the patriarchal, capitalist system that had led to the Hansen family's ruin was overcome by the "soft" (dare I say feminine) art of weaving. Moreover, as is often the case for women artists, Frida was scarcely acknowledged by scholars of art history until 1973, when art historian Anniken Thue published her book *Frida Hansen: (1855–1931): The European in Norwegian Textile Art Around 1900*.^{22), 23)}



Fig. 3: Frida Hansen, 75 years old. Copyright: Privat; Fig. 4: Concept art, by Inna Hansen. Copyright: RippleX Studios

Aside from the subject matter, there was also the esthetic quality of Frida's work that motivated this creation of a VR hybrid documentary. Her most famous weaves²⁴⁾ are large, wall-sized examples of what one may call, in game development terms, "environmental storytelling." Media scholar Henry Jenkins²⁵⁾ explains that environmental storytelling

19) Thue and Hansen, *Frida Hansen*.

20) "Obituary," Mundal.

21) "Nu har jeg jo et litt annet syn på disse ting." Ibid.

22) Thue and Hansen, *Frida Hansen*.

23) Textile and graphic artist Annie Albers says: "When work is made with threads, it is considered craft; when it is on paper it is considered art." F. Dijke, *Annie + Josef Albers* (The Hague: Kunstmuseum Den Haag, 2023).

24) *Melkeveien* (F. Hansen, 1898); *Salome* (F. Hansen, 1900); *Semper vadentes* (F. Hansen, 1905).

25) Henry Jenkins, "Game Design."



Fig. 5 (left): Early concept art, by Daniel Ernst. Copyright: RippleX Studio; Fig. 6 (right): Melkeveien, 1899, Frida Hansen



Fig. 7 (left): Semper Videntes, 1905, Frida Hansen; Fig. 8 (right): Art comes to life, still from *Finding Frida*. Copyright: RippleX Studios

“creates the preconditions for an immersive narrative experience” by allowing spatial stories to evoke narrative associations, provide staging grounds for events, embed narrative information within mise-en-scène, or offer resources for emergent narratives.²⁶⁾ In an industry talk in 2013, game designer Steve Gaynor defined the term as existing “in the conceptual space between game play and scripted story, the story that the player deduces from the gameworld itself.”²⁷⁾ Like environmental storytelling, Frida Hansen’s weaves provide clues and traces from her lived life and become — borrowing from Henri Lefebvre²⁸⁾ — “representational spaces, embodying complex symbolisms.” It was this quality that made the creative technologist, who was to create the first, tentative sketches of the *Finding Frida* universe, exclaim upon our first meeting, “This is VR!”

Infused with visual motifs and references to Frida’s personal life experiences, many weaves also have a three-dimensional quality that matches the VR medium. This is obtained through a special semi-transparent technique²⁹⁾ that Frida developed and patented. As a child, I remember staring at a weave on the wall in Frida’s house (which by then had become my great-aunt’s home) noticing the square-shaped details of the red-haired mer-

26) Ibid., 123.

27) Steve Gaynor, “AAA Level Design in a Day Bootcamp: Techniques for In-Level Storytelling,” *CDCVault*, accessed September 21, 2025, <https://gdcvault.com/play/1017639/AAA-Level-Design-in-a>.

28) Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 33.

29) See F. Hansen, *Juni*, 1918 and F. Hansen, *Sommernattsdrøm*, 1914.

maids in *Havfruer, som tænder Månen* (F. Hansen 1895).³⁰⁾ Looking at the work we have done thus far in VR, I see the same squareness in the form of polygons.³¹⁾

A Practical Challenge: The Lip-Sync Problem in *Finding Frida*

During the development of *Finding Frida*, a specific technical issue arose that emphasized the importance of a deep, dramaturgical investigation of perspective and its relation to diegetic and non-diegetic sound in VR. While working on the creation of Frida Hansen's virtual character, the creative team³²⁾ ran into the problem of lip-syncing. As preparations began for a motion-capture recording of Tone Danielsen — the 75-year-old actress who was to embody the main character — the technical team raised a question about how to register her lip movements. The actress was covered in sensors from head to toe, but the studio equipment did not provide a solution for recording her face.



Fig. 9 (left) and 10 (right): Actress Tone Danielsen in motion capture studio. Copyright: RippleX Studios/Hilde K. Kjøs

This practical problem led to a heated discussion about whether lip syncing the character was important at all, which again raised questions reaching deep into the core of the story's dramaturgy. As it turned out, the issue with lip syncing was not so much a technical problem, as a symptom of unresolved questions on the level of story — or its “poetic architecture,” as scholar and filmmaker Kerstin Stutterheim words it in her book *Modern Dramaturgy*.³³⁾

To navigate these complex questions, on which I will elaborate later, I turn now to established theoretical frameworks from film studies and narratology, seeking analytical tools that can shed light on deeper issues around perspective-taking in cinema and VR.

30) “Havfruer som tænder Månen [Billedvev],” *digitalmuseum*, accessed September 20, 2025, <https://digitalt-museum.no/021049525941/havfruer-som-taender-manen-billedvev>.

31) Cecilie Levy, “Light from Aside: A Screenwriter’s Perspective in Virtual Reality” (PhD diss, Inland Norway University, 2023) 67.

32) The team is comprised of a writer, director, unity developer, creative technologist, photogrammetry and motion capture expert, and producer.

33) Stutterheim, *Modern Film Dramaturgy*, 15.

Spectatorship and Perspective-Taking in VR

In his book *Film Narratology*, author and academic Peter Verstraten writes: “Focalization is always a matter of subjective colouring, an interpretation of (sensory) impressions.”³⁴⁾ And further, that a “narrator in a novel communicates the story with words, whereas in film the communication is accomplished by images combined with sounds.”³⁵⁾ Straightforward as this may sound, it is worthwhile to consider how this communication is accomplished in VR. In the book chapter “Shifting Diegetic Boundaries,” Ole Kristoffer Haga argues that the boundary between the diegetic and the extra-diegetic³⁶⁾ becomes diffuse in VR.³⁷⁾ ³⁸⁾ As the spectator is assigned a role in the virtual story-world, and can even interact with and influence the environment, questions arise about “where the represented diegesis ends and the extra-diegetic begins.”³⁹⁾ The word “user,” as opposed to the more traditional “spectator” in film studies, implies that the audience adopts a different attitude toward the story in VR than in film. This also has implications for the question of perspective — and of focalization. As a maker, I question whether the “user attitude” is the only way to approach the issue of spectatorship in VR.

Looking at examples of recent and/or notable VR experiences where my viewing experience was closer to that of a spectator than a user, the seminal *Notes on Blindness* (Arnaud Colinart, 2016) comes to mind. What makes this work effective and captivating is the elegant way in which the spectator is enabled to take the perspective of the protagonist. In my view, the first-person perspective in *Notes on Blindness* is more similar to the singular point-of-view perspective in *The Lady in the Lake* (Robert Montgomery, 1946)⁴⁰⁾ than to a first-person user experience in a video game. Whereas in a video game, the incentive is to *do* things, or to *accomplish* something, in *Notes on Blindness*, my primary motivation as a spectator is to *understand* something: the lived experience of losing sight and a shift toward a form of echolocation. The tension that arises in this work between the “visual narrator” and the “auditive narrator”⁴¹⁾ is something to which I will return later.

Another work that operates within this tension between interaction and spectatorship, is the Canadian *Book of Distance*⁴²⁾ (Randall Okita, 2020). The creators refer to co-creation

34) Verstraten, *Film Narratology*, 43.

35) Ibid., 47

36) Haga writes that “story content that is accessible to the fictional characters is usually considered diegetic, while anything only the viewer can perceive, like musical scoring, voice-over, titles, superimposition, and end credits are characterized as extra-diegetic,” in Ole Kristoffer Haga, “Shifting Diegetic Boundaries,” in *An Introduction to Screenwriting for Virtual Reality: Story, Space and Experience*, ed. Kath Dooley and Alex Munt (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland AG, 2024), 29. In my understanding, extra and non-diegetic are mostly synonymous.

37) Haga, “Shifting Diegetic Boundaries.”

38) In the text, cinematic virtual reality (CVR) is the primary reference, but the principle applies to room-scale, CGI VR, as well.

39) Haga, “Shifting Diegetic Boundaries,” 30.

40) *The Lady in the Lake* (1946) uses first-person perspective throughout, with the camera serving as detective Philip Marlowe’s eyes; it is a film that Verstraten describes as “the most notorious experiment with a subjective camera,” in Verstraten, *Film Narratology*, 96.

41) Ibid., 130.

42) Winner — Best Immersive Experience, Canadian Screen Awards.

and (participatory) theater as a model and inspiration for their experience, with the central focus being the story that unfolds and that we are invited to witness. As director Randall Okita explores his painful family history, serving as both performer and virtual guide, the audience witnesses his visualization of these events. He contextualizes the scenes with his commentary, and we see the story through his eyes. Okita and his team have referred to it as “a virtual pilgrimage with a friend who is trying to uncover his family’s past.”⁴³⁾ Although they reference a Janet Murray quote — “the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices”⁴⁴⁾ — the actions available to the spectator/user in this experience do not influence the narrative. The creators refer to story types as described by Kent Bye and Devon Donlan, distinguishing between “local agency” and “global agency.” Only the latter has influence on the narrative, while the former can “control the outcomes of your own experience in small ways, but these small actions may have no real impact on the overall outcome.”⁴⁵⁾ This leaves the focus of the narrative design with the perspective taking, to experiencing “from the inside.”⁴⁶⁾

The final work that I will mention is the Danish experience *End of Night* (David Adler, 2021), winner of Best VR Story at the 78th Venice International Film Festival. In this experience, the spectator is seated in a rowboat that moves through a dreamlike representation of occupied Copenhagen during the Second World War, while the main character — the rower — recounts the story of a failed attempt to escape the Nazis with his Jewish wife.⁴⁷⁾ As a spectator, we get to be present inside his fragmented memories and relive a traumatic experience. The virtual world through which we travel becomes a representation of his memories.

Returning to Verstraten and his notion of a visual narrator,⁴⁸⁾ he describes this narrator as the implied intelligence that chooses (again and again throughout a film) which perspective we take in a scene or a shot: this is what we call “focalization.” When we are presented with a shot-reverse shot, we are drawn into the perspective with which the visual narrator presents us. As an example, Verstraten describes a scene from *Out of Sight* (Steven Soderberg, 1998), with several shifts in focalization. As the character of an escaped convict (played by George Clooney) leans back in a hot, steaming bath, eyes closed, we see what we assume is an objective shot of an FBI officer (played by Jenifer Lopez) who silently enters the house, gun raised, to make his arrest. However, as she appears in the bathroom, instead of arresting him at gunpoint, she kisses him, and we realize that the shot is

43) David Oppenheim and Randall Okita, “The Book of Distance: Personal Storytelling in VR,” in *ACM SIGGRAPH 2020 Immersive Pavilion (SIGGRAPH ’20)* (New York: Association for Computing Machinery, 2020), article 5, 1–2.

44) Janet Murray, in *ibid.* n.p.

45) Kent Bye, in *ibid.* n.p.

46) For a discussion on “central and acentral imagining” in Smith, “Altered States,” 36; and for a discussion on experiencing “from the inside” and “from the outside,” see Marie-Laure Ryan, “Beyond Myth and Metaphor: Narrative in Digital Media,” *Poetics Today* 23, no. 4 (2002), 593.

47) During the VR experience, we come to realize the significance of the boat as, during the Nazi occupation, many refugees escaped by rowing to Sweden. It seems as if the main character is “eternally rowing” as an expression of trauma.

48) In the original Dutch text, Verstraten makes the distinction between *beeldverteller* (visual narrator) and *geluidsverteller* (auditive narrator), who together become the *filmische verteller* (filmic narrator). Verstraten, *Film Narratology*.

in fact not objective, but a daydream — his, we presume, but then the perspective changes again. We see the FBI agent wake up in a hospital bed with her father standing next to her, telling her that she was talking in her sleep: “She: ‘What did I say?’ Father: ‘Hi, yourself.’”⁴⁹⁾ This sequence establishes a strange emotional connection between the two characters, as if they have shared dreams.

This example demonstrates the ability film can have, through inventive use of focalization, to grant “subjective access,” a term coined by film theorist Murray Smith in his essay “Altered States: Character and Emotional Response in the Cinema.”⁵⁰⁾ Smith proposes a “structure of sympathy” as a “model of spectatorial engagement”⁵¹⁾ consisting of the concepts of recognition, alignment, and allegiance — each “a kind of narrative system that relates to character.”⁵²⁾ “Recognition” refers to the perception that a spectator has of a character as a (usually) human agent. Even if we know that a character is an artefact of a fictional world, we assume that they “correspond to analogical ones”⁵³⁾ in the real world. “Alignment” refers to the extent to which the spectator has access to a character’s actions and inner world and motivations. “Allegiance” flows from the other two, as the spectator evaluates the moral and ideological result of the character’s actions and motivations. Smith emphasizes that the systems are dependent on the “cooperative activity of the spectator” working with them, and that, more broadly, they are responses “neither solely in the text nor solely in the spectator.”⁵⁴⁾ Smith suggests that alignment is akin to the literary term “focalization,” Gérard Genette’s term for “the way in which narratives feed story information to the reader through the ‘lens’ or ‘filter’ of a particular character.”⁵⁵⁾ In cinema, this lens becomes an actual lens that can be aligned with the viewpoint of one or more characters, and we see the world through their eyes.⁵⁶⁾

Smith describes “subjective access” as one of two interlocking functions⁵⁷⁾ with which to analyze alignment.⁵⁸⁾ To what extent does the alignment (focalization) give the spectator access to what the characters “know and feel”?⁵⁹⁾ I understand focalization, as Verstraten uses it, as one way of providing access to the subjectivity of a character. It is dependent on Sergei Eisenstein’s visual counterpoint⁶⁰⁾: The shot-reverse shot of a character looking at a soup bowl and appearing hungry is as effective as the novel’s narrator telling us, “I was bitterly hungry, wished myself dead and buried.”⁶¹⁾ In cinema, the feeling of hun-

49) Ibid., 119.

50) Smith, “Altered States.”

51) Ibid., 40.

52) Ibid., 39.

53) Ibid., 39.

54) Smith, “Altered States.”

55) Ibid., 41.

56) Simon Weaving proposes that, in VR, the movement of the camera in film is taken over by the spectator/user. Simon Weaving, “The Nature of Narration in Cinematic Virtual Reality,” in Dooley and Munt, *Screenwriting for Virtual Reality*, 79.

57) The other one being “spatial attachment”: to what extent the spectator can follow the “spatio-temporal paths” of the different characters. Smith, “Altered States,” 41.

58) Ibid., 40.

59) Ibid., 41.

60) Stutterheim, *Modern Film Dramaturgy*, 29.

61) Knut Hamsun, *Hunger*, trans. George Egerton (New York: Knopf, 2005), 27. „Project Gutenberg eBook of

ger in a character is inferred, as the editing tells us something about the character's interest in the soup bowl. According to Smith, this is not a question of identification or of mimicking a character's feeling; it is a question of understanding.⁶²⁾

In VR, where there is no frame and no editing, the mechanism of shot-reverse shot to provide subjective access is no longer there. As creators, we need other ways to help the spectator understand the character's subjectivity, at least to the extent that it matters to the story. How do we induce the "cooperative activity of the spectator"⁶³⁾ and provide enough clues and information for the spectator to understand, and eventually sympathize with the protagonist?

Voice-Over Narration and Implicit Storytelling

Through my work with *Finding Frida* and the interdisciplinary, iterative development process, I have wrestled with these questions of alignment and subjective access. As demonstrated by Verstraten, the shot-reverse shot exempts the scriptwriter from explicitly articulating what a character is thinking and feeling. The "visual narrator" enables implicit storytelling, and this heightens spectator involvement, as they are inferring emotions and motives and actively anticipating what will happen next. In the VR experiences mentioned earlier, in place of shot-reverse shot is what becomes a kind of prolonged first-person point of view of the spectator.⁶⁴⁾ It is tempting to assume that the perspective of the story then becomes that of the spectator, hence the emphasis in VR development on the audience experience and the assigned role of the spectator.⁶⁵⁾ However, doing so would be to ignore the notion of a filmic narrator, that, in Verstraten's words, "negotiates the relation between the auditive and the visual tracks."⁶⁶⁾ ⁶⁷⁾ A review of a freeze-frame in *All About Eve* (Joseph Mankiewicz, 1950) illustrates this. In this review, Verstraten discusses Seymour Chatman's view that sound and text are "hierarchically superior to images."⁶⁸⁾ The freeze-frame in this discussion seems to be instigated by the voice-over of the character Addison, but in Verstraten's view, this is an illusion. Verstraten argues that the visual and auditive narrators operate on an equal level and that their synchronization is regulated by the filmic narrator:

Hunger, by Knut Hamsun," *gutenberg*, July 6, 2003, accessed September 20, 2025, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/8387/8387-h/8387-h.htm>.

62) Smith, "Altered States," 42.

63) *Ibid.*, 39.

64) According to Weaving, "The viewer's point of view in CVR is best described as being either impersonal or personal (more or less subjective) depending upon the filmmaker's narrational strategies." Weaving, "The Nature of Narration in Cinematic Virtual Reality," 80.

65) In VR work, the spectator is sometimes assigned a role, for example as "the monster under the bed."

66) Verstraten, *Film Narratology*, 130.

67) Although Verstraten seems to reject the idea of an implied author, he suggests that the filmic narrator, who regulates the visual and the auditive narrator, could resemble an implied author in some ways. *Ibid.*, 130.

68) *Ibid.*, 130.

Prompted by the filmic narrator, the visual narrator freezes the image for Addison's commentary. The smug critic Addison is led to think that he can direct the narrative with his voice-over, but he can indulge in that fantasy only because the filmic narrator has determined that the visual narrator should conform itself to it.⁶⁹⁾

What this discussion makes clear to me is that, even in a first-person perspective in VR, there is still a narrating agent. This role is not taken over by the spectator the minute they don the VR goggles and are free to look around. There is still an agent that organizes the visual and auditive⁷⁰⁾ information to enable understanding of actions, motives, or — in Smith's words — the “apportioning of knowledge among characters and the spectator; the systematic regulation of narrative knowledge [that] results in a structure of alignment.”⁷¹⁾ According to Smith's structure of sympathy, from the first two concepts (recognition and alignment), allegiance follows. This last stage is important to me in the development of *Finding Frida*, as the spectator must assemble snippets of information and cues about the character's outer and inner life to become emotionally involved. As a scriptwriter for VR, I felt that I only had limited tools to accomplish this. When shot-reverse shot is excluded, traditional ways of giving subjective access essentially boil down to dialogue and voice-over.⁷²⁾ The Frida character can *tell* us how she feels and what she wants, or she can tell a secondary character, but this does not feel very dramatic,⁷³⁾ and may evoke less emotion in the spectator. The option of dialogue between characters in VR runs the risk of excluding the spectator, making them feel ignored. This effect⁷⁴⁾ was made clear to me in the narrative VR experience *Age of Sail VR* (John Kahrs, 2018) in which, during a long exchange between two characters on the deck of a sailboat, my attention drifted. Only when the perspective changed to first person and I had the embodied experience of sinking under water, did my attention return.

This effect of feeling excluded was one I wanted to avoid in my own concept. My experiment with the first drafts of the script confirmed this instinct. Although dialogue helped me with exposition and opportunities for “plants and pay-offs,” I felt that the scenes in which two characters were talking to each other “over the head” of the spectator, induced distance. The inability to visually narrate the dialogue through shot-reverse shot made the dialogue unengaging, and the construction felt expositional. In the subsequent drafts — written alongside style tests and VR prototypes — we returned to the concept of a voice-over narration to assist the spectator's alignment with the Frida character, although we struggled with what form that narration should take. Sometime during this

69) Ibid., 130–131.

70) And in the case of VR, haptic and kinetic information about how to move your body in the virtual space.

71) Smith, “Altered States,” 41.

72) According to Weaving, “Point of view in CVR filmmaking is dramatically different from traditional filmmaking because the methods of controlling the viewer's access to narrative information rely more on mise-en-scène and staging than framing and editing.” Weaving, “The Nature of Narration in Cinematic Virtual Reality,” 80.

73) As in mimetic — i.e., according to Halliwell, “fully dramatic representation [...] of the characters ‘all in action.’” Stephen Halliwell, “Diegesis — Mimesis,” in *Handbook of Narratology*, ed. Peter Hühn, Jan Christoph Meister, John Pier, and Wolf Schmid (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2014), 133.

74) VR practitioners call this the “Swayze effect” in reference to the film *Ghost* (Zucker, 1990).

process, the question of lip-syncing the Frida character was raised, and it led to a heated discussion. The technical team advocated for traditional lip-sync using AI technology, arguing that it would look more professional and create better presence in VR. However, the director felt intuitively that static lips would be more effective, proposing that the character was not speaking directly to the audience but rather reflecting internally. As the director explained, “She’s not talking to us; she’s talking to herself.” She based this viewpoint on previous documentary experience where a similar approach had created intimacy, “as if we were listening in on her thoughts.” Despite technical concerns about reduced presence and the irreversible nature of the decision, the team ultimately chose the unconventional approach. This final decision was weighted with uncertainty, as the technical lead warned: “You know that if you decide on this now, there is no going back.”

During development, many decisions are made intuitively and hunches are followed, as there is not always time to investigate or analyze deeply. There is a meeting and there is a deadline, and someone must make the call. As the writer, I backed the director’s decision that lip-syncing the character was not a priority. However, I had yet to figure out what this meant for the narrative perspective and how it aligned with another idea: using an old gramophone as a diegetic sound source for the character’s voice.



Fig. 11: Frida’s “ghost,” VR screenshot/still from *Finding Frida*. Copyright: RippleX Studios

In film and VR, a voice-over narration can be either diegetic or extra-diegetic, depending on its conceptual quality. A distinction can be made between the kind of voice-over that is an “inner voice,” and for that reason accessible to the character in the story-world (diegetic) and one that is only accessible to the spectator (extra-diegetic).⁷⁵⁾ The ironic voice narration in *Barry Lyndon* (Stanley Kubrick, 1975) is an example of the latter. When

75) See Haga, “Shifting Diegetic Boundaries.”

working with the first prototype of *Finding Frida*, we listened to different examples of voice narration in VR and, on instinct, tried to decide which would best suit our experience. Intuitively, we connected to the “click” of the tape recorder in *Notes on Blindness* and to the static noise of the old recordings, either real or added for effect. The “click” gave the voice-over an immediacy, as if we were there alongside the real-life character who was making the recording. It added direction, or perspective, to the experience. Akin to the freeze-frame in *All About Eve*, the “click” suggested a narrative agent that organized the auditive and the visual aspects into a shared experience with the story’s subject — separate from our perspective as spectators — while remaining very present.

Another example is the direct address of *Book of Distance* and of *End of Night*, where a character talks directly to the spectator, telling them the story while the visual narrator illustrates the words spoken with small scenes, or tableaux’s, in the surrounding space. And *Songbird VR* (Lucy Greenwell, 2018) demonstrates a hybrid approach: an extra-diegetic voice gives an introduction, providing the context necessary to follow the narrative. The recorded voice of a scientist, upon whose story the VR experience is based, then takes over. The spectator is invited to “re-live” or perform the story, with (again) a tape recorder as a central prop.⁷⁶⁾

This being invited *in*, to see a lived experience through someone else’s eyes, is a way of providing subjective access. The first-person perspective becomes aligned with the thoughts of the character who may or may not be visually present in the experience. The story-world itself becomes the subjectivity, the alignment with the character. The design of that world — the narrative space — reflects the character’s interiority. In VR, the spectator’s entry point and perspective can be guided by the auditory narrator, which is often more flexible than the visual, as it is not limited to a single viewpoint. A voice in VR can be far away, or close by; it can be *inside* you, or inside a character. It can also be outside of the story-world, with the spectator having access to both.

Throughout the development process, and inspired by the examples mentioned earlier, the director and I researched and experimented with the voice-over. Examples of attempts from different versions of script or prototype include:

(A soft voice, in your ear, as if inside your head) “This is a ghost story. Or is it a dream?” (Extra-diegetic, revealing itself as diegetic in the course of the story)

Or: “The only things I see clearly these days are in my head. Everything else is just a blur.” (Diegetic)

Or: The sound of a typewriter, we hear a voice narrate as she writes: Exterior, vast, deserted landscape, dusk. The wind howls... (Extra-diegetic)

An idea to have Frida’s voice emanate from a gramophone came when the director stumbled upon an old record player while examining furniture and objects in Frida Hansen’s house. It suggested that her voice had been preserved on a record, long before tape record-

76) In a pivotal scene, the protagonist asks the spectator to rewind and replay a recording of an almost extinct bird’s cry using a handheld device. The playback attracts the original bird, who mistakes the recording for a potential mate. The protagonist’s voice-over expresses guilt over giving the bird “false hope,” allowing the spectator to viscerally understand the profound loneliness of being “almost extinct.”

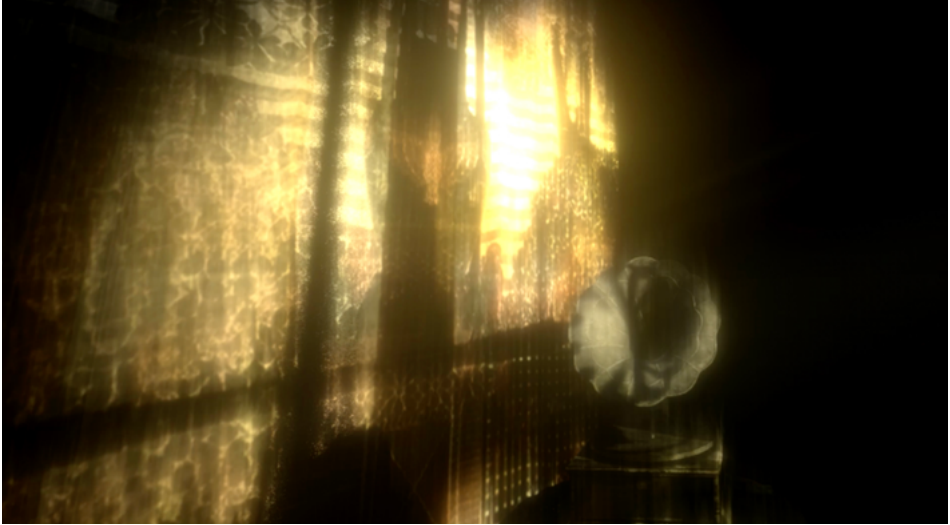


Fig. 12: Gramophone & Weave, VR screenshot/still from *Finding Frida*. Copyright: RippleX Studios

ers existed. This concept provided a narrative entry point and guided the decision to use only Frida's own words from an 1926 interview, published in Anne Rogstad's *Famous Men and Women*.⁷⁷⁾

In the interview, Frida talks about her life, the tragedies through which she lived, and how her creativity and art has been a synthesis of these. We decided that we would "let her speak for herself." For the voice-over, we would piece together the snippets of information from that interview and let that form the story arc and contextualization of the scenes. In this arc, we alternated between moments when the Frida character shared her thoughts with the spectator and environmental storytelling⁷⁸⁾ — what we might call "representational spaces," as described by Lefebvre in *The Production of Space*: "representational spaces, embodying complex symbolisms."⁷⁹⁾ In combination with Frida's voice, these representational spaces would enable the spectator to witness scenes, images, and dreamlike memories from Frida's interiority. A tension arises between the auditive and the visual narrator,⁸⁰⁾ as the scenes are not objective reconstructions of the experiences recounted, but "emotional landscapes" that encompass the subjectivity of memory, with a dreamlike quality.

77) Rogstad, *Kjente menn og kvinner*.

78) As Jenkins writes, "Environmental storytelling creates the preconditions for an immersive narrative experience in at least one of four ways: spatial stories can evoke pre-existing narrative associations; they can provide a staging ground where narrative events are enacted; they may embed narrative information within their mise-en-scene; or they provide resources for emergent narratives;" Jenkins, "Game Design," 123.

79) Lefebvre, *The production of space*, 33.

80) Burman asks, "Instead of us placing ourselves where we want, the space seems to decide how we are positioned; could it be that the space itself is the primary narrator of our experiences?" Nicolas Burman, "Where is Myself? A Reflection on the Spatiality and Disquieting Effects of Daniël Ernst's Virtual Reality Dioramas," *soapbox*, accessed September 20, 2025, <https://www.soapboxjournal.net/onlinearticles/where-is-myself>.



Fig. 13 (left): Dreamscape garden, VR screenshot from *Finding Frida*. Copyright: RippleX Studios. Fig. 14 (right): Frida Hansen's house in Hillevåg before the bankruptcy, around 1880. Copyright: Privat

Acousmètre and Dramaturgy

Another piece of the puzzle fell into place when a colleague sent me a chapter from *The Voice in Cinema*, by Michel Chion.⁸¹⁾ In the chapter, the concept of the “acousmètre” in cinema is discussed, and Chion offers a specification from an old dictionary: “acousmatic... ‘is said of a sound that is heard without its cause or source being seen.’”⁸²⁾ And further, that:

mysterious powers are associated with the acousmatic character as “neither inside nor outside the image.” The suspense that arises from this mystery is resolved when the character is de-acousmatized, “when the film reveals the face that is the source of the voice.” Chion writes that this de-acousmatization results in “an unveiling process that is unfailingly dramatic.”⁸³⁾

The acousmètre often hides behind an opaque curtain, or a door, or outside the frame.⁸⁴⁾ The origin of the word, according to Chion, is “apparently the name assigned to a Pythagorean sect whose followers would listen to their Master speak *behind a curtain*.”⁸⁵⁾ A conference paper by digital artist Wendy Ann Mansilla suggests that the “concept of *acousmètre* is a powerful instrument in cinema that hasn't been fully realized in the interactive virtual entertainment arena to date”⁸⁶⁾ and emphasizes its ability to create suspense in a virtual environment in which dramaturgy is often hard to capture.⁸⁷⁾

Chion's description of the mysterious effect of the acousmètre, illustrated with examples from Fritz Lang and others, helped me understand the appeal of the gramophone in

81) Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*.

82) Ibid., 18.

83) Levy, “Light from Aside,” 129–131.

84) Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, 18.

85) Ibid., 19.

86) Wendy Ann Mansilla, “Interactive Dramaturgy by Generating Acousmètre in a Virtual Environment” (Paper presented at the International Conference on Entertainment Computing, Cambridge, September 20–22, 2006), n.p.

87) Ibid., n.p.

connection with Frida's voice: The spectator's first encounter with Frida will be with her voice only. Suspense will arise as the spectator wonders to whom the voice belongs, countering the initial sense of its purely expositional function. Gradually, they will discover the source of the voice. Only after being taken into the subjective memory world of the "ghost" of Frida Hansen will her character become visible: dark and vague, in the beginning. As the exploration of who Frida is continues — as much the character's own discovery as that of the spectator — she will become more distinct and whole.

The title *Finding Frida* encompasses the Frida character's need to see her life through the eyes of a stranger, from another time, in order for her ghost to find peace. At the same time, it reflects the wish of the creators to shine a light on Frida Hansen as a role model for feminism and female agency. As the de-acousmatization takes place, the ghostly character "re-enters the realm of human beings."⁸⁸ Together with Frida, the spectator embodies "temporalities that cannot be grasped adequately in terms of present time."⁸⁹ In this context, it is not strange that the spectator can "listen in on her thoughts" as she ruminates to herself, *not* moving her lips. There is, however, a clear sense of a connection and of presence, as the Frida character opens her memory world to the spectator.



Fig. 15: Gramophone in garden, VR screenshot from *Finding Frida*. Copyright: RippleX Studios

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to articulate an answer to the question of how we, as VR creators, can facilitate "the cooperative activity of the spectator"⁹⁰ and provide sufficient clues and information for the spectator to understand — and eventually sympathize with — the

88) Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, 23.

89) Moische Postone, in Burman, "Where is Myself?."

90) Smith, "Altered States," 39.



Fig. 16: Scanned clock in atelier, VR screenshot from *Finding Frida*. Copyright: RippleX Studios

main character in the VR experience *Finding Frida*. Through the lens of a practitioner, I have investigated the question of subjective access in relation to focalization and sound, drawing on insights from film theory, narratology, and cognitive approaches. The discussion began with the practical challenge of lip-syncing the virtual character in *Finding Frida*. This seemingly technical problem pointed to deeper dramaturgical questions about perspective and the role of the spectator in a VR experience.

While the field of VR narrative design has drawn heavily from game studies and interactive design, this paper proposes that a constructive dialogue with film theory and narratology can offer valuable tools for conceptualizing VR narratives. The analysis of subjective access, focalization, and the concept of the *acousmètre*, exemplified through the creative process of *Finding Frida*, has demonstrated ways of approaching dramaturgy in VR storytelling. Unlike traditional film, where techniques like shot-reverse shot facilitate subjective access, VR creators must rely on alternative methods. This paper suggests that sound, with its “focal flexibility” in VR, can be a powerful tool for guiding the spectator’s perspective and providing access to the character’s inner world. The use of Frida Hansen’s own words from a 1926 interview, delivered through an old gramophone, shows how the concept of the *acousmètre* has informed the dramaturgy in *Finding Frida*. This creates an initial sense of mystery and suspense, drawing the spectator into the narrative. The gradual de-acousmatization of Frida’s character, coupled with the exploration of her dreamlike memory world, allows for a deeper understanding of her subjectivity.

Furthermore, the paper highlights the importance of environmental storytelling and “representational spaces”⁹¹⁾ in conveying the Frida’s inner life. By immersing the spectator

91) Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 33.

in dreamlike environments that come to represent Frida's internality, *Finding Frida* seeks to convey a unique form of alignment and sympathy, exploring the potential of VR as a medium for intimate and emotionally resonant storytelling. The insights gained from this project suggest that further investigation into the spatialization of sound and its narratological implications in VR is warranted. Additionally, continued dialogue between VR practitioners and film theorists can lead to a richer understanding of this evolving medium and its potential for innovative storytelling.

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Biography

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Storytelling Beyond Dialogue and Preschool Animation

Rethinking Audiovisual Narrative in the TV Series **The Sound Collector**

Abstract

Sound plays an important role in filmmaking, enhancing the narrative power of the image and engaging audiences in various ways. Significantly, when we say we watch a film, we are truly “audio-viewing” it — a key point concerning the nature of audiovisual storytelling. In animation, sound representation used to receive limited attention. This perspective, however, is shifting, as demonstrated by the growing awareness in film scholarship and how-to manuals regarding sound design. Within this evolving framework, *The Sound Collector* (2023) stands out as a preschool television series that places sound at the center of its storytelling, integrating auditory exploration and themes of disability with a calm, reflective tone. This article examines the creative process behind the making of the show, to which I contributed as a scriptwriter, drawing on both my personal experience and conversations with its creators and producers. It explores how the series relates to the existing tradition of preschool animation and its strategies — in characterization, worldbuilding, narrative structure, and scripting conventions — to foster engagement through sound, even in the absence of dialogue. In particular, the series blends stop-motion animation with live-action footage, giving space to the portrayal of small moments of everyday life, in contrast to the faster pace and gag-driven style common in much children’s animation. By analyzing the interplay of sound, visuals, and narration, this paper argues that *The Sound Collector* questions some conventional assumptions about children’s television and illustrates an approach to inclusive storytelling that can engage a wide audience.

Keywords

children’s animation, audiovisual storytelling, sound design, scriptwriting, disability

The relationship of sound to the moving image is evident in the history of cinema since the very beginning, when silent films were accompanied by live music. The introduction of film scores marked a technological revolution, quickly evolving beyond the promise of mirroring reality.¹⁾ A powerful soundtrack aestheticizes the image, reinforcing its expressive potential. Sound design also includes diegetic and non-diegetic effects, both of which shape audience perception. For example, off-screen sounds in horror films evoke fear, while music in video games stimulates interactivity.²⁾ Dialogue, too, carries substantial narrative weight, often equaling the importance of visuals.

In the context of filmmaking, animation has always maintained a close connection with music. Avant-garde artist Walter Ruttmann's *Lichtspiel Opus I* (1921) and Walt Disney's *Silly Symphonies* (1929–1939) exemplify early experiments in synchronizing movement with sound, which was what most fascinated the viewers of the time.³⁾ As a storytelling tool, sound helps shape meaning, rhythm, and emotion.⁴⁾ For a long time, cartoon music received scarce academic attention, and its creators remained largely unknown to the general public.⁵⁾ Today, this has changed, thanks to more detailed credits and royalties, making music one of animation's most lucrative industries, while the relationship between animation and music has also been addressed by various film scholars.⁶⁾

The importance of sound emerges in preschool animation, which is typically aimed at children aged 2–5 and seeks to convey educational values.⁷⁾ TV shows such as *Blue's Clues* (1996–2007) or *Dora the Explorer* (2000–ongoing) use tunes and sounds to guide the audience's attention.⁸⁾ Nursery rhymes, a staple of children's preschool education, are matched with simple animation on platforms like CoComelon, the top-rated YouTube channel in 2020 with over 1 billion weekly views.⁹⁾ Preschool theme songs can even become popular hits: *Bob the Builder's* "Can We Fix It?" topped the UK Christmas charts in 2000, selling over a million copies.¹⁰⁾

This work focuses on *The Sound Collector* (2023), a preschool animated series I contributed to as a scriptwriter, which places sound at the center of its storytelling through a

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- 1) Kathryn Kalinak, ed., *Sound: Dialogue, Music, and Effects* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 6.
 - 2) Karen Collins, *Playing with Sound: A Theory of Interacting with Sound and Music in Video Games* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2013), 2.
 - 3) Leonard Maltin, "Foreword," in *The Cartoon Music Book*, eds. Daniel Goldmark and Yuval Taylor (Chicago: A Cappella Books, 2002), x.
 - 4) Paul Wells, *Understanding Animation* (London: Routledge, 1998), 97.
 - 5) Goldmark – Taylor, eds., *The Cartoon Music Book*, xiv.
 - 6) Marco Pellitteri, ed., *The Palgrave Handbook of Music and Sound in Japanese Animation* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), lxxvii.
 - 7) Jean Ann Wright, *Animation: Writing and Development: From Script Development to Pitch* (Burlington and Oxford: Focal Press, 2005), 289.
 - 8) Jennifer Fleegeer, "The Sound of Slime-ness: Telling Children's Stories on the Nickelodeon Network," in *The Routledge Companion to Screen Music and Sound*, eds. Miguel Mera, Ronald Sadoff, and Ben Winters (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 605.
 - 9) Anna Potter and Jeanette Steemers, "Children and the media industries: An overlooked but very special 'television' audience," in *The Routledge Companion to Media Industries*, ed. Paul McDonald (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2022), 252.
 - 10) Ami Sedghi, "UK's Million-Selling Singles: The Full List," *The Guardian*, November 4, 2012, accessed September 15, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2012/nov/04/uk-million-selling-singles-full-list>.

young protagonist with hearing loss. The article situates it within the framework of preschool animation, highlighting both its continuities and changes with tradition whilst addressing the theme of disability. In particular, the absence of dialogue posed specific challenges for the creative team, which will be discussed here drawing on my perspective as a writer for the series. By combining textual analysis with personal experience, this study aims to deepen the understanding of how stories, visuals, and sound design interface within the animated narrative.

Overview of the Series

The Sound Collector (from now: *TSC*), animated at the studios of MacKinnon & Saunders in Greater Manchester, debuted in the United Kingdom in 2023. Consisting of 60 five-minute episodes, the show was co-produced with Turin-based company Enanimation and was released in Italy in the same period. Animation typically relies on co-production to mitigate high production costs and secure diverse funding sources, and this was particularly relevant for *TSC*, which combines stop-motion, using puppets made out of clay, with live-action. While MacKinnon & Saunders handled the stop-motion aspects of the show, the live-action sequences were filmed in North Devon and Cornwall by a specialized crew experienced in both stop-frame and wildlife documentaries. These were then integrated through compositing and visual effects by Enanimation, who was also responsible for the storyboards.

Commissioned by the British commercial network ITV and the Italian State broadcaster RAI, the series also received funding from the now-defunct Young Audience Content Fund of the British Film Institute. The creators of the show were Tom and Erica Angell, who also served as producers through their studio, Eagle Vs Bat. Head writer Dave Ingham, who wrote for numerous preschool series such as *Charlie & Lola* (2005–2006) and *Shaun the Sheep* (2007–2020), joined early in the development process in spring 2021. Ingham played an important role in shaping the series, contributing significantly to its bible — the reference document outlining the narrative premise, characters, settings, story arcs, and episode structure — and by liaising with the creative team. This comprised both British and Italian directors and screenwriters, including myself.

At the heart of *TSC* is the story of the Sound Collector, a curious little being who is fascinated by sounds, despite the fact that he is very hard of hearing. The idea originated from a simple walk taken by Tom and Erica Angell with their children and dog.¹¹⁾ They soon realized that, while the dog was fully engaged with its surroundings, the kids seemed a bit disconnected. This sparked a creative inquiry: how could young viewers be encouraged to explore their environment more actively, starting with the world of sound? Drawing on Erica's expertise in animation and Tom's background as a composer, the series set out to answer this question.

11) Tom Angell and Eric Angell, zoom call with author, September 5, 2024.



Fig. 1: The Sound Collector and his friend Mole (© Eagle Vs Bat / Enanimation)

Vintage Aesthetics and Pastoral Setting

TSC has many points in common with the tradition of preschool television and children's literature, especially in the way its characters are portrayed. The protagonist is an eight-inch-tall boy who, as stated in the series bible, belongs to the realm of "pixies and fairies" and "has an affinity with everything in the natural world."¹²⁾ This brings him closer to "green souls" such as Heidi or Calpurnia Tate, archetypal characters who share an intuitive connection with nature,¹³⁾ but also to the little people abounding in children's books since the Victorian age. The fact that he is part of a broader world of fellow Collectors — two characters named Seed Collector and Hebe the Bumblebee make occasional appearances throughout the series — reinforces the idea of a fairytale-like story.

The Sound Collector lives in a cottage by the river with Mole — always hungry, clumsy, and adorable. The presence of an animal sidekick in animation is a well-established trope, often used to lighten the tone of a narrative. Indeed, Mole provides companionship and comic relief with her funny behavior (a recurring gag sees her facing her nemesis, an unseen fly), whilst mirroring the often-messy, affectionate nature of real-life pets.¹⁴⁾ Just as Paddington the Bear, Mole allows the protagonist to take on a parental role, showing care

12) Eagle Vs Bat, *The Sound Collector Bible* (2022), 7.

13) Eleonora Fornasari and Ilenia Provenzi, *Le amiche formidabili* (Milan: DeAgostini, 2020), 207.

14) She was actually modeled on the creators' dog; Tom and Erica Angell, zoom call with author.

and concern.¹⁵⁾ As nonhuman beings, both Mole and the Sound Collector are stripped of social obligations, making it easier for them to embark on adventure: they do not attend school, have no parents, and yet function as a family.

TSC takes place in rural Britain, which plays a prominent role in the series, almost working as a character in its own right. Common locations include forests, streams and lakes, meadows, villages, beaches, and so on, primarily filmed in the South-West of England, where Tom and Erica Angells are based. The goal was to represent “the UK countryside in all its glory across all four seasons.”¹⁶⁾ This is evident in the title sequences, where a series of drone shots shows an old watermill and the Sound Collector’s miniature cottage surrounded by nature — lush and green in spring and summer, with red and brown foliage in autumn, or bare trees in winter.



Fig. 2: Seasonal shots from the title sequences (© Eagle Vs Bat / Enanimation)

The pastoral setting is a common feature in British children’s fiction. Already in the Edwardian era, a period of intense urbanization, natural settings and fantasy became strongly linked, along with the idyllic representation of childhood as a golden age of bliss and fun.¹⁷⁾ In television, puppet animated programs are also traditionally set in idealized communities of “middle England” since the birth of the medium and up to the 1990s and beyond.¹⁸⁾ For instance, Aardman Animation’s popular franchise *Wallace and Gromit* rec-

15) I elaborate here on observations made by Maria Nikolajeva on supporting characters in children’s literature; Maria Nikolajeva, *The Rhetoric of Character in Children’s Literature* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2002), 126–127.

16) Eagle Vs Bat, *The Sound Collector Bible*, 9.

17) Adrienne E. Gavin and Andrew F. Humphries, eds., *Childhood in Edwardian Fiction: Worlds Enough and Time* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 4.

18) David Buckingham, “Television,” in *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children’s Literature*, ed. Peter Hunt (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2004), 709.

creates a stylized world of British coziness, which, as Sargeant notes, seems nostalgic of “a less complicated, and less diverse, Britain than the one that exists today.”¹⁹⁾

TSC has a British feel, and this is part of the charm of this series. The importance of the location was evident from the creators’ effort to ensure accuracy. According to the head writer, “all action was described full for the storyboard artists,” who, being Italian, might not have been familiar with British landscapes,²⁰⁾ while Tom and Erica Angell filmed real-life locations to provide the necessary visual references. At the same time, the focus is less on British identity and more on experiencing the little moments of everyday life, such as inventing a new game when it is rainy outside (Episode 46, “Mole’s Magic Carpet”), looking at the sycamore leaves spinning through the air (Episode 41, “Wind Farm”), or waking up early to listen to morning sounds (Episode 5, “Snorgesbord”).

There is another point of divergence, concerning the role of technology. In the usual pastoral setting, technology is often featured as an antagonist or as a source of comedy (Sargeant gives the example of *Wallace and Gromit*’s eccentric gadgets, such as a home-made rocket to fly to the moon). Here, instead, technology is benign, harmless, and useful. It enables the protagonist to overcome his disability (more on this later) and record sounds. Moreover, all devices serve just one purpose and are reliable in their functionality. These devices being analog (magnetic tape recorders, vinyl records), they contribute to the retro aesthetic which correlates with a feeling of safety and nostalgia. Although it is made clear that the Sound Collector belongs to his little house by the river, connecting with the beauty of nature, there are also urban episodes, with traffic sounds, street musicians, and workers fixing the road (Episode 51, “Sound of the Town”).

The third major character in *TSC* is the narrator. This choice draws on an established tradition in British children’s TV, using different animation techniques. Examples are: *Andy Pandy* (1950, marionettes, remade in 2002 with stop-motion puppets), *Bill and Ben — The Flowerpot Men* (1952–1953, marionettes, remade in 2002), *Pogles’ Wood* (1965–1968, stop motion), *Bagpuss* (1974, stop motion), *The Clangers* (1969–1974, stop motion, remade in 2015–2020), *Paddington* (1976–1980, stop motion), *Tales Of The Riverbank* (1960–1964, live action animals), *Mary, Mungo and Midge* (1969, cut outs that moved in real time), and *The Herbs* (1969, stop motion).

TSC is set aside from this tradition by the voice actor, who is female, which is rare, and the narrative style. In fact, the narrator is not omniscient but quite passive in terms of story progression. Rather than assisting the protagonist, it gives voice to the audience. It is worth noticing that the voice actor, Keira Knightley, had kids of the target audience’s age at the time of recording. She allowed her acting to include her own experience, keeping a genuine tone.

19) Alexander Sargeant, “Wallace and Gromit and the British Fantasy Tradition,” in *Aardman Animations: Beyond Stop Motion*, ed. Annabelle Honess Roe (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

20) Dave Ingham, email with the author, September 4, 2024.

Disability Representation: Sound and Deafness

In *TSC*, technology has a further positive connotation as it helps the protagonist overcome his hearing impairment. The Sound Collector hears sounds by pointing his microphone, which are then amplified in his headphones: this process necessarily alters the sound design of the show and how auditory experiences are presented to the audience, too. They hear sounds the way the protagonist does, and this contributes to experiencing his disability.

There are precedents of shows where certain narrative or stylistic choices help the viewers relate to a protagonist who has a disability. As posited in cultivation theory, media have a strong influence on children's lives and their perception of the world.²¹⁾ Therefore, values such as inclusivity are advocated to encourage positive behavior. Media portrayal of disabled characters can help reduce stigma and challenge negative social attitudes, which are the roots of ableism.²²⁾ This is particularly relevant in children's media, where despite good intentions, the representation of disability could fall into a stereotypical pity-based characterization, reinforcing the idea of disabled individuals as clinical problems rather than highlighting their different abilities.²³⁾

In the British landscape, there are recent shows treating disability. Examples include: *Pablo* (2017–2020, autism), *Melody* (2013–2015, visual impairment), *Mixmups* (2023, visual impairment and wheelchair), and *Magic Hands* (2013, hearing impairments). These series engage audiences employing different strategies: for instance, sounds and animation styles appropriate for visually impaired children or the use of sign language. On the one hand, their characters work as identification for people with disability. On the other hand, people without any impairment can feel a different viewpoint and empathize with the experience of disability, which is an important aspect of "crip animation."²⁴⁾ Moreover, some of these series, such as *Mixmups* and *Pablo*, were created by a disability-led team, which adds to their authenticity.

In the case of *TSC*, disability is represented tactfully, simply showing how, at the beginning of each episode, the Sound Collector puts on his hearing aids. This also allows the viewer to share his experience: when the aids are switched on, the auditory landscape comes to life. What makes the representation more relevant is that deaf portrayals are still not very common in the media, although the World Health Organization estimates that around 466 million people worldwide have hearing loss.²⁵⁾ Eagle Vs Bat were aware that

21) Abigail Walsh and Leaper Campbel, "A Content Analysis of Gender Representations in Preschool Children's Television," *Mass Communication and Society* 23, no. 3 (2020), 331–355.

22) Lingling Zhang and Beth Haller, "Parasocial Contact Effects and a Disabled Actor in *Speechless*," in *Disability Representation in Film, TV, and Print Media*, ed. Michael S. Jeffress (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2022), 15.

23) Jesse Holcomb and Kate Latham-Mintus, "Disney and Disability: Media Representations of Disability in Disney and Pixar Animated Films," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (2022), 176; Madeleine DeWelles, "The Communication of Disability through Children's Media: Potential, Problems, and Potential Problems," in *Disability Representation in Film, TV, and Print Media*, ed. Jeffress, 162–179.

24) Slava Greenberg, *Animated Film and Disability: Crippling Spectatorship* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2023).

25) "Una serie inclusiva e tecnicamente rivoluzionaria: è 'Il Cercasuoni,'" *RAI*, November 23, 2023, accessed September 28, 2025, <https://www.rai.it/ufficiostampa/assets/template/us-articolo.html?ssiPath=/articolo->

hearing difficulties are often associated with elderly people, and that stop-motion puppets can “feel slow and ploddy” in their movements, reinforcing this perception. For this reason, they were “very fussy” about the Sound Collector’s rigging.²⁶⁾ To maintain a sense of youthful energy, they insisted that the character was dressed as a real kid, with baggy jeans and sneakers, and that his movements remained quick and natural.

Mole also has a disability, that is, visual impairment, compensated by its exceptional sense of smell; the underlying idea is that a disability can be paired with a different, heightened ability. However, the show does not shy away from just portraying the drawbacks of a disability: so, the Sound Collector is at times frustrated with his handicap, making him a more relatable character. For example, in Episode 31 (“Harp Strings”), he angrily takes out his aids when multiple people enter the room and start making noises, making it harder for him to hear the sound of a harp.

In fact, the show’s aim was to narrate the story of a character who loves sounds (despite his disability), and who manages to appreciate the world via its sounds. The Sound Collector uses his hearing aids as tools for exploration rather than letting them define him, and there is no confusion between personality and disability: he just happens to be deaf, but his hearing impairment is not his main feature. This seems especially valuable at a time when disability can be included in media as a token gesture, and not always considered in depth.²⁷⁾

The creators of *TSC* chose not to use sign language in their show, as it changes from country to country.²⁸⁾ Nonetheless, the series benefited from consultations with the British Society of Audiologists (BSA) and from exceptional ambassadors like Welsh deaf percussionist Evelyn Glennie. For example, Dr. Ted Killan from BSA was involved by “viewing edits of show episodes and providing feedback on the sound balance and language used in the scripts.”²⁹⁾ Glennie also contributed to the creation of subtitles for non-hearing audiences, offering crucial insights. She helped the creative team understand that describing sounds to someone who has never heard them requires alternative sensory references. Rather than saying “It sounds like bells,” she would use tactile descriptions like “scratchy” or “soft like cotton wool.”³⁰⁾

Innovations in Narrative Structure

The success of *TSC* with a broad audience can also be attributed to its simple yet innovative narrative structure. Frequently, preschool animation features short and simple stories;

li/2023/11/Una-serie-inclusiva-e-tecnicamente-rivoluzionaria-e-Il-Cercasuoni-70579471-2760-4be5-8969-70974a0f63b9-ssi.html.

26) Tom and Erica Angell, zoom call with the author.

27) Aileen Blackborough, “Bringing Disability into the Media Spotlight,” *aideenblackborough*, November 17, 2014, accessed September 18, 2025, <https://aideenblackborough.com/2015/11/17/bringing-disability-into-the-media-spotlight/>.

28) Tom and Erica Angell, zoom call with the author.

29) “TV Collaboration for audiology expert,” *University of Leeds*, March 14, 2023, accessed September 18, 2025, <https://medicinehealth.leeds.ac.uk/faculty-/news/article/605/tv-collaboration-for-audiology-expert>.

30) Tom and Erica Angell, zoom call with the author.

this is instrumental to engage a young audience and enable them to decode the plot, understand emotions, and internalize cultural values.³¹⁾ Key elements of this simplicity are a short format (3–11 min), repetitions, and a problem/solution plot scheme. Just as in fairytales, the protagonist achieves their goal by overcoming a series of small obstacles (usually three): this narrative device confers rhythm to storytelling and makes the story more engaging.³²⁾ Repetitions help children better process the story (for instance, establishing cause/effect relations), and are cost-effective from a production perspective. Evidence is that children will watch the same episode again, hence their enjoyment is not affected by a repeated scene.³³⁾

TSC shares some of the features described above, like brevity and simplicity. Scripts averaged eight pages — each page traditionally equating to 1.5 minutes of film in animation — with a limit of fifty dialogue lines. The number of scenes ranged from nine to twelve, with limited cuts and transitions to assist children's comprehension. Another point in common is the use of recurring scenes (morning routines, shared meals, evening gatherings). An example is the teaser of each episode, which shows the Sound Collector and Mole waking up, accompanied by extra-diegetic music and the Narrator repeating the same introductory lines ("Around and along... in the middle of somewhere... lives a little Sound Collector. Ah yes, and his best friend, Mole"). These repetitions, together with the seasonal transition of the episodes, create a cyclical structure.

What is missing is a rigid problem/solution scheme as the plot driver. Already, the Australian show *Bluey* (2018) — the most-streamed TV series across America in 2024³⁴⁾ — has shown that the series can be more flexible in story construction, without negatively impacting engagement. In *TSC*, a typical episode will show the protagonist waking up and setting out to explore new sounds; Mole has its own subplot, which can be independent from the Sound Collector. However, within this model, there is a high degree of variation. Mole might join the Sound Collector or meet him at the end of the episode; some episodes are set indoors, while others in various locations, either during the day or at night; the Sound Collector might hitch a ride on a horse or car; he might hear a peculiar sound and follow it.

A further marker of distinction is the lack of fantastic or surreal settings. Traditionally, British children's TV features magical worlds, nonsense, and absurd humor, as in the popular live-action show *Teletubbies* (1997–2001).³⁵⁾ This is often connected with the problem/solution scheme, when present, with the protagonist entering a fantasy dimension to remedy the initial issue (a process screenwriters may describe, following Christo-

31) Valerio Fuenzalida, "Quality Criteria in Narrative and Script Writing for Children's Television (Ages 0–6)," *Communication Research Trends* 36, no. 2 (2017), 10.

32) Maria Chiara Oltolini, "Scrivere bambini, scrivere per bambini," in *Storia delle Serie Tv*, Vol. 1, eds. Armando Fumagalli, Cassandra Albani, and Paolo Braga (Roma: Dino Audino Editore, 2021), 207.

33) Tali Te'Eni-Harari, Keren Eyal, and Matan Aharoni, "It's Complicated: Plot and Formal Feature Complexity in Early Childhood Television Content," *Mass Communication and Society* 23, no. 4 (2020), 579–583.

34) Jimmy Briggs, "Bluey Celebrates 'Incredible' Achievement as the Aussie Kid's Series Continues to Take the US by Storm," *Daily Mail Australia*, September 10, 2024, accessed September 18, 2025, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/TVshowbiz/article-13833345/Bluey-celebrates-incredible-achievement.html>.

35) Buckingham, "Television," 709.

pher Vogler's "*Hero's Journey*," the passage from the Ordinary to the Special World).³⁶⁾ Regardless of fantastic elements, there is an expectation of plausible human features. For example, in *Peppa Pig* (2004–2020), a family of pigs must be recognizable with the same dynamics and behavior as a human family, and this was pivotal to the worldwide popularity of the show.³⁷⁾

In *TSC*, there are, of course, fantastic elements, like the fairy-like protagonist or the (slightly) anthropomorphized animal sidekick, and magic is not fully obliterated. On one occasion, the Sound Collector hears fairies laughing in the forest (Episode 11, "Magical Sounds"). Nonetheless, the exploration takes place within the "ordinary" world. Natural landscape and built environment are portrayed in a true-to-life way (in fact, those are live elements within stop motion animation). Unlike the tiny people of the British classic *The Borrowers* (Norton, 1952), who repurpose human objects to fit their size, the Sound Collector's house is scaled to his own dimensions, creating a lifelike feel. Even his technology is plausible.

The 3D look of stop-motion puppets, which seems to particularly appeal to preschoolers,³⁸⁾ was pivotal to the creation of a convincing world, even for adult viewers. MacKinnon & Saunders, who worked as model builders for famous children's series such as *Bob the Builder* (1999–2011) or *Postman Pat* (1981–2017), are known for their meticulous attention to detail. The Sound Collector's miniature instruments include a tiny Melotron, and there are hidden references to iconic bands like The Beatles. Paul McCartney's



Fig. 3: The Sound Collector's home recording studio. Note the amp branded "EVB" (© Eagle Vs Bat / Enanimation)

36) Christopher Vogler, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers* (Studio City: Michael Wiese Productions, 2007), 83.

37) Francesco Mangiapane, "Peppa Pig and Friends: Semiotic Remarks Over Meaning-Making of Some Cartoons Targeted to the Early-Childhood in the Italian Television," *International Journal for the Semiotics of the Law* 31, no. 3 (2018), 454.

38) Jeannette Steemers, *Creating Preschool Television: A Story of Commerce, Creativity and Curriculum* (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 137.

bass guitar is visible among the props, and there is a picture of the Sound Collector and Mole walking on Abbey Road, echoing the famous album cover from 1969.

This fits within the mission to involve the public in believing that a sense of wonder can be part of everyone's experience, and not just fiction. In fact, in preschool animation, a relevant theme is that of curiosity and exploration. Protagonists seek adventures, and viewers are empowered to do as well: acknowledging their own agency is important for their psychological development.³⁹⁾

Often, the problem/solution scheme offers a convenient platform for the adventure, and a fantastic setting contributes to it with a variety of possibilities. *TSC* uses a faithful portrayal of its environment to showcase how adventure can be sought for the sake of exploration, and found even in the most familiar spaces. For example, the Sound Collector looks in awe at the flocks of starlings creating displays in the sky (Episode 35, "Murmurations"), and marvels at the tinkling sounds of a mechanic working in a garage (Episode 54, "The Sound of Silence"). These simple but engaging narrations encourage viewers to value nature and rediscover their surroundings.

Scriptwriting Patterns

As is typical in animation, the scriptwriting process for *TSC* consisted of three phases: synopsis, outline, and script. When the screenwriters were appointed, synopses (a paragraph-long version of the story narrated in one episode) had already been decided. Since the live-action elements of each episode needed to be shot throughout the year, the series had to be planned out from the start, leaving no room for a writers' room experience.⁴⁰⁾ So, for us writers, the most demanding phase was the outline: a two-page document with a numbered list of scenes, suggested lines for the Narrator, and notes on sound. From there, the work moved on to the script.

In my experience, there were aspects of this process that departed from standard practice. As a rule of thumb, screenwriters have little communication with other departments and often remain unaware of the animation aspects until the episodes are aired. In this case, however, we had extensive access to set photos, puppet designs, and behind-the-scenes footage, which allowed us to immerse ourselves in the world of the series. In particular, the photos of *maquettes* (scale models of unfinished sets, with character size proportions and prop placements) were essential for accurately visualizing scenes. This was crucial because 3D characters are less malleable and have more limited movement compared to 2D animation, while physical sets "may have certain limits that permit only a certain number of characters and scenery."⁴¹⁾ Access to these images made it possible to imagine narrative beats in which the characters interacted with their surroundings in a believable way.

39) Fuenzalida, "Quality Criteria in Narrative and Script Writing for Children's Television (Ages 0–6)," 11.

40) Ingham, email with the author, June 23, 2022.

41) Chris Pallant and Paul Wells, "Everybody Chips in Ten Cents, and Somehow It Seems to Add up to a Dollar": Exploring the Visual Toolbox of Animation Story Design," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Screenwriting Studies*, eds. Claus Tieber, Paolo Russo, and Rosamund Davies (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2023), 278.

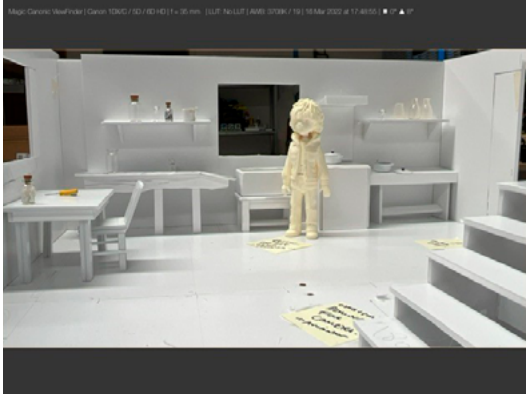


Fig. 4: Maquette of the Sound Collector's house (© Eagle Vs Bat / Enanimation)

Secondly, revisions were minimal and generally concerned practical issues rather than narrative overhauls. In the episodes I wrote — chosen not as exemplary cases but because I have access to all stages of their development — typical changes involved:

- altering a location; for example, in Episode 25 (“The Piano”), where the Sound Collector plays the piano by walking across the keys, the setting was changed three times: from a private house to a little church, and finally a rehearsal studio, suiting the jazz music created by the protagonist;
- adapting to the live-action footage; for example, a draft originally set in summer, such as Episode 48 (“Buzzy Business”), ended up being set in autumn due to the variable weather conditions of filming in Britain; or the wallabies which the Sound Collector sees at a wildlife park in Episode 42 (“Meerkat Mayhem”) were changed to lemurs due to live-action constraints;
- reusing scenes for cost-efficiency; for instance, in the aforementioned Episode 48, the planned original ending was replaced with a recurring scene in which the Sound Collector gives Mole a bath, which has the additional advantage of providing a cuddly close to the episode;
- trimming or merging of adjacent scenes (via camera movements); this was often the case with episodes set in external locations, such as Episode 23 (“Horse Power”): here the Sound Collector meets and rides a horse, his interaction possibilities being limited to animation constraints. So, a camera note in the broadcast script explains how the recording of the horse’s galloping actually takes place (“We cut from the Sound Collector to a low shot of the hooves on different surfaces”);
- adjustments to the Narrator’s lines to ensure they sounded more natural, concise, and empathetic; according to Ingham, this was crucial to keep her voice “in the moment” and avoid over-writing.⁴²⁾ Some revisions were also made during recording and with Knightley’s help, as certain lines felt out of character when spoken aloud.⁴³⁾

42) Ingham, email with the author, 2024.

43) Tom and Erica Angell, zoom call with author.

A third innovative aspect is that, although education content is central in preschool series, the head writer and the production studios integrated it without an overtly didactic approach. For instance, in Episode 22 (“Rewilding”), the Sound Collector and Mole visit a forest where trees had been cut. The synopsis included a note from Ingham emphasizing that, while the episode had an “environmental connection,” it should avoid becoming a broader statement, as the intention was to present a scenario that parents could later contextualize for children.⁴⁴⁾

The final point to note is that, despite the changes, the writers’ original ideas were preserved, including quiet moments of everyday life. This is unusual in animation, where there is typically little room for beats that do not move the action forward — a point that will be further developed in the next paragraph. Examples are the Sound Collector diving into a pile of leaves (Episode 45, “Buzzy Business”), blowing a grass whistle (Episode 25), or pluming in the frosty air (Episode 50, “Nice on the Ice”). Visual cues to describe the characters’ behaviors were usually kept as well. For instance, when the Sound Collector and Mole do some ice-skating on a frozen puddle (Episode 50), the allusion to “Ponchielli’s Dance of the Hours in *Fantasia*” was accepted alongside Ingham’s initial comparison with the British ice-skaters Torvill and Dean.⁴⁵⁾

The Role of Sound Between Writing and Animation

The relationship between sound and narration is a defining feature of *TSC*. In the show, characters do not speak; instead, the invisible Narrator does, while interactions between the characters are conveyed through physical reactions and non-verbal sounds. This placed specific demands on us writers. First, the absence of dialogue required telling stories in a very clear and visual way, emphasizing sound over dialogue. Second, the sound design, overseen by Tom Angell, needed to be carefully reproduced and meticulously scripted. This was conducive to increasing the cinematic quality of the show, which, as Tom put it, should not have been “repetitive and dull” just because it was intended for little children.⁴⁶⁾ Third, sound served as a narrative device. For example, the Sound Collector’s tapes might mismatch sounds comically or make viewers reflect on how sound interacts with visuals.

As the series’ screenwriters, we were asked to pay close attention to these aspects, as they were central to the writing of the episodes. Regarding the absence of dialogue, the broadcasters trusted the creators’ decision despite being initially against it, especially for Mole’s character.⁴⁷⁾ Such concerns are understandable, given the appeal of talking animals, typical of fables, in animation. The silent interactions between the Sound Collector and Mole led to the central role of the Narrator, who actively helps viewers find the characters and clarifies unfolding events.

44) Ingham, email with the author, April 22, 2022.

45) Ingham, email with the author, June 2, 2022.

46) Tom and Erica Angell, zoom call with the author.

47) Tom and Erica Angell, zoom call with the author.

The need for precise sound writing in scripts introduces an interesting topic in the field of children’s preschool animation. Unlike most TV series for a young audience, where scripted sounds are often limited to musical montages or magical sequences, *TSC* demanded detailed notation of each sound. While the writing conventions we used were standard in animation (with sounds usually written in uppercase and either marked with angle brackets or preceded by SFX, i.e., Sound Effects),⁴⁸⁾ what was remarkable to me was the abundance of sounds and the level of detail in their description.

Sound could be employed for various purposes, such as:

- shaping mood; examples are the Sound Collector producing calming music when Mole is in an excitable mood (Episode 5, “How to Calm a Mole”), or when she is frightened by thunder (Episode 6, “Stormy Day”);
- assigning original sounds to non-musical elements, such as “a spider spinning a web, or the moon, or clouds, or fish underwater”—a technique called “soundtracking” in the series bible;⁴⁹⁾ for example, in Episode 10, the Sound Collector plays a piano music when he sees a beautiful, but obviously silent, bluebell wood;
- creating music from sampled sounds; for example, at the end of Episode 35, the Sound Collector records a donkey bray and then replays it in different keys, with Mole popping up and down from her molehill in time to his “music”;
- making music with natural objects; for example, in Episode 60 (“Ice Music”), the Sound Collector sees some icicles and plays on them like a xylophone;

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SFX: LOUD MASSIVE SOUND OF THE WORLD

He trains the microphone onto the waterwheel as it turns with
water cascading from its buckets. (Live non-interactive
footage.)

SFX: CASCADE OF WATER AND CREAK OF WHEEL

He records the noise of a tractor rolling along the lane. (Live
non-interactive footage.)

SFX: CRUNCH OF TYRES AND BURBLE OF ENGINE

01:01
10                                NARRATOR (V.O.)                                10
                                Off to harvest in the fields...

SFX: BOUNCING AND SQUEAKING O/S

01:06
11                                NARRATOR (V.O.)                                11
                                Huh?

A squeaky ball flies into shot - He catches it.
```

Fig. 5: Sound notation examples in Episode 48

48) Live-action segments are an exception, as they were simply indicated as “live non-interactive footage” to acknowledge the unpredictability of what the crew might actually have filmed (e.g., a singing bird might have varied depending on the available footage).
49) Eagle Vs Bat, *The Sound Collector Bible*, 2.

- experiencing sound through both hearing and vibrations; in Episode 31, when the Sound Collector is unable to hear the harp sounds through the babble, he places his hand on the sound box, feeling the vibrations of its strings;
- using sounds to sense approaching characters; in Episode 3 (“Night Noises”), whilst camping in his moonlit garden, the Sound Collector senses a “louder growing rumbling noise,” signaling Mole digging a tunnel to reach him;
- blending diegetic and non-diegetic music, usually to connect different scenes or storylines when Mole and the Sound Collector are apart.

Sound accuracy was also a priority in the animation of *TSC*. In the animation industry, voices are recorded before the animation begins so that the animators can render the characters’ mouth shapes to accurately match the words, while the music and sound effects are added in post-production, after the animation is completed. However, for *TSC* sound was planned and created from scripts onwards, favoring sound design over music.⁵⁰⁾ Sound was then integrated during the animatic stage, a sort of animated storyboard which gives the sense of “timing and rhythm” of the episode before it is fully animated.⁵¹⁾

Tom Angell was passionate about sending the message that sound matters, although this impacted production time and costs.⁵²⁾ Since diegetic and extra-diegetic music had to be recorded beforehand, and stop-motion requires every prop to be built before even one minute of animation can be completed, it took twenty months in total to produce all episodes — a long time compared to other preschool series, which can be completed in six-to-eight months. Animators were also guided for musical performances. For example, Tom Angell recorded himself playing the cello to provide animators of Episode 9 (“Cello Cello”) with precise finger placements.

Another aspect of sound design worth mentioning is the rhythm of storytelling. It is often the case that entertainment preschool programs — as opposed to strictly educational ones — feature fast-paced action to keep children engaged in viewing and attract a slightly older audience.⁵³⁾ The speed is implemented through narrative complexity, packed gags, quick cut-scenes, and camera movements, as well as through an abundance of visual and auditory stimuli (bright colors, sound effects). Contrary to this trend, *TSC* keeps a more relaxed pace. There are visual comedy and slapstick elements, particularly through Mole’s impish behavior, but they are isolated, without the urge to show many one after another.

Eagle Vs Bat and Ingham instructed us screenwriters to approach episodes as more akin to a mindfulness experience, a practice increasingly integrated into school curricula to help children manage stress.⁵⁴⁾ In conversations I had with the team, they compared the activity of writing (and watching) the series to ASMR videos, which have gained popularity on YouTube. Autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR) is a neurological phe-

50) Eagle Vs Bat, *The Sound Collector Bible*, 5.

51) Paul Wells, *Basics Animation 01: Scriptwriting* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2007), 110.

52) Tom and Erica Angell, zoom call with the author.

53) Te’eni-Harari, Eyal, and Aharoni, “It’s Complicated: Plot and Formal Feature Complexity in Early Childhood Television Content,” 583.

54) Eagle Vs Bat, *The Sound Collector Bible*, 4.

nomenon typically associated with “tingles” on the skin as well as sensations of relaxation and well-being.⁵⁵⁾

Like ASMR, the series emphasizes sensory awareness — visually, through the beauty of the images, and audibly, through subtle, intimate soundscapes. This is reinforced by the already recalled narrative beats in which the characters explore the world and its little things. According to Ingham, “The design and music married with sound design and the use of ‘quiet’ was unique and something I believed was really needed for kids’ attention and focus on a marketplace where the preschool genre really can be heavy-handed where sound is concerned.”⁵⁶⁾

Concluding Remarks

TSC situates itself within the British tradition of children’s fiction, featuring traditional elements such as fairytale-like characters and a pastoral setting, as well as structural simplicity and an inclusive message. In spite of the rural location, the contemporary world was not obliterated, and there was a positive framing of technology, conveying a sense of modern nostalgia. While it offered a credible portrayal of disability, *TSC* was not a show about deafness but rather about a character enamored of sounds. The precise reconstruction of real-life locations, aided by the 3D quality of stop-motion animation, conveyed the idea that wonderful things can happen in everyday life.

As a writer for the show, I encountered a greater diversity in narrative construction, moving beyond a problem-solution pattern. Unlike in many productions, where episodes may be heavily rewritten by the head writer, the concept of *TSC* was clearly defined from the start. As writer Gaia Agostinelli puts it:

There was plenty of reference materials, the style and guidelines were clear, and screenwriters were given the right amount of creative freedom (within well-defined boundaries). As a result, the process ran smoothly, with no major setbacks or re-writes. Editing of the outlines was always minimal and never substantial — I believe this is only possible when the creators have a clear vision of the final result and communicate it effectively to the screenwriters.⁵⁷⁾

Sound was a focal point in the series, deeply influencing animation and writing. Its diegetic use enhanced engagement and relatability, serving as a useful tool of plot construction. From a screenwriter’s perspective, we had to develop story ideas in which what is usually treated as a secondary element — sound — became central, with an ASMR-like quality. Our task was not to propose fantastical adventures, but to focus on tiny details, in-

55) Giulia L. Poerio, Emma Blakey, Tom J. Hostler, and Theresa Veltri, “More Than a Feeling: Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) is Characterized by Reliable Changes in Affect and Physiology,” *PLOS ONE* 13, no. 6 (2018).

56) Ingham, email with the author, September 4, 2024.

57) Gaia Agostinelli, email with the author, August 18, 2024.

viting viewers to slow down, listen, and appreciate the world around them, one sound at a time. This represented an interesting variation in a context where fast-paced action is often the norm, both in children's animation and beyond.

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Biography

Maria Chiara Oltolini is a children's writer and researcher. She began her career in animation at Calon TV in Cardiff, specializing in preschool series, and later worked as a freelance writer. She has a BA, MA, and PhD from Università Cattolica of Milan, Italy, where she has been working as a Teaching Assistant in Semiotics and History and Language of International Cinema for several years. Her research interests include children's literature, adaptation, animation, and Japanese culture. She is the author of *Rediscovered Classics of Japanese Animation: The Adaptation of Children's Novels into the World Masterpiece Theater Series* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2024).

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The Living Script

Proposing an Adaptive Practice in Humaira Bilkis's Things I Could Never Tell My Mother (2022)

Abstract

This paper examines Bangladeshi filmmaker Humaira Bilkis's feature film, *Things I Could Never Tell My Mother*, through genetic criticism and screenwriting theories to propose the concept of the living script: a dynamic narrative framework that evolves in response to real-time discoveries, emotional shifts, and ethical dilemmas. Bilkis's film exemplifies this process, weaving intergenerational dialogues and confessional sequences to negotiate complex cultural and inter-religious boundaries within Bangladeshi society.

By analysing early drafts, directorial notes, and an interview with the filmmaker, the study reveals how Bilkis's narrative adapts to the contingencies of production. This fluid approach embodies a self-reflexive negotiation between storytelling and cultural discourse, engages with core debates in documentary theory, and offers a symbolic dialogue from a Global South perspective. Ultimately, the concept of the living script provides an adaptive framework for understanding screenwriting as a site of negotiation between intention, collaboration, and reality, particularly in narrative films employing documentary aesthetics.

Keywords

Bangladeshi film, creative documentary, ethical dilemma, living script, transcultural transfer

I don't have aesthetic objectives. I have aesthetic means at my disposal, which are necessary for me to be able to say what I want to say about the things I see. And the thing I see is something outside of myself — always.
Paul Strand¹⁾

Screenwriting, as a discipline, has long been dominated by rigid forms and predetermined structures. Yet, in recent years, scholars and practitioners have begun to interrogate the very nature of the script as a static document, arguing instead for its potential as a dynamic, iterative entity.²⁾ In this paper, I propose the concept of the living script as a framework to understand how narrative filmmaking — especially within the creative documentary and docufiction genres — can function as an evolving dialogue between creative intention and the unpredictable flux of real life. In contrast to Merewether's notion of living documents³⁾, which emphasizes processual flexibility primarily in terms of structural and logistical adaptations, the living script foregrounds emotional shifts and ethical dilemmas as critical drivers of narrative transformation.

This study focuses on Humaira Bilki's *Things I Could Never Tell My Mother*, a film that negotiates intergenerational, inter-religious, and cultural boundaries through its conversational and personal style and fluid narrative structure. Bilki's work emerges from a Bangladeshi context marked by both historical tensions and contemporary societal transformations. As such, her film offers a unique site for exploring how the script adapts during production — from early drafts and directorial notes to the final cut — responding not only to practical constraints but also to emotional revelations and ethical imperatives.

The objectives of this article are twofold. First, it seeks to elaborate the theoretical contours of the living script, demonstrating how emotional and ethical dimensions become embedded in the narrative-making process. Second, it aims to show how these dimensions facilitate a re-grounding of living scripts with the notion of documentary style like *cinéma vérité* or observational mode, the “*cine-eye*” philosophy and the ethical concerns of representations, authorial responsibility and subject-filmmaker relationship. In doing so, the paper contributes to a broader rethinking of screenwriting theories, one that privileges creative alchemy over deterministic structures.

The Static Screen, the Moving Image, and the Weaver

The cinematic practice of Humaira Bilki is centered on the nexus of history, politics, and personal experience. Her creative methodology is characterized by a researcher's intellectual rigor, an ethnographer's observational acuity, and a conversationalist's sensibility. With an academic qualification in mass communication and journalism from the Univer-

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- 1) Michael Renov, “Toward a Poetics of Documentary,” in *Theorizing Documentary*, ed. Michael Renov (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 12–36.
 - 2) Ian W. Macdonald, *Screenwriting Poetics and the Screen Idea* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 22–23.
 - 3) Janet Merewether, “Shaping the Documentary Subject: Writing and Visualizing the Documentary and Media Art Script,” *Journal of Screenwriting* 6, no. 1 (2015), 89–113.

sity of Dhaka, Bilkis began her practical training through filmmaking and cinematography workshops during her undergraduate studies. This period coincided with the early 2000s, an era when digital filmmaking was not yet a prevalent option in a Least Developed Country (LDC) like Bangladesh. Consequently, Bilkis pursued a conventional trajectory to acquire experience in film production, undertaking roles on various projects. Of particular note is her engagement as an assistant producer for *A Journey of a Thousand Miles: Peacekeepers* (2015), a production by two-time Academy Award-winning documentary filmmaker Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy. Subsequently, Bilkis graduated from the Creative Documentary program at the Sri Aurobindo Centre for Arts and Communication in New Delhi. This practice-based academic training enabled her to explore guerrilla filmmaking techniques, blending personal autoethnography with feminist textures and examining the complexity of human relationships through an observational approach. As she defines her approach to filmmaking:⁴⁾

I prefer the ethnographic “fly on the wall” approach. I start with a hypothesis in mind, but let my observations guide me towards what the final narrative is, trying to remain as objective as possible. I do all my own camera work, so I like working with a light hand-held camera. For *The Things I Could Never Tell My Mother*, it had to be more interactive, since it was a personal, partly autobiographical work, of course.

Bilkis’s work is self-reflexive. The film’s central conflict, as detailed in its press kit,⁵⁾ originates from a profound ideological schism within her family. The filmmaker’s mother, Khaleda Bilkis, formerly a passionate poet who cultivated her daughter’s appreciation for the arts, underwent a significant transformation following her Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca in 2002. Adopting a strictly religious lifestyle in accordance with Sharia law, she repudiated her previous cultural engagements and now insists her daughter abandon filmmaking, citing Islam’s prohibition of human representation. This divergence presents a fundamental paradox for Bilkis, as her chosen medium of expression has become the object of her mother’s condemnation. This situation engenders a central question that the film endeavors to address: How can the cinematic apparatus — an instrument of representation that has become a source of ideological conflict — be repurposed by the filmmaker as a potential medium for reconnection and understanding?

The film navigates this inquiry through a deeply personal narrative. Bilkis initially agrees to undertake the Hajj with her mother, perceiving the journey as an opportunity for reconciliation and as a moment to disclose her clandestine interfaith relationship with a Hindu partner in India. However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic precludes the pilgrimage, compelling them to remain confined within the family home as her parents’ health deteriorates. It is within this period of enforced proximity that Bilkis directs the camera inward, grappling with the complexities of her maternal bond and seeking to identify the shared values that might still connect them across their profound divide. This shift

4) Sabrina Fatma Ahmad, “Q&A With Humaira Bilkis,” *MW*, March 29, 2023, accessed September 14, 2025, <https://mansworldbangladesh.com/2023/03/29/qa-with-humaira-bilkis/>.

5) “*Things I Could Never Tell My Mother*,” 2022, Humaira Bilkis’s Personal Archive, Dhaka: Bangladesh.

from a planned journey to an unforeseen confinement exemplifies the film's status as a living script: a narrative framework that evolves in response to the contingencies of production and real-time emotional discoveries. The filmmaker's initial intention — to explore societal shifts by examining her mother's life — was itself a response to a broader generational disconnect she observed among her peers. However, the pandemic necessitated a radical adaptation, transforming the project's methodology. By focusing the camera on her immediate domestic reality, Bilki's process embodies a self-reflexive negotiation between her original storytelling objectives and the unavoidable present. *Things I Could Never Tell My Mother* thus becomes a necessary exemplar of the living script concept. The film's narrative is not merely executed from a static blueprint but is actively shaped by the evolving dialogue between filmmaker and subject, past and present, intention and reality. By engaging with themes of transformation, ideological conflict, and transgressive love, the film challenges the conventional moral boundaries of representing private life within Dhaka's contemporary filmmaking culture. It serves as a reference to a transformative practice where the screenplay itself becomes a site of negotiation, allowing for a resonant, autobiographical narrative to emerge from the complex and often unpredictable interplay of life and art.

The Living Script: An Argument for Flexibility, Discovery, and Affective Truth

Recent scholarship in documentary screenwriting has increasingly challenged the traditional dichotomy that posits the form as inherently unscripted. Theorists like Brian Winston⁶⁾ have dismantled the notion of the “script as an oxymoron,” demonstrating how even observational cinema achieves narrative coherence through iterative scripting processes. His analysis of filmmakers like Frederick Wiseman reveals that films celebrated for their spontaneity are often undergirded by structured, albeit flexible, written frameworks. This line of inquiry has been expanded by others who conceptualize the script as a provisional tool. Jouko Aaltonen⁷⁾, for instance, frames the documentary script as a “hypothesis” that is continually revised in response to real-world unpredictability, while Janet Merewether⁸⁾ introduces the idea of “living documents” that adapt to on-set improvisations, participant agency, and ethical considerations.

While these perspectives valuably highlight the script's processual and logistical flexibility, they tend to stop short of fully exploring the affective and moral dimensions that underpin narrative evolution. The work of John Iwuh and Nicodemus Adai Patrick⁹⁾ on docufiction, which examines the delicate balance between fact and fiction, begins to touch on this by emphasizing the ethical imperative to signal embedded facts through narrative.

6) Brian Winston, “The Documentary Script as an Oxymoron?,” *Journal of Screenwriting* 6, no. 3 (2015), 287–300.

7) Jouko Aaltonen, “Script as a Hypothesis: Scriptwriting for Documentary Film,” *Journal of Screenwriting* 8, no. 1 (2017), 55–65.

8) Merewether, “Shaping the Documentary Subject.”

9) John Iwuh and Nicodemus Adai Patrick, “Reading the Docufiction Script: Harnessing the Thin Line Between Facts and Fiction,” *Journal of Screenwriting* 13, no. 3 (2022), 375–387.

However, a conceptual gap remains in operationalizing how emotional shifts and ethical dilemmas function not as obstacles, but as vital creative drivers in documentary storytelling. The concept of a “living script” bridges this gap by defining the script as an evolving narrative framework continuously reshaped by real-time discoveries, emotional shifts, and ethical recalibrations, thereby foregrounding the pursuit of emergent emotional truths.

The viability of this concept is substantiated by the flexible screenplay strategies of practitioners like independent filmmaker and academic Jill Daniels and interdisciplinary scholar and screen theorist Kathryn Millard. Daniels’s¹⁰⁾ conception of the script as a “working document” aligns perfectly with the ethos of the living script. She reinterprets the documentary form’s uncertainty as a source of creative plasticity, allowing the narrative to be shaped by “chance and the flexibility to change course.” In her film *Not Reconciled* (2009), a spontaneously witnessed fire was incorporated as a key structuring metaphor, altering the entire narrative’s thematic trajectory. Daniels uses her script — a “maggie collection of research findings, preliminary reflections and ideas”¹¹⁾ — to construct a film’s “emotional arc,” demonstrating how a multi-modal, evolving text can find its form through the process of its own making.

Similarly, Kathryn Millard’s¹²⁾ argument to reconceive screenplays as “design prototypes” provides a robust theoretical framework for the living script. Millard critiques rigid, linear “waterfall design” in screenwriting, advocating instead for an “iterative design” cycle of prototyping, testing, and refining. This model inherently embraces the “continuous reshaping” central to the living script. For her film *The Boot Cake* (2008), the “script” was a “grab-bag of Chaplin related relics,” with scenes emerging from the objects themselves to preserve a “sense of discovery.” This approach elevates found materials from props to narrative catalysts and affirms that a film’s affective core can be an emergent property. Millard notes how director Terrence Davies located the “emotional arc” for *Of Time and the City* (2008) “in the editing room,” confirming that emotional truth is often discovered through direct engagement with the material, not premeditated.

Considered in tandem, the frameworks of Daniels and Millard elucidate the argument for the living script. Both demonstrate that flexibility extends beyond logistical adaptation to a fundamental openness to creative and emotional evolution. Daniels’ reliance on “chance” and Millard’s cultivation of a “sense of discovery” illustrate how real-time events are not disruptions but primary catalysts for a more resonant narrative. By embracing multi-modal materials — from notebooks to physical objects — they expand the definition of a “script” from a purely textual object into a dynamic apparatus for creative development. Their work provides a compelling case for a methodology predicated on receptive engagement, substantiating the premise that the most powerful narratives are often those that are permitted to discover their inherent form.

10) Jill Daniels, “Scripting the Experimental Documentary Film: Developing the ‘Script’ for *Not Reconciled*,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Script Development*, eds. Stayci Taylor and Craig Betty (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 103–119.

11) *Ibid.*, 105.

12) Kathryn Millard, “The Screenplay as Prototype,” in *Analysing the Screenplay*, ed. Jill Neldes (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2010), 180–198.

Ultimately, the power of the living script lies in its synthesis of three core principles: flexibility, discovery, and affective truth. Flexibility is reframed from a mere practical concession to an essential creative methodology; it is the foundational willingness to abandon the blueprint in service of the story that is unfolding. This flexibility is what facilitates the process of discovery, where the filmmaker uncovers the narrative's most resonant themes, metaphors, and emotional arcs not by imposing them, but by remaining open to chance, context, and the agency of their subjects. The final goal of this fluid process is to achieve affective truth — an emotional and thematic resonance that feels more authentic and profound precisely because it was not predetermined. In this model, the script is a compass that helps navigate the unpredictable terrain of reality to find a truth that could not have been imagined at the outset.

Through the Living Script: Re-grounding Documentary Style and Engaging with Ethical Concerns

The living script resonates deeply with the spirit of *cinéma vérité* and the “cine-eye”¹³⁾ philosophy, yet it pushes these concepts further by integrating emotional and ethical recalibrations directly into the narrative's ongoing formation. Dziga Vertov's vision of a “mechanical eye” in “perpetual movement” prefigured the script's commitment to real-time responsiveness. Later, Jean Rouch¹⁴⁾ actualized this by transforming the camera into a “living camera,” enabling an improvisational “cine-trance” where the crew adapts organically to the action.

The living script advances this tradition by asserting that such on-the-spot adaptation is not merely technical or observational, but is fundamentally driven by emotion and ethics. The decision in *Things I Could Never Tell My Mother* to recalibrate scenes to honour moments of vulnerability exemplifies a stylistic choice born from emotional resonance, not just logistical necessity. This embrace of an evolving text mirrors the flexible shooting style of *cinéma vérité*, where “editing while shooting”¹⁵⁾ became a reality.

However, the living script simultaneously acknowledges the inherent constructedness of any cinematic reality. It aligns with the self-awareness of films like Deborah Stratman's *Vever* (2018), which intentionally reveals its own constructed nature to the audience. Rather than feigning access to an “unmanipulated reality,” the living script understands its continuous evolution as an act of fabrication and imagination in pursuit of a “subjective” or “poetic, ecstatic truth,”¹⁶⁾ while taking ethical perspectives into account.

13) Shari Kizirian, “1929: Man With a Movie Camera (Dziga Vertov),” *Senses of Cinema*, 2017, accessed September 15, 2025, <https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2017/soviet-cinema/man-with-movie-camera/#fn-32609-7>.

14) Jean Rouch, “The Camera and Man,” in *Principles of Visual Anthropology*, ed. Paul Hockings (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter Mouton, 1995), 79–98.

15) *Ibid.*, 90.

16) Miranda Harincar, “Constructed Reality: The Ethics of Subjective Truth in Filmmaking,” *Walker*, August 16, 2019, accessed September 13, 2025, <https://walkerart.org/magazine/constructed-reality-ethics-subjective-truth-filmmaking-platforms/>.

By placing moral dimensions at its very heart, the living script directly addresses the complex ethical landscape of documentary film. It implicitly rejects the “persistent pretense of impartiality”¹⁷⁾ that Thomas Waugh identified as a failing in some *cinéma vérité*, leaning instead into Bill Nichols’s assertion that the filmmaker is always an “active fabricator of meaning.”¹⁸⁾

This framework finds its strongest precedent in Jean Rouch’s concept of “shared anthropology” or “audiovisual reciprocity.” His practice of showing rough cuts to his subjects — “the first public is the other, those whom I’ve filmed”¹⁹⁾ — and incorporating their feedback is a powerful model of the living script in action. Here, ethical considerations are not external checks but intrinsic drivers of the narrative. This stands in stark contrast to the manipulative practices of filmmakers like Joris Ivens, who admittedly tricked his “performers” to elicit “natural reactions.”²⁰⁾

Furthermore, the living script’s ethos demands a transparent and accountable relationship between filmmaker, subjects, and audience. It implicitly advocates for a “presentational” mode of performance in certain contexts, where the act of being filmed is openly acknowledged. This respects the subject’s agency and their “right to play oneself,” making the “author’s intention” and the “limitations of the medium” part of the visible narrative.²¹⁾

The living script provides a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding how a creative documentary actively negotiates its style and ethics. By asserting that the narrative is in a constant state of flux — it moves beyond simplistic notions of objective capture. It positions the creative documentary as a profoundly human endeavor, where stylistic choices are deeply intertwined with the moral responsibility of representing evolving truths, and where the filmmaker’s ethical compass is a primary force in shaping the script until the very last moment, and beyond.

Living Script Approach Applied on a Case Study

A key distinction of the living script is its sensitivity to emotional resonance and ethical choices. While other analyses, such as Merewether’s, primarily focus on how scripts adapt to practical production changes, the living script equally prioritizes the emotional situation of filming. In a project like *Things I Could Never Tell My Mother*, familial conflict is not just a narrative device but a dynamic force. Consequently, unexpected moments of vulnerability compel the filmmaker to recalibrate scenes, making emotional shifts — whether catharsis, grief, or joy — the primary catalysts for the script’s evolution. This process transforms drafts into documents that mirror the authentic emotional truths of their subjects.

Furthermore, this evolution is governed by an ethical-emotional alchemy, where moral considerations become engines of narrative change. Ethical dilemmas are treated as op-

17) Thomas Waugh, “Acting to Play Oneself: Performance in Documentary (1990),” in *The Right to Play Oneself: Looking Back on Documentary Film* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 71–92.

18) Bill Nichols, “The Voice of Documentary,” *Film Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (1983), 17–30.

19) Rouch, “The Camera and Man,” 95.

20) Waugh, “Acting to Play Oneself,” 73.

21) *Ibid.*, 76.

portunities for profound re-evaluation. For instance, when a subject's trauma unexpectedly surfaces, the script reframes the narrative to prevent exploitation, which in turn can shift the film's focus from an individual story to a broader interrogation of social concerns.

Ultimately, this framework implies a deep co-creation between the filmmaker and participants. The script emerges not from a top-down structure but from a sustained dialogue where feedback and unplanned interactions are integral. This ensures the final narrative honors both the filmmaker's vision and the subjects' lived experiences. This responsiveness is also marked by a temporal urgency; when documenting unfolding events like a political crisis or a terminal illness, the script must remain agile, evolving in tandem with reality itself.

To investigate the living script in practice, this study employs a qualitative case study of *Things I Could Never Tell My Mother*. The analysis draws from a set of archival materials, including early drafts, directorial notes, text for voice over, character charts, international co-production, and talent development application.

This archival analysis is supplemented by in-depth interviews with the filmmaker, Hu-maira Bilkis. The methodological focus is on how her script evolved through creative and ethical recalibrations, particularly under the influence of digital production practices and international collaboration.

A central pillar of this methodology is genetic criticism, specifically adapted for the film's born-digital workflow, which began in 2018. Although Bilkis initially drafted the treatment traditionally, the production soon shifted to a process where every stage was subject to continuous revision. To analyze this, I draw on Dirk Van Hulle's²²⁾ work on the logic of versions in born-digital literature. His framework helps treat the screenplay not as a fixed blueprint but as a series of "versions" that are reconfigured in response to emerging insights, allowing for a granular analysis of how digital tools facilitate a script's evolution.

In addition to digital iteration, the methodology accounts for the collaborative nature of Bilkis's international co-production. Constant communication with her French producer and editor was pivotal. Their contributions, from feedback on notes to real-time digital revisions, added another layer to the script's evolution. This process exemplifies a transcultural transfer, where the narrative dialogues with both local sensibilities and global aesthetic standards.

To deepen the analysis of the creative process, the study also incorporates Caterina Cucinotta's²³⁾ application of genetic criticism to film production. Cucinotta's focus on "process documents" and the "aesthetics of the unfinished" is particularly relevant. Here, Bilkis's archived notes, loglines, and early drafts function as process documents that capture the evolving interplay between creative vision and ethical responsibility.

22) Dirk Van Hulle, "The Logic of Versions in Born-Digital Literature," in *Genetic Criticism in Motion: New Perspectives on Manuscript Studies*, eds. Sakari Katajamäki and Veijo Pulkkinen (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2023), 61–73.

23) Caterina Cucinotta, "Time and Movement in the Process of Film Making: An Approximation to the Genetic Criticism of Costume Design in Raúl Ruiz's 'Mysteries of Lisbon,'" in *Time and Movement in the Process of Film Making*, eds. Bruno Marques, Luísa Soares de Oliveira, and Miguel Mesquita Duarte (Lisboa: Instituto de História da Arte, Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas, Universidade NOVA de Lisboa, 2022), 46–55.

Finally, the methodology integrates a creative influence and proximity mapping, drawing parallels between Bilkis's work and the cinematic languages of Maya Deren and Chantal Akerman. This lens allows for a nuanced exploration of how a Global South artist navigates and reinterprets global aesthetic influences to address specific cultural imperatives.

In synthesis, these frameworks — Van Hulle's digital versioning, Cucinotta's process documents, and transcultural creative mapping — provide a multi-faceted lens for examining the living script. This triangulated approach moves beyond a simple description of the film's development to foreground the dialogic interplay between authorial intent and the emergent realities of production. By doing so, it reveals how the screenplay functions as a living document, continuously shaped by digital processes, collaborative dialogue, and ethical imperatives.

From Archive to Introspection: The Creative Process

While mainstream screenwriting theory acknowledges that writing is a dynamic process, the practical need for a fixed script can obscure this reality. The more nuanced question is how the dynamism of a documentary script differs from that of a feature film — a distinction vividly illustrated by the narrative film *Things I Could Never Tell My Mother*. By adopting a documentary style, the film explores the tensions within Bangladeshi family, culture, and religion. Its nonlinear story blends dialogues between generations with inner monologues, poetry, and confessional scenes to build a textured narrative that feels both intimate and deeply relevant to society.

The initial drafts of the script reveal a conventional narrative outline that sought to document an organic progression of events — a strategy that would later be subverted by the evolving realities of production. Initial treatment indicates that Bilkis primarily envisioned a creative documentary, with a possibility of becoming a *cinéma vérité* instead of making or shaping a situation. Originally, the film was called *Bilkis and Bilkis*. Later, the filmmaker changed the title to the current one. Before the film found the current cinematic reality on the digital document, it was envisioned as she will explore her daughter-mother "relationship up close and personal, the many conflicts with which we live, our journey towards the pilgrimage (hajj), and the emotional outburst."²⁴ Moreover, at the beginning of the production, Bilkis composed a character chart²⁵ (fig. 1–2) where the film will end at Mecca. Nevertheless, the unprecedented reality of global pandemic played a pivotal role to change that treatment and incorporate the ongoing reality in the *living script*.

However, as production progressed, the director's notes began to reflect significant alterations. Emotional shifts observed during filming — such as the raw vulnerability or reluctance expressed by a subject during an intimate interview — prompted Bilkis to rework certain sequences, thereby infusing the narrative with a heightened emotional resonance. As she wrote in the treatment²⁶ for Docedge Kolkata pitching for production funding in 2018

24) "Idfa Document," Humaira Bilkis's Personal Archive, Dhaka: Bangladesh.

25) "Character Chart," Humaira Bilkis's Personal Archive, Dhaka: Bangladesh.

26) "Bilkis and Bilkis for docedge 2018 (final)," Humaira Bilkis's Personal Archive, Dhaka: Bangladesh.

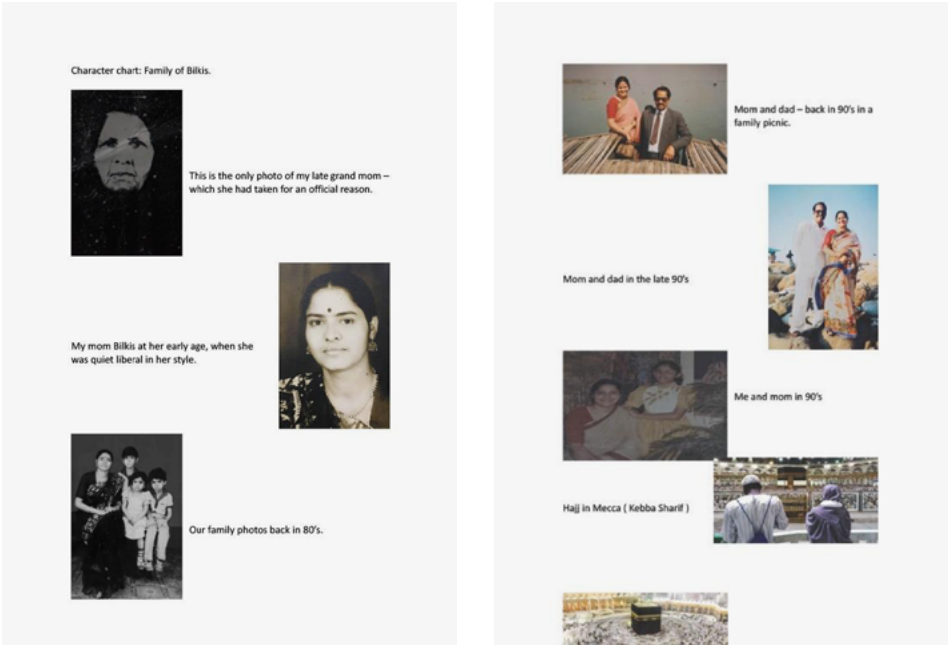


Fig. 1: Bilkis and Bilkis Character Chart

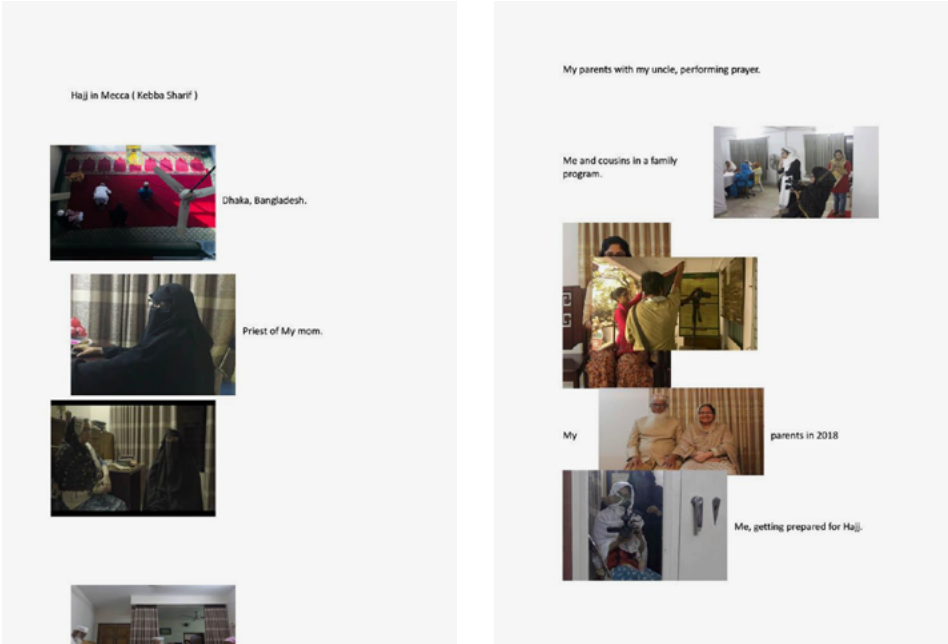


Fig. 2: Bilkis and Bilkis Mood board

Since the film is an extremely personal narrative based on a mother-daughter relationship, the struggle of the two characters, the ups and downs of their relationship, emotions, feelings etc. will be dealt with extreme care and sensitivity. However, in many cases, the mother expresses her reluctance and discontent towards the making of this film. But the film will self-consciously incorporate these due to the fact that the variance of opinions is the main theme of this film.

In the subsequent final version of the film, the audience sees a subtle tension between the mother and daughter which the filmmaker resolved or transformed into a fluid montage intercut with confessional monologues and real-time interactions, capturing the cathartic power of shared vulnerability. This transformation epitomizes the living script: a text that is continuously reshaped by unfolding emotional realities and ethical considerations.

The uncertainty performed an integral role in the screenwriting process,²⁷⁾ Bilkis's filmmaking practice engages with uncertainty through a dualistic methodology: preproduction/research and the archival documentation of actuality. In this context, she employs the camera not merely as a recording instrument but as an extension of her corporeal presence, enabling a phenomenological engagement with her subject matter. This approach fosters a fluid, improvisational mode of screenwriting, wherein playfulness becomes integral to the narrative construction. Historically, Bilkis's self-reflexive, first-person style aligns with Alexandre Astruc's conceptualization of the *caméra-stylo* (camera-pen) — a metaphor later reframed by Iranian auteur Abbas Kiarostami as a "drafting pen."²⁸⁾ This framework underscores a broader historiographic shift toward adaptive screenwriting practices. By embracing an "open creative process,"²⁹⁾ Bilkis eschews rigid narrative structures and pre-scripted dialogue, prioritizing instead the organic emergence of story form and dramatic resonance through on-location improvisation. Such a methodology not only navigates the indeterminacy inherent in the living script but also reconfigures cinematic reality as a dynamic interplay between intention and serendipity.

This screenwriting approach reflects an ethical recalibration regarding prioritizing authenticity and emotional truth over pre-established narrative structure. In doing so, the film's script evolved to acknowledge the complexity of its subjects' lived experiences. The living script framework is particularly evident in the way ethical dilemmas were addressed during production. When faced with the challenge of representing trauma sensibly, Bilkis creatively decided to situate the trauma in the background of the script, instead of putting it in the foreground. This choice gave her more room to establish the psychological distance and intergenerational gap of worldview with her parents, grounding the narrative ethically. This responsiveness to ethical imperatives is a hallmark of the living script, underscoring its role as both a creative and moral document.

27) Margot Nash, "Unknown Spaces and Uncertainty in Film Development," *Journal of Screenwriting* 4, no. 2 (2013), 149–162.

28) Kathryn Millard, *Screenwriting in a Digital Era* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014), 136–157.

29) Alex Munt, "Digital Kiarostami & the open screenplay," *SCAN: Journal of Media Arts Culture* 3, no. 2 (2006), accessed February 4, 2025, http://scan.net.au/scan/journal/display.php?journal_id=74.

Bridging Genetic Criticism and Transcultural Transfer

Traditional genetic criticism, which traces a text's linear development toward a final form, is often too limiting when applied to creative documentaries. A documentary's script is a processual text, continuously reshaped by the filmmaker's vision and by the flux of real-life events and the ethical nuances of interacting with subjects.

This analysis challenges traditional assumptions by positioning the living script within a transcultural framework, opening new avenues for understanding narrative evolution in global cinema. Drawing on the introspective aesthetics of directors such as Chantal Akerman and Maya Deren, the living script framework reveals how a Global South filmmaker like Humaira Bilkis negotiates her unique cultural, ethical, and political contexts. I find Akerman's influence is an invisibly visible presence in the creative approach. As critic Srikanth Srinivasan observes, this resonance is evident when he states:

Like Chantal Akerman in *No Home Movie* (2015), the filmmaker holds on to images of her mother as a way of warding off her physical disappearance. In a process of filial reciprocation, she offers documentary images in return for her mother's poems, which had so far provided commentary to her life. "May this film give a new dimension to our togetherness," she muses, "the same way my mother's poems give a new meaning to my life."³⁰

Besides, in an interview with me, Bilkis confirmed she finds Maya Deren's work stylistically close to her own artistic vision. I will explore this concept in detail in the following sections.

A notable parallel can be drawn between Bilkis's creative approach and Akerman's style of generating narrative through filmic syntax rather than conventional plot development. *Things I Could Never Tell My Mother's* structure emerges through what we might call documented contemplation. Bilkis's camera becomes both confessional and confrontational booth and dialogue partner, creating space for spontaneous revelations while maintaining narrative coherence. This approach echoes Akerman's method in *News from Home* (1977), where the reading of letters creates a temporal framework while allowing for emergent meaning through visual juxtaposition. The living script framework reveals its strength in how it facilitates cultural mediation. Bilkis's film navigates between traditional Bangladeshi values and contemporary global perspectives not through explicit commentary but through formal choices that emerge during writing on the screen. This approach is similar to Akerman's *Je Tu Il Elle* (I, You, He, She, 1974), where personal experience becomes a lens for examining broader social structures. While Akerman's work often positions the mother as an absent presence (particularly in *News from Home*), Bilkis inverts this dynamic, making maternal presence the central tension of her film. Both filmmakers employ what we might call durational intimacy — long takes that allow relationships to reveal

30) Srikanth Srinivasan, "With Rehana, Things I Could Never Tell My Mother, Bangladesh's Cinema Has Its Moment in the Sun," *News9live*, April 26, 2022, accessed September 13, 2025, <https://www.news9live.com/art-culture/cinema/with-rehana-things-i-could-never-tell-my-mother-bangladeshs-cinema-has-its-moment-in-the-sun-166430>.

themselves through time rather than action. However, where Akerman's mother exists primarily through letters, Bilkis's camera confronts maternal authority directly, creating a different kind of tension and relief that speaks to specific cultural contexts of South Asian family dynamics.

Things I Could Never Tell My Mother's exploration of intergenerational distance employs what Maya Deren termed vertical investigation³¹⁾ — diving deep into moments rather than moving horizontally through plot points. Like Deren's *At Land* (1944), Bilkis's film treats time as malleable, allowing past and present to coexist within single sequences by juxtaposing old photo albums, memories and remembrance of the past. This approach manifests particularly in scenes where religious practice intersects with personal desire or parents joyfully talking about their past creating what we might call emotional palimpsests — layers of meaning that accumulate through repetition and revision. Deren's exploration of ritual and mythology finds interesting parallels in Bilkis's documentation of daily household routine and religious practice. Both filmmakers understand ritual as both constraint and possibility. However, where Deren's approach is often mythological and abstract, Bilkis grounds these explorations in concrete daily practice. The living script framework allows Bilkis to discover moments where routine religious observance becomes a site of both conflict and connection (fig. 3), which particularly denoted through the scenes where she, her mother and the female Quran tutor had antagonising conversations about what the holy book asserts for the followers and how Bilkis situates those notions in the contemporary world.



Fig. 3: A self-portrait of Bilkis with Bilkis in the space between the camera's gaze and the mirror's reflection. A still from *Things I Could Never Tell My Mother*

31) Erin Brannigan, "Maya Deren: Strategies for Dancefilm," in *Dancefilm: Choreography and the Moving Image* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 100–124.

Including Bilkis, both filmmakers transform domestic space into a territory for philosophical and political exploration. In Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), the home becomes a psychological landscape, while Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) reimagines it as a site of feminist critique. Bilkis, on the other hand, positions domestic space as a battleground between tradition and self-reflection. Windows, as a recurring motif, serve as another shared thread among these three filmmakers. In their works, windows transcend their function as mere architectural elements, becoming psychological and existential symbols that reveal the inner lives of their characters. For Deren, windows act as portals to the subconscious, reflecting the fluidity and fragmentation of identity. In Akerman's films, windows function as sites of confinement and surveillance, mirroring the alienation and rigidity of gendered existence. Bilkis, meanwhile, uses windows to convey the state of mind of her characters, often in deeply connotative and symbolic ways. In her films, windows serve as liminal spaces — thresholds between interior and exterior worlds — that reflect psychological, emotional, and existential conditions.

Akerman's measured, meditative pacing and Deren's amateur and feminist ethnographic lens serve as potent counterpoints to the dominant, formulaic approaches to screenwriting that have historically characterized mainstream cinema. Rather than simply borrowing stylistic devices, Bilkis's work reconfigures these transcultural influences to articulate a narrative that is both locally grounded and universally meaningful. In this light, the living script becomes a dialogic space in which diverse cinematic traditions intersect. Rather than simply transplanting formal elements across cultures, the focus is on negotiating meaning in a way that addresses local needs. The evolving narrative framework of *Things I Could Never Tell My Mother* reflects this process, as the treatment is continually revised in response to both the immediate emotional realities on set and the broader ethical imperatives that arise from its social context. This approach challenges genetic criticism's tendency to freeze the creative process into a series of discrete, measurable stages, instead emphasizing the constant, iterative nature of narrative formation. Moreover, this transcultural transfer is not unidirectional. While global south filmmakers may draw inspiration from Western auteurs, they also contribute to an expanded, pluralistic understanding of screenwriting that enriches the global cinematic dialogue.

Ethical-Emotional Alchemy as a Creative Force

One of the most profound contributions of the living script is its capacity to foreground ethical and emotional dimensions as central creative forces rather than peripheral concerns. In conventional screenwriting, ethical dilemmas are often relegated to postproduction adjustments or treated as unavoidable obstacles that must be managed through technical fixes. As Maras argues in his examination of screenwriting ethics, conventional approaches tend to treat moral considerations as secondary concerns rather than integral narrative elements³². The living script, however, posits that ethical and emotional chal-

32) Steven Maras, "Ethics beyond the Code," in *Ethics in Screenwriting: New Perspectives*, ed. Steven Maras (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 1–30.

lenges are not impediments to narrative coherence but are in fact integral to the creative process. This ethical-emotional alchemy reframes moments of vulnerability, distress, or moral uncertainty as catalysts for narrative transformation³³.

For instance, in *Things I Could Never Tell My Mother*, moments of raw emotional disclosure — such as Bilkis's reaction during the final conversation with her Hindu partner over the text messages — prompt immediate script revisions. Rather than attempting to erase or minimize these emergent moments, the living script framework recognizes them as essential components of the film's authenticity. The process of ethical-emotional alchemy involves a recalibration of narrative priorities: emotional truths and ethical responsibilities become embedded within the script, actively shaping the film's structure and thematic focus. Also, when Bilkis and her mother found out that her father was living with dementia, her mother expressed discomfort or vulnerability, the script is not merely adjusted to comply with ethical guidelines; it is transformed in a way that amplifies the film's overall authenticity and emotional resonance.

The living script reconceptualizes narrative structure as a responsive and evolving document, challenging the traditional notion of a rigid, predetermined plan. Building on scholarly ideas of scripts as "living documents," this framework emphasizes the affective dimension, viewing the creative process as a site of ethical-emotional negotiation. Within this model, ethical dilemmas and emotional shifts are not obstacles but transformative forces that continuously integrate into and recalibrate the narrative's trajectory. This challenges the classic dichotomy between form and content, suggesting instead that a film's structure emerges directly from the unpredictable, lived experiences of its subjects. The living script thus functions as an ethical and emotional barometer, guiding the filmmaking process to ensure the final work remains true to the people and events it documents.

Implications for Global South Screenwriting

For filmmakers operating within the global south, the concept of the living script offers a liberatory framework that challenges both dominant screenwriting conventions, and the unique constraints imposed by local sociopolitical contexts. In many non-Western settings, filmmakers confront a multitude of challenges, ranging from limited financial and technical resources to political censorship and cultural pressures that demand innovative narrative strategies. The living script, by virtue of its iterative and responsive nature, provides a mode of storytelling that is particularly well-suited to these conditions. It valorizes the dynamic interplay between intention and improvisation, allowing filmmakers to capture the nuanced realities of their cultural environments in a manner that is both innovative and ethically grounded.

In the case of *Things I Could Never Tell My Mother*, Bilkis's evolving screenplay reflects the tensions inherent in global south filmmaking. The living script framework enables Bilkis to negotiate these complexities by continually revising the narrative in response to unfolding revelations and ethical dilemmas. This approach enhances the film's authentic-

33) Merewether, "Shaping the Documentary Subject," 89–113.

ity and empowers the filmmaker to assert a creative vision that is both locally specific and globally resonant. Furthermore, the living script highlights the importance of collaboration and co-creation in overcoming resource limitations and political challenges. In international co-productions, such as Bilkis's work, constant communication with the creative collaborators — like her French Producer Quentin Laurent and French Editor Léa Chatauret — ensures that the script remains adaptive and responsive. The primary challenge Bilkis faced was explaining her local sociopolitical culture to others. She needed them to understand why, as an independent adult, she struggled with societal pressures when choosing an interfaith partner. This included clarifying her mother's insistence on her marrying a Muslim man, as well as addressing concerns from creative collaborators in France who grew alarmed after seeing news reports about honor killings in India related to interfaith relationships. These transnational collaborations exemplify how the living script functions as a dynamic, evolving document that is continuously reshaped through collective negotiation.

By integrating insights from diverse cultural and technical practices, the living script fosters a sense of shared authorship, wherein every contribution becomes part of an ongoing dialogue between intention, collaboration, and reality. It enables a form of narrative resilience that is essential for capturing the complexities of life in contexts marked by both cultural vibrancy and political instability. In doing so, the living script redefines narrative filmmaking and also contributes to a broader understanding of how creative practices can serve as sites of resistance, transformation, and cultural renewal.

Conclusion: The Living Script as an Adaptive Practice

This article has proposed the concept of the living script as an adaptive practice that bridges screenwriting theories and documentary aesthetics. By analyzing Humaira Bilkis's screen production, this study has shown how a script can function as a living document — responsive to the emotional shifts, ethical dilemmas, and collaborative discoveries that shape narrative filmmaking. This model challenges traditional, static notions of screenwriting, reframing it as a dynamic negotiation between intention and reality.

Future research could explore how digital tools and collaborative platforms further enhance this adaptive practice, especially as the lines between production phases continue to blur. Comparative studies examining the living script across diverse cultural contexts would also be invaluable, contributing to a decolonized screenwriting scholarship that values non-Western narrative traditions.

Ultimately, the living script is an arrangement to an ongoing dialogue between the filmmaker, the subject, and the unpredictable nature of lived experience. It is through this adaptive practice that films like *Things I Could Never Tell My Mother* capture the profound complexities of human existence, offering a vision of storytelling that is both ethically engaged and transculturally resonant.

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- Not Reconciled* (Jill Daniels, 2009)
- Of Time and the City* (Terrence Davis, 2008)
- The Boot Cake* (Kathryn Millard, 2008)
- Things I Could Never Tell My Mother* (Humaira Bilkis, 2022)
- Vever* (Deborah Stratman, 2018)

Biography

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The Anti-Star

Věra Hrubá Ralston and Fault Lines of Classic Models of Stardom

Abstract

This article focuses on the Czech actress, Věra Hrubá Ralston, who was a champion athlete, a national celebrity in the United States and Czechoslovakia, starred in over 25 films in nearly two decades in Hollywood alongside some of the most well-known actors of her generation, married the head of her movie studio, and still failed to become a Hollywood star. By examining the career of Hrubá Ralston, we gain new insights as to the limits of star-making power in the postwar studio system as well as the tensions between assimilation and stardom.

Klíčová slova

star studies, celebrita, česká herečka, meziválečná celebrita, Věra Hrubá Ralston, B-Movies, kulturní asimilace, filmový průmysl, modely hvězdné slávy

Keywords

star studies, celebrity, Czech actresses, interwar celebrity, Věra Hrubá Ralston, B-Movies, cultural assimilation, film industry, models of film stardom

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In recent years, the discipline of star studies has increasingly focused on the intersection of race, ethnicity, Otherness and their interactions within the context of stardom in the American media landscape, where white immigrants from many European countries were imported and incorporated into the American starmaking machine. Many of these works, such as Diane Negra's seminal *Off White Hollywood: American Culture and Ethnic Female*

Stardom have focused on the assimilation of European Otherness into American popular cinematic culture as “the promise of American pluralism” which “provided the desirability and reliability of the American dream.”¹⁾ Others focus on Europeanness as marker of exoticism, or as a potentially disruptive force to be conquered or titillated by, as in Agata Framus’ recent work, *Damsels and Divas*. However, what of the foreign actors and actresses who, while part of the same starmaking apparatus as their more successful colleagues, failed to see their stars shine in the American public consciousness? What can we learn from these stillborn stars? In this article, I propose that examining these European “anti-stars” — public figures who possess most, if not all of the traditional prerequisites of stardom, but who somehow fail to capture the public imagination in the manner of established stars — provide us with a way to examine the limitations of various variables: assimilation, ethnicity, race, and political beliefs. In this sense, perhaps one can think of an anti-star as an actor or actress who either assimilates or sheds enough of their foreign identity that they no longer become the focal point of attraction, yet still remain too foreign for complete assimilation and adoption into the American star system.

It is to this end that I have composed this study examining the largely-forgotten career, star profile, and the public image of the Czech actress and athlete, Věra Hrubá Ralston,²⁾ who was both the ideal raw material for the classic model of the foreign star in the post-war Hollywood studio system and, paradoxically, also a spectacular example of the failure of such a system to will a foreign star into being. Throughout her life, Věra Hrubá Ralston (who went by either Hrubá/Hruba, her stage name Ralston, or Hruba Ralston) attempted to become a celebrity, first as an athlete-actress in the mold of her longtime competitor and rival on the ice rinks of the world, Sonja Henie, and then as a star *sui iuris*. While the publicly available details of her life would make ample fodder for any number of movies and her private persona was no less fascinating, Hrubá Ralston’s career never really materialized into that of a star, despite repeated attempts to make her one. Although she was classically attractive, had captured the hearts of audiences as an athlete, married the head of the largest (and arguably best) B-Movie studio, caused numerous international incidents, and remained active in the movie industry for nearly 15 years, Věra Hrubá Ralston was never celebrated as either a star or a cult figure, despite possessing all the prerequisites of both. Her film career, which spanned from 1941 to the 1958, often featured her in the role of the leading lady in high profile productions with co-stars like John Wayne, Erich von Stroheim, Sterling Hayden, and other leading men of the 1940s and 50s. And yet, she often received blisteringly critical reviews of her performances, which were often considered “unadulterated corn”³⁾ in both the American press and in the memoirs of other contemporaries. This would have suggested a re-discovery as a camp or cult star ala Maria Martinez,⁴⁾ however, a second career as a camp idol or rediscovered starlet never materialized. Despite her wry and witty appearances in the American media, her personal con-

1) Diane Negra, *Off White Hollywood: American Culture and Ethnic Female Stardom* (London: Routledge, 2001), 3.

2) Věra Hrubá Ralston (b. 1919?–1923? — d. 2003, daughter of Rudolf Hrubý) should not be confused with Vlasta Hrubá (b. 1918 — d. 1996, daughter of Alois Hrubý) the Czech singer and actress.

3) Dick Lowe, “Angel at the Amazon: New Film at Paramount,” *Miami Herald*, December 14, 1948, 22.

4) Ernest Mathijs and Jamie Sexton, *Cult Cinema: An Introduction* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 81.

nections with studio heads and the elite of European exiles during the 1940s, her public scandals in love and business, her anti-Nazi activism, and her international incidents, Hrubá Ralston is at best remembered as a footnote in the lives of other products of the star system, an answer in a movie trivia contest. It is indeed this failure of the star production process which remains the most compelling. In writing this study, I do not intend this work to provide a reexamination or re-evaluation of Hrubá Ralston's performances or create the argument for her being a star-in-all-but-name, but instead to examine how her career can be understood as not as a failure of the star system, nor as a study of the divergence between a star's critical success and public memory (as in the case of an actress like Norma Sheerer),⁵⁾ but as a lens which reveals some of the hidden structures and unconscious rules which help influence the ultimate trajectory of an actor or actress' career. I aim to observe how her career as an ethnic idol, a (chaste) sex symbol, and as a maligned performer reveals the fault lines of our conception of the star-making process and helps further refine our current conception of stardom during the postwar period.

A Star is Born: From Athletic Success to the Silver Screen

One of the key ideas behind the classic Hollywood model of stardom as formulated by Richard Dyer is the realization that movie stars are “a phenomenon of production,”⁶⁾ although who exactly is in control of the act of star production varies as per the historical, economic, and political situation in question. However, the general trajectory in which a star is “born” remains largely the same — an unknown individual is discovered by an agent or studio or director; the star's image and backstory is constructed or refined and prepared for public consumption; the star's image is distributed; and eventually, the star falls out of favor with the general public as tastes, audiences, and fashions change or the star themselves ages out of their star image. This “star image” according to Dyer, is the key concept which underlies any formal examination of celebrity; it is, in short, the realization that what the public perceives as a given celebrity is really a combination (or combinations) of two mediated personalities: a manufactured “star image” (what the star presents to the public and through their artistic roles) with an underlying nonpublic persona (a “real” person, the individual removed from these artistic creations). These two often-contradictory personages are combined for public consumption, although the exact ratio between the two can vary as per the era, tastes, or even sociopolitical situation at hand. As Richard Dyer notes in *Stars*:

Stars are, like characters in stories, representations of people. Thus they relate to ideas about what people are (or are supposed to be) like. However, unlike characters in stories, stars are also real people.⁷⁾

5) C.f. Lies Lanckmann, “What Price Widowhood,” in *Lasting Screen Taste: Images that Fade and Personas that Endure*, eds. Lucy Bolton and Julie Lobazallo Wright (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), 71–72.

6) Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 10.

7) Dyer, *Stars*, 20.

Thus, in this traditional Hollywood model of stardom, the contrast between “representations of people” as Dyer puts it and the “real people” (or the unmediated, private individual) remains part of the appeal of stars for the audience and the public at large. For as glamorized as a celebrity might be, the fact that they suffer from the same prosaic ailments or like the same quotidian things as we do, allows us to connect with them, albeit through the mediation of various intermediaries in the media ecosystem. However, these intermediaries often have conflicting ideas of should or shouldn’t be revealed to the public, as do the stars themselves; Or, as Richard deCordova noted in *Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America*, that:

The individual who is the star may indeed have private “individual” thoughts and feelings, but these only enter the public sphere as they are channeled through the star system and subject to its requirements.⁸⁾

The tension between the glamorizing expectation of the celebrity individual and the hunger of the public to learn about not only the scandalous details but also the unglamorous details of a given star’s life is a traditional feature of the classic model of stardom, and often the public delights in the blurring of these lines between the “star image” and the individual underneath it, indulging the general public’s voyeuristic desires while the capital behind the star image (studios, managers, artist representation, consultants, advertisers) retains some degree of control over what is revealed and how.

However, equally applicable to the star is their audience, particularly for the wave of young, immigrant female stars who emerged in the first decades of the 20th century. As a number of other critical studies such as Diane Negra’s *Off-White Hollywood: American Culture and Ethnic Female Stardom* have more granularly examined the star making industry as not only an economic one, but as an ongoing negotiation between ethnic audiences and the more conservative established American public. In this process “ethnic stars” presented their ethnic identities and values in the process of assimilation or claiming space for their own identities in a fluctuating cultural landscape.⁹⁾ For an immigrant star, especially a refugee like Hrubá Ralston, this process was even more necessary and pressing than for homegrown stars who could rely on the security of established “Americanness” as an aid to their careers. Instead, ethnic performers would be tasked with not only proving their right to be treated as American by film audiences but often forced into performative depictions of ethnicity to secure their own space in the American cultural landscape. These two valences, commercial worth and ethnic identity, are constantly in tension, as stars that are overtly “ethnic” often found themselves relegated to minor roles, while stars often succeeded at the cost of diluting or even hiding their own ethnicities. As many authors like the aforementioned Diane Negra, Richard Dyer, Agata Fymus, and Antonella Palmieri have noted, this process of dilution or recasting of ethnicities is also tied into the shifting notions of race in America — in particular, what is considered “white” at

8) Richard DeCordova, *Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 10.

9) Negra, *Off White Hollywood*, 3–4.

a given time. To paraphrase Richard Dyer, to become an assimilated European actor or actress in America often implies giving up a range of other markers of difference in order to conform to racial ideas.¹⁰⁾

To not be a star is easy. Nearly all of us who read this will never be considered a figure on par with even the lowest level of celebrity which Dyer and DeCordova have articulated — figures who are produced, whose public appearances and proclamations are molded and shaped to best provide the studio who wishes to profit off us with the means to do so. However, it is far more difficult to be an anti-star — a figure who is not only as deliberately manufactured as a Hollywood star is, but who is unable to find any foothold in the public consciousness — especially when one possesses many of the so-called requisites for stardom: physical beauty, charm, social connections (both interpersonal and institutional), and a degree of public notoriety. These failures of the star making system are often unremarked upon in the studies of stardom and for logical and obvious reasons — those individuals who are anti-stars are not stars *per se*, for instance, and most examinations of stars or stardom are interested in the import and meaning of stardom, not one's failure to obtain it. However, as more contemporary scholars of stardom and our contemporary permutations of it like Emily Hund have noted, “[celebrities] are, fundamentally, a particular type of influential person whose social power is wholly dependent upon media industries,”¹¹⁾ which, for Věra Hrubá Ralston, were not always so reliable.

For the woman who would become the anti-star Věra Hrubá Ralston, where exactly the “real person” ends, and the representation of the person began would often be difficult to discern. However, few actresses or even characters would be able to live the kind of life that she claimed she did, even allowing for the generous amount of exaggeration and reinvention which took place during her life. What we do know with any degree of certainty is that Věra Hrubá was born in Prague on July 12 sometime between 1919 and 1923,¹²⁾ the daughter of a wealthy Prague jeweler, Rudolf Hrubý.¹³⁾ She had one brother Rudy, who went on to become a film producer and worked under her future husband Herbert J. Yates, the owner of Republic Pictures. Although the sources differ greatly on the year of her birth (an ambiguity which Hrubá Ralston often encouraged in her public interviews), what is known is that she attended the Charlotte G. Masaryková gymnasium (at least until 1934),¹⁴⁾ she displayed exceptional promise in figure skating and dance, and by her mid-teens, she was competing nationally in Czechoslovakia in figure skating competitions. As a teenager in 1936 (she might have been anywhere from 17 to 13, depending on which source one trusts for her date of birth), she was one of the Czechoslovak representatives in the 1936 Winter Olympic games, where her skating (allegedly) caught the eye of the Nazi Führer,

10) Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 2017), 39.

11) Emily Hund, *The Influencer Industry: The Quest for Authenticity on Social Media* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), 22.

12) Dennis McLellan, “Věra Hrubá Ralston, 79; Czech Ice-Skating Star Turned Film Actress,” *The Los Angeles Times*, February 15, 2003, B22.

13) The fate of Hrubý is unknown but several newspaper articles suggest that he was interred (and likely perished) in a concentration camp during the war. See for example: Anon., “Miss Hrubá's Troubles,” *The Albertan*, March 30, 1939, 4.

14) Anon., “Seznam žákyň na konci školního roku,” *Výroční zpráva městského dívčího reálného gymnasia Charlotte G. Masarkové v Praze I.* 11, no. 1 (1934), 29.

Adolf Hitler. Hrubá Ralston maintained that following her performance in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, the SS pulled her aside for a private meeting with the Fascist dictator. According to one 1977 telling of the story, after winning a “silver medal” Hitler “asked her to skate for the swastika,” however she replied “I’d rather skate *on* it...” and that following that teenage act of defiance, “[Hitler] shook my hand so hard it hurt.”¹⁵ Several historical discrepancies abound with her story (for one, she never medaled in the ’36 Olympics, she placed 17th, losing to long-time rival Sonja Henie from Norway) and it should be noted that Hrubá Ralston’s life story was a frequent exercise in reinvention, especially in her later years, and the ability to reinvent one’s self as necessity demands was very useful for potential stars in the Hollywood system. However, while the exact details of Hrubá Ralston’s possible encounter with Hitler remains unverified, it was indeed reported in the American press as early as 1940¹⁶ and was repeated often during World War II,¹⁷ often as a way to mock the fascist dictator as “a hysterical, neurotic little man even then drunk with power,”¹⁸ as one journalist put it, whose petty tyranny then foreshadowed even larger future crimes.

Following her amateur finale at the Olympics, Hrubá Ralston became a professional ice skater in North American and European markets. This meant she often left for short tours with professional skating companies in the United States, only be forced to return to Czechoslovakia when her contract expired, or she ran into visa troubles. Fortunately, during this first visit to the United States, she managed to attract the attention of James “Jimmy” Johnston, a former heavyweight boxer turned manager and promoter, who quickly signed the young Hrubá Ralston to a management deal despite her limited English.¹⁹ Perhaps because Johnston was a controversial figure (he was in the midst of being sued for breach of contract when he signed her to a management deal) Hrubá Ralston was immediately thrust into the spotlight in the American press. The young Czech skater received even more attention when, in the weeks that followed the 1938 the Munich Agreement and subsequent dissolution of Czechoslovakia, she immediately cabled Johnston, her manager, and requested two tickets out of her home country.²⁰ The rapid slide of Europe into fascism and war would make any attempts at stardom purely American in scope.

Ethnic Identity and Political Identity

As tempting as it might be to ascribe the notion of a celebrity as a representation or manifestation of political ideology to contemporary sensibilities, many film and theatre historians have long noted the connection between political activism, ideology, and the entertainment industries. For example, Richard DeCordova mentions that political identity

15) Paul Rosenfeld, “The Cult of the Clinker Queen,” *San Francisco Examiner*, December 26, 1982, 18.

16) Anon., “Czech Skater Threat Victim,” *Miami Herald*, June 2, 1940, 6.

17) Anon., “Vera Hrubá Met Hitler in 1936,” *The Colfax County Press and Clarkson Herald Consolidated*, April 15, 1943, 6.

18) Anon., “Arcadia,” *The Portsmouth Herald*, January 26, 1943, 6.

19) Al Wolf, “Astute Mitt Pilot Signs Skating Star,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 30, 1941, 10.

20) Anon., “Johnston Rescues Girl Skater from Czechoslovakia,” *The Evening Star*, September 23, 1938, C1.

was a “final aspect of a star’s identity, though one not developed very elaborately,”²¹⁾ a component which appeared relatively early on in the formation of the Hollywood star manufacturing process, often as a way of fending off criticism of decadence or immorality via public support of mainstream political stances and patriotic sentiment. However, as Steven J. Ross noted in his article “The Politicization of Hollywood before World War II: Anti-Fascism, Anti-Communism, and Anti-Semitism,” the anodyne political beliefs of the first generation of Hollywood stars had rapidly begun to give way to a more increased activity in the political sphere by various film stars and celebrities. Indeed, the late 1930s might have represented the apex of what Ross declared “the Golden Age of Hollywood politics,”²²⁾ where stars were publicly aligning themselves with political causes and movements which might have even been contrary to the wishes of the general public, such as anti-fascism and anti-Nazism.

Even before the annexation of Sudetenland and the dissolution of Czechoslovakia, Věra Hrubá Ralston had long maintained a vehemently personal distain for Nazism, however it is worth noting that this was not always the case for much of her American audience. In fact, as Nancy Snow has reported, even as late as July 1941 (less than 6 months away from the attack on Pearl Harbor and the declaration of war against the United States by Nazi Germany and its allies), polling reported that nearly 79 percent of American respondents were opposed to any military intervention against Germany and Italy.²³⁾ Even more unusual for an immigrant celebrity during these last few years before World War II, Hrubá Ralston was publicly proud of her origins, wearing traditional Czech costumes and proclaiming, “I’m still a Czech even though we have no country at this time”²⁴⁾ during a period where American popular sentiment was drastically pro-isolationism and decidedly rather anti-immigrant. After America entered the war in 1941, Hrubá Ralston’s anti-Nazi sympathies even more prominently displayed; as the Hollywood correspondent Robbin Coons quipped in 1942, “[Věra Hrubá Ralston] has a Scandinavian fondness for herring, an American liking for ice cream sundaes, and a Czech’s hatred for Adolf Hitler,”²⁵⁾ who often lent her image and presence to various Czech charitable organizations, such as Joliet, Illinois’s memorial to the victims of the Lidice massacre.²⁶⁾

However, even before the war, Hrubá Ralston had managed to turn her anti-Fascist views into a part of her celebrity. Shortly after her immigration to the United States in 1938, Hrubá Ralston’s anti-Nazi stance was immediately put in the forefront of her public

21) DeCordova, *Picture Personalities*, 110.

22) Stephen J. Ross, “The Politicization of Hollywood before World War II: Anti-Fascism, Anti-Communism, and Anti-Semitism,” in *The Jewish Role in American Life: An Annual Review*, eds. Bruck Zuckerman and Jeremy Schoenberg (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2007), 2–4.

23) Nancy Snow, “Confessions of a Hollywood Propagandist: Harry Warner, FDR and Celluloid Persuasion,” in *Warners’ War: Politics, Pop Culture & Propaganda in Wartime Hollywood*, eds. Martin Kaplan and Johanna Blakley (Los Angeles: The Norman Lear Center Press, 2004), 69.

24) Anon., “Unconquered by Hitler; Prettiest Skater on Ice Will Perform in Miami,” *The Miami Herald*, May 26, 1940, D-10.

25) Robbin Coons, “Vera Hrubá and Sonja Henie are Doing Hawaiian Numbers,” *Asbury Park Press*, June 30, 1942, 4.

26) Anon., “Dvě vynikající krajanky u pomníku lidických mučedníků,” *Amerikán: Národní kalendář na rok 1944* 67, no. 1 (1944), 103.

image, when partnered with fellow refugee Hedy Stenuff²⁷⁾ (who had fled Austria for France and then the US) to form an anti-fascist “Anschluss” of their own, which was often seen as critical of Nazi Germany.²⁸⁾ Furthermore, Hrubá Ralston frequently performed selections from her competition routines which included her 1936 Olympic “česká polka” while dressed in Czech *kroj* (traditional dress), a sequence influenced by the popular Czech polka dances which were often performed during the Czech National Revival²⁹⁾ and which had acquired additional nationalistic significance in the months since the annexation. A few months later in 1939, Hrubá Ralston publicly accused the German embassy in New York of a pressure campaign in the Czech-language American press, claiming they (or their sympathizers) attempted to force her change the content of her routine by eliminating this dance as well as other elements they found to be provocative³⁰⁾ including the playing of the Czechoslovak national anthem during her performances. As one newspaper column put it:

Beauteous Vera Hrubá, Czechoslovak ice skating star now performing in New York, defies Herrs Hitler, Goering, and all Nazis in general and the German consul in New York in particular to make her stop dancing on ice to the tune of the Czechoslovak national anthem. When the German consulate ordered her to do just that, the un-anchlussed [sic] ice queen retorted: “Mr. German consul — not for one little minute can you tell me what to do. You my boss? Ha! Ha!”³¹⁾

Hrubá Ralston’s defiance of Nazi officials ranging from Hitler to unnamed functionaries in the New York consulate was a highly visible aspect of her star image in the late 1930s and early 1940s, however it was not without its risks. Although the German consulate and diplomatic figures publicly disavowed any pressure campaign or attempts to intimidate Hrubá Ralston, the possibility of attacks by fascist sympathizers or German nationalists remained a constant threat until well after the United States entered the war and public opinion swung against Nazi Germany. For example, in another highly publicized incident from 1940, Hrubá Ralston returned from a performance in New York to find a pulp magazine story about the murder of a figure skater slipped under her door with an attached note expressing the sender’s desire to do the same to the young Czech.³²⁾

As mentioned previously, Hrubá Ralston’s defiance of fascism and enthusiastic embrace of the anti-fascist cause was outside of conventional Hollywood norms. While ethnic female stars were often faced with the pressure to assimilate (as Hrubá Ralston’s rival Sonja Henie or early Irish star Colleen Moore often did in their public personae as well as their roles) in a manner consistent with contemporary ideas of American femininity,

27) Anon., “Anschluss on Ice,” *The Times News*, October 7, 1938, 4.

28) Ibid., 4.

29) It is worth noting here the long association of the polka with Czech and other Slavic nationalist movements, not just Polish ones. For more about the Czech polka in particular, see: Daniela Stavělová, “Polka jako český národní symbol,” *Český lid* 93, no. 1 (2006), 3–26.

30) Anon., “Hrubá trvá na svém prohlášení,” *Telegraf*, August 4, 1939, 3.

31) Anon., “Defies Hitler,” *Norfolk Ledger Dispatch*, August 28, 1939, 8.

32) Anon., “Czech Skater Threat Victim,” 6.

Hrubá Ralston's active early resistance to European fascism was atypical. Her enthusiastic embrace of American culture was often lauded but her constant opposition to fascism even before the war was seen as provocative and even occasionally masculine in its fervor. However, more trouble was soon to come. Throughout the end of the 1930s and into the first few years of the 1940s, Hrubá Ralston also made headlines due to her constant legal problems regarding her visa status, and eligibility to travel, problems made worse by the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1939. On March 23, 1939 a mere week after the country was formally dissolved and the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia had been established by the Nazi regime, Hrubá Ralston was refused entry to Canada as her working permit had been issued by the Czechoslovak government — a country which no longer existed — which meant that she was, in the eyes of the Canadian government, a “woman without a country,”³³⁾ and thus in dubious legal standing. Although Hrubá Ralston was allowed to return to the United States and continue working, further legal problems would soon be on the horizon.

In early 1941, Hrubá Ralston once again became a cause célèbre and the focus of national interest in the United States when the press discovered that her temporary visitor's visa was expiring and she was in danger of deportation back to the now-occupied Bohemian and Moravian Protectorate, an especially risky proposition for a young woman who had taken such a public stance against fascism.³⁴⁾ American newspapers were flooded with stories about how the young Czech skater was given the ultimatum to either to marry an American citizen, flee to Chile, or to be deported to a hostile Germany, to which Hrubá Ralston replied that “she would rather die than return to Europe.”³⁵⁾

While visa troubles were not uncommon for female actresses in wartime (and even postwar Europe),³⁶⁾ what was unique for Hrubá Ralston is how the actress dealt with this setback in the public eye. Although she received hundreds (eventually thousands)³⁷⁾ of marriage proposals, Hrubá Ralston refused all offers as she “didn't want to make a business out of marriage,”³⁸⁾ another move that was widely covered in the national press. Although her case was aided by heavy lobbying of the United States Department of State by her manager and private citizens,³⁹⁾ no solutions were reached and in March of 1941, Hrubá Ralston was forced to relocate to Canada for several weeks until a compromise could be negotiated. Although seemingly heartfelt, this public performance of chastity would be unremarkable in an earlier era. However, in the era of Hollywood “vamps,” when foreign celebrities whose unabashed sexuality and agency proved threatening, yet alluring, to a

33) Anon., “People in the News,” *Tacoma Times*, March 25, 1939, 12.

34) Anon., “Czech Skating Star Residing Here after Making Movie — Fled Nazi Invaders,” *The News*, June 24, 1941, 42.

35) Anon., “Men Would Aid Czech Girl Skater; Proposals Made by 2500 to Avert Deportation,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 8, 1941, 9.

36) Antonella Palmieri, “America is Home... America is her Oyster: The Dynamics of Ethnic Assimilation in Alida Valli's American Star Persona,” in *Stars in World Cinema: Film Icons and Systems Across Cultures*, eds. Andrea Bandhauer and Michelle Royers (London: I.B. Taurus, 2015), 81–82.

37) Wolf, “Astute Mitt Pilot Signs Skating Star,” 10.

38) Anon., “Proposals Shunned by Czech Skater; She Refuses to Wed to Remain in Country,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 09, 1941, 2.

39) George Ross, “In New York,” *Waterbury Evening Democrat*, June 23, 1939, 6.

substantial portion of the American public, Hrubá Ralston's chaste disavowal of her own physical charms and their utility must have removed any temptation to view her as another "vamp," or seductive, unassimilated, sexually confident European woman, in the model of Pola Negri. Instead, Hrubá Ralston's demure disavowal of her own physical beauty and sexual desirability resembled more assimilable stars like Irish silent film star Colleen Moore or the Hungarian actress Vilma Bánky,⁴⁰⁾ who in the course of assimilating into American culture consciously modeled the behaviors, codes, and attitudes which most closely matched the predominant cultural mores of white Protestant American identity.⁴¹⁾

Although Hrubá Ralston's story was seemingly tailor-made for the public consumption during the war, upon closer examination, a number of contradictions emerge. She was an innocent-faced, attractive young girl, who was feisty in her opposition to Nazi Germany, fiercely supportive of her adopted country, yet eager to assimilate to the American way of life. Evidently, Hrubá Ralston's story resonated deeply with the American public, as she received a number of declarations of support, including financial, when in a scene right out of a Hollywood melodrama, an unknown female elderly benefactor (one Mrs. Nan Foley, of Lafayette, Indiana) interceded on her behalf during the deportation proceedings with a \$1000 appeal bond, which extended her stay in America,⁴²⁾ and then an offer to adopt the young Czech, shielding her from the legal proceedings as her legal guardian until she came of age. Although Hrubá Ralston did not take up Mrs. Foley on the offer of adoption, she did receive a gift of \$20 000 from Mrs. Foley's estate following the later's death in 1941 while Hrubá Ralston was in Canada.⁴³⁾

Although these incidents reveal that Hrubá Ralston was indeed a celebrity athlete during the late 1930s and early 1940s, she was certainly not a film star. While her image could be found in any number of American publications from 1936 onwards, this was not really indicative of her celebrity being self-sustaining. Instead, Věra Hrubá Ralston made her money like many entertainers before her: by traveling performances, endorsements, and short-to-longer term engagements in various shows being held towns and cities across America, and as a result often had to rely on the strong social pressure in immigrant communities to support one of their own. And while Hrubá Ralston was obviously an *athletic* star for the Czech and American populations, her inability to breakthrough with the same ethnic audiences in her film career is also puzzling. In post-war Hollywood, Hrubá Ralston was in good company with some of the finest Czech and Central European actors and directors of the interwar generation: Hugo Haas, Karel Lamač, Jiří Voskovec, Hedy Lamar, and others who stayed after the war had finished,⁴⁴⁾ however, her films with these stars were scarcely covered in the Czech language press; nor were they widely promoted among Czech or Slovak enclaves in America the way that other films by similar actors and actresses were.

40) Agata Frymus, *Damsels and Divas: European Stardom in Silent Hollywood* (Camden: Rutgers University Press, 2020), 100.

41) *Ibid.*, 119.

42) Anon., "Men Would Aid Czech Girl Skater; Proposals Made by 2500 to Avert Deportation," 9.

43) Anon., "Hoosier Woman Leaves \$20,000 to Czech Skater," *The Indianapolis News*, April 3, 1941, 4.

44) Jolana Matějková, *Hugo Haas: Život je pes* (Praha: XYZ, 2005), 158–159.

Although it is difficult to pinpoint a single point of failure in Hrubá Ralston's struggle to achieve acceptance in both America and her homeland during this early portion of her career, it is striking how her early years in the American popular consciousness differed from those of more successful European stars like the Austrian Hedy Lamarr or Polish vamp, Pola Negri. On the one hand, Hrubá Ralston's inability or unwillingness to capitalize on her sexuality and physical beauty ran counter to the predominant models of starmaking for foreign (especially Central and Eastern European) female celebrity in the 1930s and early 1940s. On the other hand, her defiant opposition to German fascism was equally jarring at a time when celebrities were expected to minimize their own public political identities for fear of harming one's own marketability.

What remains curious about Hrubá Ralston's inability to capitalize on the postwar political climate was that numerous actors with much more dubious wartime records were able to transcend the baggage of their potentially anti-American (or even neutral) wartime activities while Hrubá Ralston's very well-documented anti-Fascist and pro-Allied activities during the war seem to have been scarcely mentioned after her transition into a full-time film actress. While other actresses like the Italian actress Alida Valli had to actively work to allay any suspicion of anti-American wartime behavior in order to grow their postwar careers,⁴⁵⁾ Hrubá Ralston's active antagonism of the Nazi regime, her vocal defiance of fascism and allegiance to the country of her birth made it clear that, while she supported American values, she was also conspicuously foreign, a fact which underlined her early immigration problems. Although she would later assimilate and largely abandon her Czech identity as her career progressed and the postwar situation in Czechoslovakia evolved, her assimilation never proved to be as complete or seamless as other foreign actresses; likewise, since she had largely abandoned her Czech heritage, she was unable to attract attention through an emphasis or manipulation of her Europeaness in the public eye.

Transition to Film: A Star is (Still) Born

Even as a relative newcomer in the American entertainment industry, Hrubá Ralston clearly realized that film was a more lucrative and desirable destination than years of competing in figure skating competitions with mediocre results, sharing the stage with side-show attractions like "stilt skaters,"⁴⁶⁾ posing with automobiles at trade shows, and performing on college campuses.⁴⁷⁾ Nearly every mention of her early career mentioned that she had "movie aspirations,"⁴⁸⁾ and that her management was eager to get her a screen test to prove her viability in cinema. The model of a skating starlet-turned-silver-screen-actress had already proven successful in the case of Hrubá Ralston's erstwhile rival on the rinks of Europe, Sonja Henie, who "through a series of productions, has made a mint of

45) Palmieri, 84–88.

46) Richard D Murray, "World's Best Skiers and Skaters Will Thrill Crowds — Latest Paraphernalia on View," *Boston Globe*, December 1, 1937, 21.

47) Anon., "Junior Prom At Cornell Friday," *Waterbury Evening Democrat*, February 10, 1938, 13.

48) Anon., "Jimmy Johnston Shoulders into Winter Sports Game," *The Bismark Tribune*, December 22, 1937, 10.

money for 20th Century Fox.”⁴⁹⁾ In 1936, Heine shocked the sporting world when she announced in the lead-up to the 1936 Olympics that she had decided to retire from amateur sports after the Winter Games.⁵⁰⁾ Following her gold medal victory, Henie stayed true to her word, leaving both Europe and the world of amateur figure skating for the United States where she began skating professionally and angling for screen tests at major A-list studios like Paramount.⁵¹⁾ A bidding war soon ensued and in the end, and Darryl Zanuck and his 20th Century Fox were the victors, signing Henie to a reported \$300,000 contract, making her one of the highest-paid female stars in Hollywood.⁵²⁾ Although Henie was not a particularly gifted actress but “frequently cast as a diminutive performing doll,”⁵³⁾ critics were thrilled by her skating abilities⁵⁴⁾ which often formed the dramatic axis around which her films revolved, and while these films provided diminishing returns as the novelty wore off, they set the template for the ice skating films which would prove to be a short-lived, but lucrative fad.

In 1941, Republic Pictures sought to capitalize on the waning enthusiasm for ice skating pictures, which had partially begun with the rise of Sonja Henie at 20th Century Fox but was nurtured by the emergence of nationally touring ice-skating companies who would perform lavish spectacles across the country year-round. As one of the members of the newly formed Ice Capades (a touring ice skating and figure skating show) Hrubá Ralston was one of several skaters to feature in a Republic Pictures B-movie (*Ice Capades*, 1941) treading on their touring success. Directed by Joseph Stanley, the film was a lightly plotted (and often plodding) comedy where the impressive ice-skating sequences (based largely on the touring company’s show) were secondary to the hackneyed plot about mistaken identity. As Bosley Crowther griped in the *New York Times*:

...the little bit of ice and skating which are shown in the Republic picture of the same name give it about as much claim to the title as one icicle would have to the name of iceberg. And instead of a glittering, frosty film in which skaters keep coming at you in droves, this one turns out to contain a dull and silly backstage story, played mostly in offices and gloomy rooms, with only occasional skating sequences to break the monotony.⁵⁵⁾

While Hrubá Ralston did not have any special billing as one of several of the company’s ice skaters to appear in the film, (including fellow rival of Henie, Belita⁵⁶⁾) the specter of her longtime rival, Henie lingered over several reviews, such as one in the *Rutland Daily Herald* which, while praising Hrubá Ralston’s performance, noted that “none [of the

49) Edwin Schallert, “Band Leaders to Hold Super Film Jam Fest; Ice Capades Planned,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 8, 1942, 17.

50) Anon., “Sonja Henie Will Retire From Activities this Year,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, January 25, 1936, 20.

51) Sidney Skolsky, “The Gospel Truth,” *NY Daily News*, April 27, 1936, 34.

52) Jeanette Meehan, “Look Out for the Girl on Skates,” *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, September 6, 1936, 81.

53) Negra, *Off White Hollywood*, 88.

54) Anon., “Sonja Henie Stars in Warfield Film,” *San Francisco Examiner*, January 1, 1937, 12.

55) Bosely Crowther, “‘Ice-Capades,’ a Slow Comedy (With Incidental Skating), at Loew’s Criterion,” *New York Times*, September 25, 1941, 29.

56) Tom Vallance, “Belita: Olympic ice skater turned Hollywood star,” *The Independent*, December 27, 2005, 35.

skaters] can hold a candle to Miss Henie though.”⁵⁷⁾ As ice skating pictures were never seen as more than thinly veiled contrivances to display attractive young female skaters, these negative reviews seemed to have little effect on the ultimate profitability of this subgenre. A sequel to *Ice Capades* (entitled *Ice Capades Review*) also featuring Hrubá Ralston was produced in 1942 and a feature ice skating film *Lake Placid Serenade* saw her take a starring role as a Czech figure skater, and her film career began to boom. This surge in film production was helped by the fact that Republic Pictures’ president Herbert J. Yates had fallen for Hrubá Ralston in 1941 after seeing her in the *Ice Capades*. Although Yates was married and his intentions were seemingly and initially platonic, by 1948, he had divorced his wife and in 1953, he and Hrubá Ralston were married in a private ceremony, kept secret from most of the Hollywood press.⁵⁸⁾

As far as studios went, Republic Pictures, was in many ways the best of the rest. As the so-called “strongest of the minors,”⁵⁹⁾ the studio’s low budgets belied its loftier ambitions. Republic Pictures was the brainchild of Yates, a self-made millionaire in tobacco who retired to pursue other moneymaking interests, such as film development laboratories in his late 20s. Yates had been a long time investor in film technologies with his Consolidated Film Laboratories and had even invested in Darryl Zanuck’s 20th Century Pictures early in its existence.⁶⁰⁾ In 1935, Yates decided since that major Hollywood studios were increasingly relying on their own in-house development labs instead of his services, the most logical business strategy was to obtain a studio of his own, despite the fact (or perhaps due to the fact) that the Great Depression was rapidly forcing scores smaller, independent movie studios to close their doors. Republic Pictures was born out of the consolidation of several smaller Poverty Row studios, such as Mascot Pictures,⁶¹⁾ and by the late 1940s Republic was producing not only scores of formulaic genre films (Westerns remained a specialty), but also releasing films by celebrated directors like Orson Wells, Nicholas Ray, Fritz Lang, and John Ford.⁶²⁾

Yates made consistent usage of loaned out A-list actors like John Wayne (who starred in several films opposite Hrubá Ralston, including the only two of her films which reportedly made a profit at the box office), employed well-known screenwriters like Ben Hecht, and yet, thanks to its tight budgeting still “enjoyed annual profits in the half-million dollar range,” a remarkable sum that put them nearly on par with some of the A-list studios.⁶³⁾ Although Republic produced a sizable amount of Westerns, they were also known for a range of other genres, such as science fiction and horror films, which is where Hrubá Ralston would get her first dramatic role in George Sherman’s *The Lady and the Monster*

57) Anon., “Ice Capades,” *Rutland Daily Herald*, September 15, 1941, 5.

58) Anon., “Herbert Yates to Wed Vera Ralston: Studio Head Gives Age as 72, Blond Film Star 31 in License Application,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 15, 1952, 11.

59) Thomas Schatz, *Boom and Bust: The American Cinema in the 1940s* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1997), 197.

60) Wheeler Winston Dixon, *Death of the Moguls: The End of Classical Hollywood* (Rutgers: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 66–67.

61) Richard M. Hurst, *Republic Studios: Between Poverty Row and the Majors* (Toronto: The Scarecrow Press, 2007), 1–2.

62) *Ibid.*, 6.

63) Schatz, *Boom and Bust*, 197.

(1944), where she plays Janice Farrell, the main love interest of both the handsome young Dr. Patrick Cory (played by Richard Arlen) and his boss, the obsessive mad scientist Prof. Franz Mueller (Erich von Stroheim). This first dramatic feature marked the beginning of a pattern for Hrubá Ralston's film career — she was often cast as the leading lady alongside better-known American and European actors, some of whom were on loan from bigger studios to Republic. For example, in 1945's *Dakota*, she received top billing as Sandy Devlin, the young, monied wife of gambler John Devlin, (played by John Wayne). Joining John Wayne in the cast were other well-known American and European actors such as 3-time Academy Award winner Walt Brennan, and the Central European star, Hugo Haas.⁶⁴⁾

Unlike Sonja Henie at 20th Century Fox, Věra Hrubá Ralston was often marketed as a serious starlet, often at the behest of her powerful husband, Yates.⁶⁵⁾ Although, as Norbert Auerbach, put it, this seemed to be wishful thinking, more shades of Marion Davies' career under the overbearing eye of her husband, William Randolph Hearst. As Auerbach recalled:

Although Věra Hrubá was once a European champion ice skater, she was a terrible actress. She was after all the love of Mr. Yates, the owner of the smaller production and distribution company called Republic Pictures.⁶⁶⁾

Major Hollywood star (and occasional Republic star alongside Hrubá Ralston), John Wayne, was blunter about the situation:

Yates made me use Vera Hrubá... I don't want to malign her. She didn't have the experience... Yates was one of the smartest businessmen I ever met. I respected him in many ways, and he liked me. But when it came to the woman he loved — his business brains just went flying out the window.⁶⁷⁾

However, Hrubá Ralston's influence was not entirely detrimental at Republic. Reportedly, she was responsible for forcing Yates to agree to produce at least one prestige picture a year, such as Orson Welles' *Macbeth*.⁶⁸⁾

However, here Hrubá Ralston remains a cautionary tale about the limits of the classic Hollywood system in "making" stars. Despite her marriage to one of the most powerful men in the B-movie studio system, co-starring with bona-fide cinema icons like John Wayne, and her pre-cinematic celebrity as an athlete and an anti-Nazi activist, Hrubá Ralston's films could not hide the "unadulterated corn," as Dick Lowe, the editor of *The Miami News* entertainment section put it. For some, the B-movie appeal of Hrubá Ralston's films seemed to be part of the charm, a nostalgic throwback to the "Saturday afternoon thrillers of my childhood."⁶⁹⁾ While Hrubá Ralston's films were serviceable (and not near-

64) Milan Hain, *Hugo Haas a jeho (americké) filmy* (Praha: Casablanca, 2015), 35.

65) Rosenfeld, "The Cult of the Clinker Queen," 18.

66) Matějková, *Hugo Haas*, 158.

67) Hurst, *Republic Studios*, 19.

68) Ibid., 18.

69) Lowe, "Angel at the Amazon," 4.

ly as bad by any measure as B-movie shlock being produced by Ed Wood or similarly out-tré studios), they displayed a more fatal flaw than bad acting: the fact that Hrubá Ralston “had almost no screen personality.”⁷⁰⁾ One of the great problems of stardom (or at least according to the model first codified by Dyer) is the fact that there exists an inherent tension within the star image of duality, of the ordinary and the extraordinary existing as one. As Dyer notes:

One of the problems in coming to grips with the phenomenon of stardom is the extreme ambiguity/contradiction, already touched on, concerning the stars-as-ordinary and the stars-as-special. Are they just like you or me, or do consumption and success transform them into (or reflect) something different?⁷¹⁾

This duality is even more present in the so-called cult stars, specifically those cult stars who lack the physical or artistic gifts other stars have and yet have somehow transcended the boundary between ordinary individual or star — whose ordinariness or lack of talent makes them somehow exotic simply by proximity to the film industry itself. For would-be stars like Hrubá Ralston who had originally earned their fame through some sort of non-cinematic gift, like athletics or figure skating, making a lasting impression in cinema was more difficult than expected. As her longtime director Joseph Kane put it:

But you know, the public is a very funny thing. The public either accepts you, or it doesn't, and there's nothing you can do about it. If they don't go for you, well, that's it.⁷²⁾

In the end it seems the public just simply wouldn't go for her.

By the mid-1970s, Hrubá Ralston, if remembered, was often referenced only as the punchline to jokes about bad acting in trade, popular, and even minor local publications. As film critic Bill Hagen wrote for the *Copley News Service* in 1975 (a wire service operated by the Copley Press which sent syndicated columns to papers all across the United States) in an article lampooning the actress by attributing various famous film quotes to her or about her:

“I coulda been a contendah.” In perhaps her finest performance, Vera Hrubá Ralston remarked on what might have been in a tearful farewell to show business at dinner arranged in her honor by Gabby Hayes. It will long be remembered by those gathered for occasion at the Bel Air Taco Bell.⁷³⁾

70) Dixon, *Death of the Moguls*, 155.

71) Dyer, *Stars*, 43.

72) Charles Flynn and Todd McCarthy, “Interview: Charles Kane,” in *King of the Bs: Working Within the Hollywood System: An Anthology of Film History and Criticism*, eds. Charles Flynn and Todd McCarthy (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1975), 321–322.

73) Bill Hagen, “Who the hey is Vera Ralston,” *Arroyo Grande Times Press Reporter*, December 2, 1977, 7.

While much of the critical and popular consensus of Hrubá Ralston's acting abilities was resoundingly negative, it is worth emphasizing that she was not without her fans, many of whom saw the criticism as largely overblown (especially for an actress in a B-movie) and who saw her as a link to a by-gone era.⁷⁴⁾ Even some of her skeptics were not all that skeptical in their opposition to her. Following a high visibility human interest piece on Hrubá Ralston, Ben Sommers, a motion picture theatre owner in Denver felt compelled to write in to the *Los Angeles Times*, expressing his "happy memories" of his time as an exhibitor of Republic Pictures. Sommers noted that, while many complained about Hrubá Ralston's performances, Republic Pictures were incredibly popular and well-attended. Furthermore, Sommers noted how he "missed her," and closed his letter by chuckling at the fact that "[Hrubá Ralston] sold lots of popcorn to disgruntled moviegoers."⁷⁵⁾

Conclusion

As I mentioned earlier, one of DeCordova's key insights into the creation of the Hollywood star production industry was the simple observation that the classical Hollywood model of stardom depends on maintaining an equilibrium between two opposite poles of a star's existence — capital's desire to market a highly controlled, public image of the actor or actress, and the public's hunger to know all details about the same actor or actresses private life, no matter how scandalous, salacious, or contradictory of the public image those might be. What remains difficult to decipher with Hrubá Ralston's public image is whether the public hungered to know anything about Hrubá Ralston's private life in Hollywood at all. While American newspapers were full of gossip items and speculation about Hrubá Ralston's personal life as a young ice-skating refugee from Czechoslovakia, by the time she had become one of the marquee names on Republic Pictures' roster, her mentions in gossip columns had nearly vanished.

This is not to say that there was not any potential dirt for the Hollywood gossip columnists to mine, however. While the Hrubá Ralston-Yates marriage was full of incidents that earlier generations of Hollywood scribes would have gladly turned into salacious content for gossip and blind item columns, Hrubá Ralston's scandals were seemingly unreported on, although mentions of them can be gleaned in the memoirs of her peers, like Hugo Haas or Norbert Auerbach. Since Hrubá Ralston eventually married to Herbert Yates, her domestic escapades (such as drunkenly lighting a barbeque grill on fire in the living room of her Hollywood mansion)⁷⁶⁾ and rather public affair with a married executive were never really commented on in the press. When Hrubá Ralston was associated with scandals, on the contrary, they were financial instead of salacious. Although Republic Pictures had been making a steady profit during his leadership as a producer of B movies and genre films, in 1958 a stockholder lawsuit alleged that Hrubá Ralston's husband, Herbert J. Yates, had forced the studio to make her the star of 20 pictures, 18 of which had "flopped" and

74) Jody Jacobs, "The Diamond Circle Goes Western," *Los Angeles Times*, June 28, 1981, 114.

75) Ben Sommers, "The Popcorn Queen," *Los Angeles Times*, December 12, 1982, 119.

76) Matějková, *Hugo Haas*, 158.

that Yates “was aware that Miss Ralston was no great shakes as an actress when he forced Republic to star her.”⁷⁷⁾ That same year, Hrubá Ralston retired when Republic Studios folded shortly after, marking the end of her nearly 20 year career as an actress.

Although Věra Hrubá Ralston's life seemingly satisfied most of the basic requirements for stardom, the fact that she did not become a classically defined star of note in either the public or the cultic imagination remains inescapable. This alone is not surprising, given the rarified nature of stardom; however, what remains surprising is that Hrubá Ralston possessed nearly all the prerequisite conditions for classical film stardom. She had been an internationally feted athlete who had so captivated the hearts of an American audience that she received thousands of marriage proposals and a \$20,000 dollar inheritance from a random audience member when facing a minor immigration hurdle, and yet those extraordinary responses did not translate into any sort of lasting success within the film industry. She had been a celebrated member of the Czech expatriate community and a staunch anti-Nazi activist during World War II and yet was not celebrated by her home country or her adopted country the way countless other stars (and even cult stars such as Maria Montez) were. She was married to a studio head who worked tirelessly to make her into a bona-fide star even at the expense of his own career and the studio he had turned into one of the most successful B-movie studios of the late 1940s at early 1950s; she had starred with some of the leading actors of her day. And while other cult figures saw a belated stardom due to the championing of other artists and critics, Hrubá Ralston spent the last few decades of her life trying to reignite interest in the career to no avail. No matter what approach was taken to transform the public persona of Věra Hrubá Ralston from that of a former figure skater turned untalented actress to a film star (either as a traditional model or as a cult star), the end results were the same — nothing.

In conclusion, Věra Hrubá Ralston's descent from celebrated athlete into anti-star has revealed several interesting insights into why some foreign celebrities were able to transcend their momentary fame into various degrees of stardom, and others, like Hrubá Ralston, did not. On the one hand, the fact remains that Hrubá Ralston had considerable personal advantages (international athletic celebrity, physical attractiveness, personal connections within the film industry, the social and industrial clout of her husband) which failed make her a star. Although she was managed and connected to a number of powerful men, her anti-Nazi politics did not seem to garner her the same amount of credibility or favorability as had other more exotic European actresses. Similarly, although she publicly proclaimed her desire to be American citizen, the early publicity she earned through her antagonism of the Nazi regime and Czechoslovak boosterism marked her as “foreign” in the eyes of the American public. Paradoxically, however, her willingness to abandon Czech cultural identity and assimilate into an American cultural identity reduced her value globally to ethnic Czechs. Finally, although Hrubá Ralston was originally marketed as an ethnically foreign beauty, her unwillingness to be defined through her physical desirability and her adherence to more conservative norms of femineity prevented the audience from desiring her as a “vamp” like Pola Negri and, like Vilma Bánky, instead associ-

77) Anon., “Yates Played as Head of Republic Pictures,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 20, 1958, 40.

ating her with less threatening models of European foreignness which were so unmarked, they faded very quickly in the public consciousness.

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“You All Have Such a Wholesome Look”

Class and the Gothic Family in Ozark

Abstract

The paper examines the phenomenon of class in contemporary television broadcasting, which has only recently become of interest for television historians and theorists, as well as for producers and broadcast platforms, and it demonstrates the possibilities of class analysis in the case study of the Netflix series *Ozark* (Bill Dubuque and Mark Williams, 2017–2022). The introduction to the state of research on class in contemporary cultural studies, demonstrated on the recent works of UK and German scholars (James Bignell, Faye Woods, Sieglinde Lemke and others) is followed by a discussion of several class-based categories that play a major role in US popular culture, namely the figures of the hillbilly, redneck, and “white trash.” The theoretical part of the paper also highlights the necessity of thinking beyond the boundaries of “us” versus “them” that are prevalent in class-based analysis, and offers more nuanced methods of approaching the impact of class upon other identity facets and their intersection. In this respect, the paper focuses specifically on the intersections of class and region and class and gender, as these form a strong basis for the analysis of the chosen series.

The dynamics of class in its intersection with gender and regional identity are examined in narrative and especially stylistic choices of the *Ozark* creative team. The analysis of the mise-en-scène, strongly influenced by contemporary naturalistic tendencies, is methodologically underpinned by gothic theory, which forms a relevant bridge to the final analysis of the concept of the American family and its class base.

Keywords

Ozark, Netflix, gothic theory, gender, class, region

Introduction: Ruth is Dead, Long Live Ruth!

The final episode of *Ozark* (2017–2022), which was released on Netflix on April 29, 2022, has polarized critics and fans over the fate of the main characters and the "justice" of the conclusion of this crime television series. The plot of *Ozark* revolves around the Byrdes, an upper-middle-class family whose father launders money for a Mexican drug cartel through local businesses at Lake Ozark, Missouri. Throughout the series, the family is torn between serving the cartel and trying to break their bond and move to Chicago, which they were forced to leave in a hurry after an operation went wrong in the first episode of season one.

At the end of the series, the Byrdes have achieved their goal. They are freed from their service to the cartel and free to start a new life. However, Ruth Langmore, one of the show's most beloved characters despite her "white trash" background, is not allowed a similar fate. Although she has done everything she could to free herself from her partnership with the Byrdes and the cartel, Ruth is killed by the new head of the cartel.

Scripting Ruth's death was a difficult task, as the showrunner Chris Mundy admits, but it had to be done:

Mundy ultimately concluded that the shocking death [of Ruth] "was the right decision for the show," even though it was difficult for the cast, crew and audience to admit. "Ruth was almost a stronger character in death than she would have been if she was off living somewhere," said Mundy. "That was our hope for the show. As everyone's favorite character [...] you just wanted to do it justice."¹⁾

Many fans were outraged by Ruth's death in light of the Byrdes' escape. As Daniela Scott summarizes, "[u]nsurprisingly, fans weren't at all happy on how Ruth met her end, with lots of them flocking to *Twitter* to share their less-than-impressed opinion on the whole thing."²⁾ In an interview, Julia Garner, the actress who plays Ruth, offered a perspective on the necessity of her character's death that will also guide this paper:

Asked how it felt knowing that Marty and Wendy survived but not Ruth, the actor said, "I can't speak on behalf of Ruth, because she was dead by then. But as a viewer, it reflects real life in a way. The middle class, the poor, the dreamers almost always pay for it in a sense. The super-powerful people with all the money, in the end, they do okay."³⁾

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- 1) Charna Flam, "'Ozark' Creator Says There's No Ambiguity to the Final Shot in Series Finale: 'They Get Away With It'", *Variety*, February 19, 2023, accessed October 25, 2024, <https://variety.com/2023/tv/news/ozark-finale-julia-garner-ruth-death-mel-1235528055/>.
 - 2) Daniela Scott, "Ozark fans are all having the same reaction to the finale," *Cosmopolitan*, May 4, 2022, accessed October 25, 2024, <https://www.cosmopolitan.com/uk/entertainment/a39902187/ozark-finale-fan-reaction/>.
 - 3) Julie Miller, "Ozark's Ending, Explained: Exclusive Finale Conversation With the Cast and Showrunner," *Vanity Fair*, May 3, 2022, accessed October 25, 2024, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2022/05/ozark-finale-netflix>.

My goal is to follow this logic: why does it seem acceptable to kill poor people on television shows? — and examine its basic structure, using *Ozark* as a case study. Despite the outrage the final episode caused among fans and critics, I will argue that *Ozark* performs an important operation by exposing the classed nature of the American family. Moreover, I will read the treatment of the family in *Ozark* through the lens of gothic theory to point out how its concepts help to undermine the image of success of the upper-class family and give voice to local representatives of the lower classes, like Ruth.

Class in Contemporary TV Studies

Garner's note strikes a chord in current television studies — class and its representations in popular (US) culture are understudied phenomena. They either present the middle class as standing for the whole of society or focus on analyzing reality shows and their use of stereotypes.⁴⁾ Sieglinde Lemke argues in her *Inequality, Poverty and Precarity in Contemporary American Culture* (2016) that “[p]overty studies and class studies occupy a marginal role in the academic landscape of the twenty-first century. [...] The scholarly interest in class-based oppression and its cultural ramifications remains in its embryonic stage.”⁵⁾

Although this may describe television studies as well, there are exceptions that this study would like to expand on — the fourth edition of Routledge's *An Introduction to Television Studies* (2023), authored by UK scholars Jonathan Bignell and Faye Woods, includes a chapter on representation and identity, calling for an intersectional approach to its facets:

We must remember that identity is always intersectional, people are never defined solely by a single facet of their identity. Instead, the complexities of nation, gender, race and class inform and shape our experience of the world.⁶⁾

As *Ozark* shows, representation of class issues is no longer the privilege of reality television or British social drama. Lemke and Schniedermann argue in their introduction to *Class Divisions in Serial Television* (2016) that

the Quality TV format, with its sophisticated narrative and formal techniques, coincides with equally complex ways of exposing class divisions in contemporary US life

4) See, for instance, Laura Grindstaff's chapter “Class” in *Keywords for Media Studies*, eds. Laurie Ouellette and Jonathan Gray (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 39–42; or Diana Owen's “‘Hillbillies,’ ‘Welfare Queens,’ and ‘Teen Moms’: American Media's Class Distinctions,” in *Class Divisions in Serial Television*, eds. Sieglinde Lemke and Wibke Schiedermann (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 47–63.

5) Sieglinde Lemke, *Inequality, Poverty and Precarity in Contemporary American Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 167. For more recent treatments of class in scripted television, see Holly Willson Holladay, “Doing Whiteness ‘Right’: Playing by the Rules of Neoliberalism for Television's Working Class,” in *Neoliberalism and the Media*, ed. Marian Meyers (New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2019), 192–208, and L.S. Kim, *Maid for Television: Race, Class, Gender, and Representational Economy* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2023).

6) Jonathan Bignell and Faye Woods, *An Introduction to Television Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 2023), 233.

[...]. Television — perhaps the most middle-class of all US media — has begun to turn away from class denialism and to engage with a broad range of socio-economic issues.⁷⁾

The representation of class issues in contemporary media and television often relies on a series of frames. Following Robert Entmann, Diana Owen defines framing as "a social construction or a mediated interpretation of reality that can be accurate or highly distorted."⁸⁾ When it comes to class, the latter is usually the case, resulting in the oppositional notion of "us vs. them." Owen refers to these frames as episodic (depicting poverty "in terms of personal experience by highlighting the stories of poor individuals or families") and thematic (taking "an abstract, impersonal approach by focusing on general poverty trends and public assistance. [...] These stories are depersonalized and often rely on statistics and graphics."⁹⁾). The "us vs. them" metaphor is taken up by Lemke, who sees two approaches at its root — the individual/cultural theory of poverty and a structural one. She sees both as fundamentally flawed:

[T]he culture of poverty thesis holds that poverty is the result of a failure of personal or collective initiative in a society that has impartially provided the opportunities for upward mobility [...]. By contrast, the structural thesis of poverty, which holds that poverty is a result of a failure of social, political and economic institutions [...], has the merit of not blaming the poor, though it does contribute to the same disenfranchisement of the precarious, who are relegated to the status of helpless objects in need of top-down intervention.¹⁰⁾

Lemke calls for a more holistic approach, a new narrative of class in US culture, and sees the culture industry as its main producer. Due to geographic and social segregation, the rich and the poor rarely come into direct contact anymore and thus learn about each other through different media representations. The new narrative should strive to overcome the "us vs. them" binary and position itself on "the understanding of mutual interdependence of the two Americas, connecting the privileged and precarious class."¹¹⁾ This is what happens in *Ozark* in the narrative interplay between the Byrdes and local characters, of whom Ruth Langmore is the best representative.

One of the goals of this study is to show how intersectional approach to class, one that takes into account gendered agency and regional differences, mobilizes shifts in the treatment of class. I want to argue that *Ozark* offers a surprisingly critical perspective in this regard, probably unintentionally or rather accidentally, given Netflix's official approach to class issues in its programming and production.

7) Sieglinde Lemke and Wibke Schniedermann, "Introduction: Class Divisions and the Cultural Politics of Serial TV," in *Class Divisions in Serial Television*, eds. Sieglinde Lemke and Wibke Schniedermann (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 1–17, esp. 1.

8) Owen, "'Hillbillies,' 'Welfare Queens,' and 'Teen Moms,'" 48.

9) Ibid., 54.

10) Lemke, *Inequality, Poverty and Precarity in Contemporary American Culture*, 166.

11) Ibid., 6.

In 2021, Netflix released a diversity report, covering their production from 2018 to 2019. In his commentary on the results, Ted Sarandos, then Netflix co-CEO and Chief Content Officer, wrote self-critically that despite improvements across several inclusion indicators, like hiring women and people of color in front of the camera as well as behind it, “we still have notable representation gaps in film and series for Latinx, Middle Eastern/North African, American Indian/Alaskan Native, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander communities. And we still have work to do in increasing representation of the LGBTQ community and characters with disabilities.”¹²⁾

Sarandos also promised to do these reports every two years, so a new one was released in 2023 and 2025. After two and four years, not much has changed.¹³⁾ Interestingly, none of the reports focused on the representation of people by class background, and the research team that produced the report did not comment on this omission. Despite Netflix’s efforts at diversity and inclusion, class, and especially lower class, is still not felt as an issue.

Stereotyping Class in Popular Culture

Representation, in the broadest sense of the word, is linked to stereotypes, and class is no exception. As Diana Kendall observes:

The most popular portrayal of the working class, caricature framing, depicts these people in negative ways, for instance, as idiots, white trash, buffoons, bigots, or slobs. Many television shows featuring working-class characters play on the idea that their clothing, manners, and speech patterns are inferior to those of the middle or upper classes.¹⁴⁾

Stereotypes, as Stuart Hall noted, play an important cultural role in maintaining order on both the social and symbolic levels:

Stereotyping [...] sets up a symbolic frontier between the “normal” and the “deviant,” the “normal” and the “pathological,” the “acceptable” and the “unacceptable,” what “belongs” and what does not or is “Other,” between “insiders” and “outsiders,” Us and Them.¹⁵⁾

12) Ted Sarandos, “Building a Legacy of Inclusion: Results From Our First Film and Series Diversity Study,” *Netflix Newsroom*, February 26, 2021, accessed October 25, 2024, <https://about.netflix.com/en/news/building-a-legacy-of-inclusion>.

13) Netflix, “Our Latest Film & Series Diversity Study,” *netflix.com*, accessed October 25, 2024, <https://about.netflix.com/en/inclusion>. See also Dr. Stacy L. Smith, Dr. Katherine Pieper, Katherine Neff, and Sam Wheeler, “Inclusion in Netflix Original U.S. Scripted Films & Series: Full Report,” *netflix.com*, accessed July 5, 2025, <https://about.netflix.com/en/inclusion>.

14) Diana Kendall, “Framing Class, Vicarious Living, And Conspicuous Consumption,” in *Class Divisions in Serial Television*, eds. Sieglinde Lemke and Wibke Schniedermann (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 21–46, esp. 28.

15) Stuart Hall, “The spectacle of the ‘other,’” in *Representation*, second edition, eds. Stuart Hall, Jessica Evans, and Stuart Nixon (London: Sage, 2013), 215–287, esp. 248.

The television industry, the most middle-class of all U.S. media, as Lemke and Schiedermaun observed, is a particularly rich field when it comes to class issues, and especially to the labeling of the pathological, the misfits, the unacceptable, "them." Most of the stereotypes on display in television programming, both historically and today, have a long genealogy in other media as well as the social arena, and the expansion of television (and streaming platforms, like Netflix) has only made them visible on a global scale.

There are three most common stereotypical personas pertinent to *Ozark*, given its location¹⁶⁾ — the redneck, the hillbilly, and the "white trash." A brief overview of these will provide a background from which the characters of *Ozark* are distilled. Aside from the fact that all three are mostly used as invectives in mainstream discourse, labels that distance their user from the offended, they have a fascinating social history that includes acts of appropriation.

In his 2005 study, Anthony Harkins identifies the hillbilly as a ubiquitous figure in American popular culture:

[T]he portrayal of southern mountain people as premodern and ignorant "hillbillys" is one of the most lasting and pervasive images in American popular iconography, appearing continuously throughout the twentieth century in nearly every major facet of American popular culture from novels and magazines to movies and television programs to country music and the Internet.¹⁷⁾

In attempting to elucidate the prevalence of this "icon," as the title of his book indicates, Harkins emphasizes the dual cultural function of the hillbilly label. Given its association with rural America, it can also be regarded as a repository of middle-class nostalgia:

"[T]he hillbilly" served the dual and seemingly contradictory purposes of allowing the "mainstream," or generally nonrural, middle-class white, American audience to imagine a romanticized past, while simultaneously enabling that same audience to recommit itself to modernity by caricaturing the negative aspects of premodern, uncivilized society.¹⁸⁾

Another rural persona that is often used interchangeably with the hillbilly is the redneck. While both designations share a considerable amount of interpretive ground in contemporary culture (the same films are sometimes labeled as hillbilly horror and redneck

16) The plot of the series is set at the Lake of the Ozarks in central Missouri, an existing site. As a border state during the US Civil War, Missouri has in some parts quite a strong link to the American Southern culture, although according to the US Census Bureau, it belongs to the group of Midwest states. See America Counts Staff, "MIDWEST REGION: 2020 Census," *census.gov*, August 25, 2021, accessed July 5, 2025, <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/state-by-state/midwest-region.html>.

17) Anthony Harkins, *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 3.

18) *Ibid.*, 7.

horror, for instance¹⁹⁾), the redneck carries a history of pride and rebellion, whether real or imagined. As John Goad notes in his specific lingo in *The Redneck Manifesto* (1997):

Although the term was invented by outsiders to describe soil-tilling low-class white nobodies, the word's stiff-spined rebel obstinacy made it the term most frequently embraced by the aliens themselves. To this day, "redneck" connotes defiance — stupid or otherwise.²⁰⁾

The terms "defiance" and "rebel obstinacy" illustrate the way impoverished white people reappropriated the designation. This assertion is corroborated by Patrick Huber in his investigation:

The term redneck originated as a class slur in the late-nineteenth-century South, but white blue-collar workers — especially, but not exclusively, those from the South — gave it a complimentary meaning in the late-twentieth century. The redefinition and use of the term by these self-styled rednecks speak powerfully to their racial and class consciousness as an economically exploited and yet racially privileged group.²¹⁾

From this perspective, a redneck may not only connote backwoods origin and lack of urban sophistication but also "an honest, hard-working man who identifies with traditional southern social and religious values."²²⁾

The least cherished moniker historically is that of "white trash." John Hartigan Jr. (1997) notes that it is often used "to mark the edge of sociality, either through their unruly behavior and lifestyle, or their isolation from the rest of the community."²³⁾ Jim Goad (1997) shifts the attention to culture and heredity, as the label evolved from "poor whites" to "white trash": "[I]n shunting the emphasis from 'poor' to 'trash,' one's attention is diverted from economic explanations toward behavioral and genetic alibis."²⁴⁾ Nancy Isenberg offers a similar yet more nuanced reasoning behind these shifts in her *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America*:

Before the end of the 1980s, "white trash" was rebranded as an ethnic identity, with its own readily identifiable cultural forms: food, speech patterns, tastes, and, for some, nostalgic memories. [...] A larger trend was turning America into a more ethnically conscious nation, one in which ethnicity substituted for class. The hereditary

19) See John Beifuss, "Film, Horror," in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Vol. 18: Media*, eds. Allison Graham and Sharon Monteith (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 68–72.

20) Jim Goad, *The Redneck Manifesto: How Hillbillies, Hicks and White Trash Became America's Scapegoats* (New York: Simon&Schuster, 1997), 83–84.

21) Patrick Huber, "A Short History of Redneck: The Fashioning of a Southern White Masculine Identity," in *Southern Cultures: The Fifteen Anniversary Reader*, eds. Harry L. Watson and Larry J. Griffin (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 303–327, esp. 305.

22) Huber, "A Short History of Redneck," 317.

23) John Hartigan Jr., "Unpopular Culture — The Case of 'White Trash,'" *Cultural Studies* 11, no. 2 (1997), 317.

24) Goad, *The Redneck Manifesto*, 79.

model had not been completely abandoned; instead, it was reconfigured to focus on transmitted cultural values over inbred traits.²⁵⁾

In contrast with both redneck and the hillbilly, "white trash" has a much shorter history of appropriation. In her article in *Washington Post*, Ylan Q. Mui investigates the mid-2000s popularity of "trash chic" or "trailer park chic" by interviewing both sociologists and marketing experts. One of the latter offers a simple explanation:

"[W]hite trash" has shed its connotations of rural poverty and poor education to become a symbol of everyman [...]. It now evokes a simpler life and more comforting times — terrorists don't attack trailer parks.²⁶⁾

Despite its dissemination across popular culture, the label still carries a heavy stigma. What Hartigan Jr. argued a decade earlier still holds true: "Assertions of 'white trash' as a form of self-designation, though, have not dispelled the term's negative connotations; rather, they coexist in a confusing series of cultural exchanges."²⁷⁾

In many cultural representations, class does not only intersect with regional belonging but other identity facets. "White trash" clearly demonstrates the inseparability of class and race/ethnicity, but gender is also an important issue. An intersectional approach is therefore needed in this exploration, more so because the general idea of a working-class character has dominantly been embodied by the white man, which is no longer true. As Julie Bettie argues in her analysis of the changes in working-class iconography, "class, race, and gender become more visibly entangled as the working class is increasingly composed of people who do not represent the unmarked categories of whiteness and maleness."²⁸⁾ I will therefore now focus on how gender interlocks with the above-analyzed labels in the world of *Ozark* and produces a multi-level narrative dynamics.

The Merging of Gender, Class and Region in *Ozark*

From the first episode of the series, *Ozark* was approached by its audiences as a less accomplished clone of *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008–2013), a story of Walter White who trades chemistry teaching for methamphetamine production to secure his family's future after he is diagnosed with cancer in the terminal stage. *Esquire* ran a review with a telling title in this respect, "Netflix's *Ozark* Might Be Too Much Like *Breaking Bad* for Its Own Good."²⁹⁾

25) Nancy Isenberg, *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America* (New York: Viking, 2006), 270.

26) Ylan Q. Mui, "The Selling Of 'Trailer Park Chic': One Person's Trash Is Another's Marketing Treasure," *Washington Post*, March 18, 2006, accessed December 26, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/business/2006/03/18/the-selling-of-trailer-park-chic-span-class=bankhead-one-persons-trash-is-another-s-marketing-treasurespan/b04e4e98-90d4-448a-9d5e-c866dbbf0264/>.

27) Hartigan Jr., "Unpopular Culture — The Case of 'White Trash,'" 317.

28) Julie Bettie, "Class Dismissed? Roseanne and the Changing Face of Working-Class Iconography," *Social Text*, no. 45 (1995), 126.

29) Corey Atad, *Esquire*, July 24, 2017, accessed December 26, 2024, <https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/tv/a56488/ozark-netflix-series-review/>.

The main male character of *Ozark* is Martin Byrde, played by Jason Bateman, who also executive-produced the series and directed 9 of its 44 episodes, including the pilot and the finale. Marty, a financial adviser from Chicago laundering money for the second-largest Mexican drug cartel, follows a similar trajectory as Walter from *Breaking Bad* — providing for his family and trying to keep it from any collateral damage from his criminal operations. While Walter keeps his family in the dark about his new business, Marty's wife and children know about it and become involved in it.

This is a crucial distinction between the two series because knowledge invests the Byrdes with agency, which, especially for Marty's wife Wendy, means following separate agendas. Women make the difference, as Courtney Watson put it: "Though the show is written in the vein of *Breaking Bad*, it features significant departures from that show's formula, particularly with respect to the role of women in the story."³⁰

Wendy takes initiative early in the narrative — it is she who tells their children Jonah and Charlotte the real reason why they had to leave Chicago for the Ozarks (their father's involvement with the cartel). It is Wendy's wit as a former political campaigner that secures the Byrdes a necessary permit to open a casino to launder money more efficiently; she decides the family will stay in the Ozarks, while she becomes a confidante to the head of the cartel, who values her opinions over Marty's for a considerable amount of screen time. From an unhappy, depression-prone housewife with a rich elderly lover, Wendy transforms herself into a strong player on the national political scene, able to move her family back to Chicago on her terms in the end.

Although Wendy Byrde is "[t]he breakout character in *Ozark*,"³¹ it is the local women who engage in Sieglinde Lemke's call for a more holistic approach to class representation. When the Byrdes arrive to the Ozarks, they expect to find an open field for their operations, with small struggling businesses eager to be bought and have cartel money laundered through them. What they find is the Snells, a family of old-time farmers and heroin manufacturers, with their own drug distribution and money-laundering scheme set in place, the local sheriff in their pocket, and a mansion on a hill.

Jacob and Darlene Snell are the *Ozark* version of the redneck/hillbilly stereotype. Barbara Selznick argues that "although presumably wealthy because of their business, [the Snells] are marginalized by their self-identification as hillbillies grounded in the values of the rural; values that mark them as brutal and bigoted."³² The Snells, however, are far from passive recipients of classed and racialized slurs; they are agents who have to be taken into account. To Marty and Wendy's dismay, they become a major obstacle in the smooth proceedings of their Ozark plans with the cartel. The agency of the Snells in *Ozark* betrays any simple classism. Class becomes subsumed by region, with its insider/outsider dichotomy, which, at least in the first three seasons, is played contrary to expectations — the outside teams, be it the Byrdes or the representatives of the cartel, are presented as either invaders or are racialized. In their first meeting in the sixth episode of season 1, Jacob recounts to

30) Courtney Watson, "Bad Girls: Agency, Revenge, and Redemption in Contemporary Drama," *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy* 6, no. 2 (2019), 43.

31) Ibid.

32) Barbara Selznick, "He's Not Good, But He's Not Bad': Jason Bateman as the White, Middle-Class Devil," *TV/ Series*, no. 20 (2022), 11.

Marty the history of the Snells to make him understand the flip side of Lake Ozark's popularity as a "redneck riviera":

In 1929, the power company stole our land, flooded us out. Snells fled up the mountains and started all over again. [...] But then, you came along... [...] The problem we have here is one of power. And you seem to think you've got more of it than you do. [...] Now, in these parts, power comes from time. And our family, we got a history older than anything. [...] You are a threat to my colony, Martin Byrde. You have disturbed the ecology of our delicate little system.

The Byrdes represent the same danger to the Snells as the operations of the Mexican cartel. This is particularly true about Darlene, who is more vehement in defending the Snell ground and pride than her husband, and takes action to prove it. She kills the current cartel operative for calling them "a bunch of rednecks," explaining it by saying, "I won't abide that talk, you know that." Darlene becomes an obstacle in closing a deal between the Snells and the cartel, necessary for the casino opening, and refuses to be intimidated by violence or money, to which Jacob succumbs. Before he acts on his plan to get rid of her, Darlene kills him and takes over their operations. She even reaches out to Ruth, revenges a severe beating Ruth got which Marty feared to do anything about, and offers Ruth and her cousin Wyatt to become part of the Snells's business as well as the clan (Wyatt is her lover at the time and becomes her husband soon after): "Look, you and Wyatt could grow the business. I'll teach you. And besides, it's about time both of you understood the value of people from here having their own thing."

The relationship between Darlene and Wyatt, and her partnership offer to Ruth, turns stereotypical readings of the Southern lower-class upside down. The "rednecks" or "hillbillies" (nomenclature is quite fuzzy in the series — the Snells are called both "rednecks" and "hillbillies" by other characters, while Ruth and her family, the Langmores, are "white trash," as well as "rednecks") are historically said to feel superior to "white trash" representatives, priding themselves on their hard work. In contrast, "white trash" has historically been associated with laziness and shiftlessness, prone to criminal behavior.³³⁾ Darlene does not follow this sentiment and wants to become allies instead of enemies. Class divisions are overcome by regional bonds.

Ruth Langmore is the most pronounced local character in *Ozark*, and it is through her that the convolutions of the "white trash" label are explored. Although the Langmores have a similarly long history in the region as the Snells, Ruth does not cherish it, nor finds any source of pride in their ancestors: "God's a motherfucker. [...] Built me smart enough to know how fucked up my life is. But not quite smart enough to haul my ass out of it."

Contrary to Darlene's advice, Ruth wants to leave her history as well as the place she grew up in behind her and wants the same for her cousin Wyatt. She starts working for

33) See J. Brooks Bouson, "'You Nothing but Trash': White Trash Shame in Dorothy Allison's 'Bastard out of Carolina,'" *The Southern Literary Journal* 34, no. 1 (2001), 101–123; Janet Holtman, "'White Trash' in Literary History: The Social Interventions of Erskine Caldwell and James Agee," *American Studies* 53, no. 2 (2014), 31–48; see also Isenberg, *White Trash*.

Marty and soon becomes indispensable to him, drawn to him not only for the money that would allow her and Wyatt to leave, but also because Marty seems not to judge her by her family, but accepts her for who she is and helps develop her skills. The actress Julia Garner observes that “Ruth wants to be acknowledged and never gets acknowledged. I think that’s why she was drawn to Marty in the first place, to be seen in a way she’s never been seen.”³⁴⁾

Ruth’s position is often related to as “cursed,” and there is much discussion about “the Langmore curse” in *Ozark*, echoed even in the title of one of the episodes (“Once a Langmore...”), meaning that any member of the Langmore family will always be judged by the deeds of their fathers and punished for them, as distinctly noted in the essay Wyatt writes for his university application:

You ask why I belong at Mizzou. The simple answer is I don’t. An undercurrent of savagery pervaded my life long before the violence truly began. My dad made grand theft auto seem like a good career path like we were entrepreneurs in a start-up. Only our start-up was the motor of someone else’s car or truck or boat. [...] My childhood traumas are not like yours. My mother’s leaving is not like your mother’s leaving. You see, I’m a cursed Langmore, long inured to violence and death. “Taken too soon?” people ask me of an untimely death. And in the case of a Langmore, perhaps not soon enough.

The Langmore curse in practice is mostly evident in Wyatt’s interactions with Charlotte Byrde, with whom he becomes friends and whose misdeeds at school for instance are treated very differently by the management. Once Charlotte steals the first edition of *Look Homeward, Angel* from an antiquarian shop, a book Wyatt loves, he gets mad at her, explaining the different treatment they get based on their background:

You just don’t get it. It’s like what happened at school. If you get caught, you get a slap on the wrist. Marty pays for the book. I get caught, I go to fucking jail. [...] You just don’t understand who my family is, ok? The shit that they’ve done, it’s like I can’t escape it.

The female characters in *Ozark* do not buy the curse talk. Ruth gets angry at Wyatt after she reads his essay, Charlotte explains to him agitatedly that the criminal background in her family haunts her, too. When Wyatt tells Darlene about the Langmore curse, she rejects it completely:

Bullshit. Your daddy may have been useless, his daddy human garbage, but before that... your folks were all right. [...] Langmore stock is as good as any around here. Don’t let anyone tell you different.

34) Ben Travers, “‘Ozark’: Laura Linney Could Be the Antihero of Season 2, Cast Discusses ‘Breaking Bad’ Comparisons, and More,” *Y!Sports*, July 29, 2018, accessed December 26, 2024, <https://sports.yahoo.com/ozark-laura-linney-could-antihero-192408912.html?guccounter=1>.

While Ruth tries to get away from her trailer home for most of the series, using Marty to disentangle herself from her family, she has a change of heart after Wendy gets her disobedient brother — Ruth's lover of the time — killed. She stops working for Marty, and after Darlene and Wyatt are killed by the cartel, she inherits Darlene's property as well as a share of the casino. She cleans her felony record, buys more shares, takes the casino over, and decides to stop laundering cartel money through it. Taking Darlene's advice from earlier, she stays in the Ozarks, tears down the old Langmore trailers, and plans to build real houses on the premises. At this point, her story is one of a successful move up the social class ladder and a defeat of the "Langmore curse." Ruth is starting a new life on her own, with a clean record and her own local business. But in the final episode, when she gets killed, her luck becomes as fragile as her family trailers were when she had them torn apart by an excavator.

As representatives of the lower class in *Ozark*, Darlene and Ruth are both killed by the cartel, but their deaths are not simply explained by their social position, which is malleable, breaking the bounds of the stereotypical rubrics of "redneck," "hillbilly," or "white trash." *Ozark* is not simply a classist series, as Julia Garner observed in the interview quoted at the beginning of this text, and some reviewers, such as Hank Stuever in *Washington Post*, have accused it of being:

It's disappointing to watch *Ozark* lean so heavily on white trash clichés. The people who live around the lake are seen as backward, racist, homophobic and intelligent only in the criminal sense — all of which could very well be truthy, but not entirely fair.³⁵⁾

In rationalizing Ruth's and Darlene's deaths, class is gendered and regionalized. They both pay for acting out of emotion, without premeditation, which in the world of *Ozark* is a gendered position, occupied mostly by its main women characters, including Wendy Byrde. Contrary to Wendy, though, Darlene and Ruth follow their inner moral codes, rooted in their regional histories. Their deaths activate the gothic dynamic *Ozark* is working with because they may be approached more broadly as a surrender of a region, a demise of its specific identity, fused with the location, which was colonized by external forces (the Byrdes and the Mexican cartel) and abandoned once no longer needed. In this way, it is not the class that is regionalized; rather, it is the region that is classed, and I want to argue that it is through the treatment of location as gothic that this process is set in motion.

In their introduction to *Twenty-First Century Gothic*, Maisha Wester and Xavier Aldana Reyes argue for the importance of location in gothic narratives. They even see the place as one of the grounding characteristics of the otherwise fluid and hybrid nature of the gothic:

35) Hank Stuever, "Netflix's relentless 'Ozark' gets drunk on an ice-chest full of redneck clichés," *Washington Post*, July 20, 2017, accessed December 26, 2024, https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/tv/netflixs-relentless-ozark-gets-drunk-on-an-ice-chest-full-of-redneck-cliches/2017/07/19/2aa601fa-6b34-11e7-9c15-177740635e83_story.html.

The specificity of setting [...] may ultimately prove invaluable in separating the Gothic — which we see as strongly marked by time, characters, and place — from horror, largely defined by the emotion it aims to generate.³⁶⁾

Without going further into a discussion of genre, I would like to point out here that it is the setting of *Ozark* at a massive body of water (where dead bodies may be conveniently disposed of) surrounded by woods inhabited by the inscrutable locals, which allows for a gothic reading of the series.³⁷⁾ This lens is supported by the series' mise-en-scène.

The (Neo)Naturalist Look of *Ozark*

Location matters so much in *Ozark* that it becomes almost a character. On the one hand, the creators wanted to achieve a sense of realism and authenticity. The setting was based on the experience of one of the showrunners, Bill Dubuque, who owned a cabin at the Lake of the Ozarks and once worked at a restaurant/motel there. During location scouting, the team spent time at the actual lake to uncover the lingo and “the local way of life.”³⁸⁾ While the writing team was at work, the series designer and the pilot production designer were busy creating “an authentic run-down look perfect for *Ozark*, with Mundy [Chris Mundy, the showrunner] seeking to use lots of natural light to ensure it ‘felt real.’”³⁹⁾ At the same time, though, the show was not shot on location at the lake, but was filmed not far from Atlanta, Georgia, at Lake Altoona and Lake Lanier. The choice was motivated by Georgia's generous tax incentive program and its production facilities,⁴⁰⁾ but Jason Bate-man points out an aesthetic perspective as well:

[W]hat's nice about shooting there [...] is that you can spin the camera 360 degrees and you still have some really great color and grit to the aesthetic that's perfect for the rural flavor we want.⁴¹⁾

36) Maisha Wester and Xavier Aldana Reyes, “Introduction: The Gothic In The Twenty-First Century,” *Twenty-First Century Gothic* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 3.

37) Helen Wheatley argues in her *Gothic Television* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 1. In this central argument of her book, Wheatley follows the work of Lenora Ledwon on the *Twin Peaks* series, where Ledwon focuses on the domesticity of both television and the Gothic: “Like that other strangely domestic item, the Gothic novel, television can create a sense of the uncanny precisely by drawing on the unfamiliarity of the familiar. In fact, Gothic is the uncanny/*unheimlich* contained within the familiar/*heimlich* of the home.” Lenora Ledwon, “*Twin Peaks* and the Television Gothic,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 21, no. 4 (1993), 260–261. Apart from domesticity, Ledwon and Wheatley accentuate TV series' seriality, with its tool of deferred conclusion, similar to Gothic emphasis upon repetitive structures, and the long temporal investment which allows for a deeper psychological development of the characters.

38) Michael Pickard, “Clean Living,” *Drama Quarterly*, July 14, 2017, accessed December 26, 2024, <https://dramaquarterly.com/cleaning-up/>.

39) Ibid.

40) See Rachel Polansky and Tim Darnell, “Competition From Other States Increasing Pressure on Georgia's Film Industry,” *Atlanta News First*, August 8, 2022, accessed December 26, 2024, <https://www.atlantaneewsfirst.com/2022/08/08/competition-other-states-increasing-pressure-georgias-film-industry/>.

41) Pickard, “Clean Living.”

Authenticity may have been important to the makers of *Ozark*; the show, however, has a very distinct look that is deeply connected to its meaning-making process and its imaginary. Much has been written about the choice of somber hues and a bluish tint most scenes carry.⁴²⁾ The lighting, as one of the DPs remarked, also renders a specific meaning:

[O]ne thing that I pitched to Jason [Bateman] was to let the shadows fall and let the darkness take over a little bit of the frame, even if it's a bright day outside. That gives a sense that there's some sort of hiding.⁴³⁾

The work with the *mise-en-scène*, especially in framing, making use of drone shots of the lake, inviting a preternatural perspective, the color palette and lighting, as well as the minimalistic and somber soundtrack, suggests a noirish reading. Film and TV critics even use the "Ozark noir" label for works set in rural Missouri and the Ozark mountains, like *Winter's Bone* (Debra Granik, 2010), *Gone Girl* (David Fincher, 2014), or the third season of HBO's *True Detective* (Nic Pizzolatto, 2019). *Ozark* is also mentioned in papers on neo-naturalistic tendencies in contemporary literature and film.⁴⁴⁾ Gary Totten gives examples of specific techniques that underwrite the naturalist feeling of human insignificance and nature's omnipotence used by *Ozark* creators:

In order to create suspense, the naturalistic cinematographic style of the series places characters and scenes in prolonged states of instability or peril until climactic moments of despair and collapse. The characters' insignificance and ongoing misery are also emphasized using camera angles and techniques such as overhead shots and flashbacks.⁴⁵⁾

The tension between outsiders and insiders, mentioned above in connection with the intersection of class and region, is approached by some as a characteristic of the naturalist style: "The Ozarks are presented as a hostile environment and a place that is especially perilous for outsiders."⁴⁶⁾ This is an intriguing note that brings tension between the narrative and audiovisual style of *Ozark* — on the one hand, as Jasmine Humbug remarks, the setting is ominous and viewed as incomprehensible by the outsiders, most of whom want to get out as soon as possible, on the other hand, they react by pure exploitation and violence,

42) "Ozark has selected a blue tint for its imagery. It makes everything look steely, somber, cold, and somehow unforgiving," Sean T. Collins, "Ozark Is the Platonic Ideal of a Netflix Drama," *Vulture*, April 22, 2020, accessed December 26, 2024, <https://www.vulture.com/2020/04/ozark-ideal-netflix-drama.html>.

43) Pepe Avila del Pino, "How the 'Ozark' DP Created a 'Gritty, Authentic Vibe' with Consistent Color Temps and Practical Lighting," interviewed by Hawkins Dubois, *Nofilmschool*, July 31, 2017, accessed December 26, 2024, <https://nofilmschool.com/2017/07/subconsciously-creating-more-cinematic-show-pepe-avila-del-pino-dp-ozark>.

44) See Klaus H. Schmidt, "Neonaturalism in Contemporary U.S. Film," *Studies in American Naturalism* 15, no. 1 (2020), 18–48; Jasmine Humbug, *Television and Precarity: Naturalist Narratives of Poor America* (Berlin: J.B. Metzler, 2020); and Gary Totten, "'Time is a Flat Circle': The Naturalist Visual Aesthetic of Contemporary Television Crime Series," *Studies in American Naturalism* 17, no. 2 (2022), 197–218.

45) Totten, "'Time is a Flat Circle,'" 197.

46) Humbug, *Television and Precarity*, 238.

which makes them toxic to the local community. The audiovisual rendering of the location speaks to the pervasiveness of the “us” vs. “them” logic: the locals, deeply classed, as I have shown above, are at home in this “hostile environment” which makes them, as well as their surroundings, strange and monstrous to “us,” the outsiders, represented by the Byrdes. “Our” reaction to the incomprehensible nature of the setting and its inhabitants — violence and exploitation — activates the colonial mindset and is the source of a profound moral unease, which, in my view, led to the angry reactions of the viewers to the conclusion of the series.

This unease, as well as the visual treatment of the setting with “a sense that there’s some sort of hiding” is at the core of the cultural work performed by the gothic mode, and one of the reasons why it is intriguing to approach *Ozark* as a gothic narrative. The connection between naturalism and the gothic may seem like a contradiction in terms, but as Eric Sundquist states as early as 1982, “[t]he gothic is the grandfather of naturalism.”⁴⁷⁾ Klaus H. Schmidt made a similar observation in 2020, writing about “the [...] Gothic predilection for naturalistic motifs.”⁴⁸⁾ Among these, Schmidt foregrounds “focus on rural poverty, religious fanaticism, grotesque protagonists, inexplicable violence, and the curses of the past.”⁴⁹⁾ Most of these features form the core of the intersections of class and region in *Ozark*.

Ozark is gothic not only in its treatment of the landscape, the quirky local characters, or violence as a guiding principle of many actions, but in the way it presents one of the most commonplace notions that America prides on — the American dream and the role of the classed family in its accomplishment. As the gothic lens allows for pinpointing, it is class again that directs the narrative flow of the series.

Gothic Family and the American Dream

The family is probably the most overused word in *Ozark*. Both Marty and Wendy justify their connection with the cartel, and all the killings that come with it, once they move to the Ozarks, by the necessity of protecting their family. The logic seems simple — either they get ahead of events, or they end up dead. There is some reason in their fears, as the first cartel operative Del threatens Marty with just that in the very first episode of the series:

I’m torn, Marty... between intrigue and thinking this whole Ozark thing is complete and utter straw-grasping bullshit. But I’m willing to roll the dice. Because you’re special. You have a gift. But if I think that you’re trying to fuck me... I will have to kill you... and Wendy... and Jonah... and Charlotte. And not in that order.

The foundation of the Byrde family, Wendy and Marty’s marriage is dead at this point, though, and the family falls apart further after their relocation to the Ozarks. In a heated

47) Eric Sundquist, “Introduction,” in *American Realism: New Essays*, ed. Eric Sundquist (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 13.

48) Schmidt, “Neonaturalism in Contemporary U.S. Film,” 23.

49) *Ibid.*, 24.

scene in the ninth episode of season 2, Marty laments: "It's not even a family. It's a god-damn group of criminals."

The family is, however, quintessential for *Ozark* showrunner Chris Mundy, who claims in an interview that "the show doesn't work if we don't think of it framed through the marriage and framed through the family."⁵⁰ In another *Ozark* review, Mundy is quoted endorsing the Byrdes:

The arrival of the Byrde family changes the Ozarks, and the Ozarks change the Byrdes, with the new surroundings pushing the family to their limits. But when push comes to shove, adds Mundy, "they want to be together. There's something that still holds them together. At their core, they're still a family worth fighting for."⁵¹

This attitude, in tune with Wendy's and Marty's reasoning throughout the series, deserves a closer look. Many of the series *Ozark* was compared to (*This Is Us*, *Succession*) center on well-to-do American families whose problems never stem from their social status. *Ozark*, however, occupies a peculiar position — on the one hand, the dynamic inside the Byrde family undoubtedly drives the narrative of the whole series and its focus; on the other hand, the gothic stylization of the series' mise-en-scène, discussed above, undermines the reading of the Byrdes as "a family worth fighting for." The otherworldly perspective often created through camera angles, combined with the show's bluish tone, creates a space for doubt, and it is exactly where the series challenges the integrity of the American family and its enduring mythical status.

The first visual cue of this deconstruction comes from within the family. On the first morning, after they move to their new house, vultures appear on their backyard, picking on fresh animal carcasses. Wendy suspects the Langmores brought them as a warning, only to find out in the following episode that her son Jonah drags them to their property to study the vultures' behavior. Jonah is also interested in starlings, an invasive species, and asks for his mother's permission to kill them. In his reasoning he might as well describe his family trajectory in the Ozarks: "They're invaders. They steal nests and peck unhatched eggs." This metaphor, played upon in the very name of the family and voiced later by an angry Darlene calling the Byrdes vultures directly, points at the gothicization of the (upper) middle-class family that *Ozark* is performing. It also complicates the "us" vs. "them" logic — the narrative as well as stylistic approach to the Byrdes as a family undermines viewers' identification with them, which the outsider-insider perspective (along with their position as central characters) invited.

In the eighth episode of season one, we see Marty discussing with Wendy in a flashback to their past whether he should start laundering money for the cartel, and their agreement is explicitly class- and family-motivated. Wendy has had a miscarriage and has been depressed and distant from the family. Depending on Marty's salary only, the family

50) Chris Mundy, "Ozark' Boss Talks Twists and Turns and the Emotional Impact of Killing Off Characters," interview by Tyler Coates, *The Hollywood Reporter*, August 18, 2020, accessed December 26, 2024, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/ozark-boss-talks-twists-turns-emotional-impact-killing-characters-1307224/>.

51) Pickard, "Clean Living."

has been living on a tight budget, and the prospect of “never ever having to worry about money again” is just too tantalizing, especially as Wendy has had trouble finding a job after several years spent home with the kids. *Ozark* offers just this glimpse into the Byrdes’ life before their connection with the cartel, but it is significantly bleak and in sharp contrast with what they can afford after Marty starts his side job, catapulting them to an upper-middle-class status. Their move to the Ozarks makes them even more tied to the cartel, and it is under these circumstances that we see Wendy’s personality and skills flourish at last, making her the more powerful asset in the family than Marty. Witnessing her talent for gentle but elaborate extortion, the local lobbyist voices Wendy’s position succinctly: “You’re not just involved with the cartel. You are the cartel.”

This scene, along with the flashback and the new opportunities that arise for both Marty and Wendy after their move to the Ozarks, prevents the viewers from approaching the family as victims of the cartel, despite the permanent fear for their lives that seemingly motivates their every move. Rather, they form the bedrock of a gothic view of the American (upper) middle class — what *Ozark* says is not only that crime pays, and the more wealth one accumulates, the more untouchable one becomes; it shows that this strategy is available to some people only. The Byrdes’ confrontation with local families, be it the Snells or the Langmores, cuts deep into the intricate web of class, region, and legitimacy that the concept of family embodies.

The image of a wholesome family of members who love and support one another is exposed as a myth. The only time the Byrdes are presented as an ideal family is in their PR campaigns, first to get the casino permit, and later in the building of a foundation that would allow them to extricate themselves from their bond to the cartel. The casino is a venue for more efficient money laundering, and the foundation is based on much extortion and corruption. Despite these facts, Marty and Wendy rationalize their deeds by their concern for the family and insist on certain rituals, like always eating breakfast together. Ruth Langmore once spends the night at the Byrdes and is in awe at the breakfast table: “Does this happen, like, every day?” To this, Jonah semi-jokingly replies: “Unless we’re on the run. Then we eat in the car.” Ruth does not eat breakfast with her family members, and her family is far from picture-perfect. Their public image is more in the vein of what Dorothy Allison describes in her *Bastard Out of Carolina*, a chronicle of growing up “white trash” in the 1950s:

Aunt Alma had a scrapbook full of newspaper clippings [...]. “Oh, we’re always turning up in the news,” she used to joke when she’d show people that book. Her favorite is the four-page spread the *Greenville News* did when Uncle Earl’s convertible smashed into the barber across the street [...]. In those pictures, Uncle Earl looks scary, like a thief or a murderer, the kind of gaunt, poorly shaven face sketched on a post office wall. [...] he looks like a figure from a horror show, an animated corpse. Granny, my mama, uncles, aunts, cousins — all of us look dead on the black-and-white page.⁵²⁾

52) Dorothy Allison, *Bastard Out of Carolina* (New York: Penguin, 1993).

Bastard Out of Carolina is a first-person narration from within the "white trash" family, which is technically impossible in the TV medium. The objectifying scrapbook appears only towards the end of the novel, while a similar tool is used as an introductory strategy in *Ozark*, disclosing its inherently middle-class perspective. Marty meets Ruth for the first time through her mugshot at the sheriff's office, and although she appeared in the episode earlier, it was as a nameless housekeeping person at the motel where the Byrdes were staying. Marty is also the first person to use the "white trash" epithet in describing the Langmores, setting the perspective through which the viewers should approach them. Not only are they living in trailers on the outskirts of the town, don't have jobs and are hopelessly incapable of getting and keeping money — from the 20,000 dollars they steal from Marty, they purchase two bobcats hoping to profit on the offspring, not noticing that they are both female. Moreover, they are not a nuclear family. Ruth's father is incarcerated and violent towards Ruth when out on parole, and her mother has long been gone. The Langmore family thus comprises of three brothers and three children of the two eldest, with Ruth being the only female. Until the Byrdes settle in the Ozarks, their life follows the stereotypical route of trailer people — petty thefts, felonies, incarceration, parole. When Ruth is fired from her job at the motel for stealing from Marty, she asks him to get her another job. He refuses, telling her that his daughter Charlotte managed to get a job interview within an hour, to which Ruth replies: "I doubt she got a rap sheet like mine."

Ruth starts working for Marty and explains to her uncles that she has a sound plan — learning to launder money, steal Marty's, and then kill him. Her plan does not work out because she is promoted by Marty and gets close to him. Once her uncles lose patience and want to carry out the plan themselves, she kills them to save Marty's life. The scene of the killing is connected by a sound bridge to the following one, featuring a Sunday morning sermon, the words of which label Ruth as a Judas, implicating she betrayed her kin. There is no such judgment voiced when Wendy empties the family accounts, or when Marty plots against their common interest in buying a second casino for the cartel. Betrayal is again a classed concept in the world of *Ozark*.

As a result of her work with Marty, Ruth's family falls apart completely. Her father is released from prison, only to be murdered by the cartel as soon as Ruth becomes valuable to them, and he tries to prevent her from working with them. Her cousins leave her as well, and even though they reunite later, it is under the roof of Darlene's house, not on their terms.

The Snells are another family affected profoundly by the arrival of the Byrdes to the Ozarks. Their local drug business model falls apart, and the husband and wife start to fight about the solution to their problems — while Jacob prefers a settlement with the cartel, Darlene refuses to succumb to them. Ironically, considering she has married into the family, she becomes a more vehement defender of the family traditions and its past than Jacob, the true heir. The situation climaxes in both Darlene and Jacob plotting to kill each other, Darlene being quicker. She becomes the head of the family business and includes the remaining members of the Langmores to work with her and protect their local operations from the cartel. She even marries Wyatt and manages to adopt a baby. But before they begin a new life as a family, the cartel kills them both.

The Byrdes are the only family that survives the chain of events in *Ozark*. Even the cartel is left thoroughly diluted, losing four top members and leaving Camila Elizondro the

only surviving member of the family. The Byrdes, on the other hand, pay no price for their involvement with crime but step up the social ladder among the elite with their foundation which is supposed to be their moral-laundering device. As Wendy sums it up: “When we are set up, we’re gonna be a major employer in Chicago. We are gonna be helping people on a large scale. Women, sick people, poor people.” When Wendy and Marty try to bribe a detective towards the end of the series, they use a similar logic: “Name your price. You can change your life. You can change anyone’s life you want. [...] Money doesn’t know where it came from.” This reasoning is backed up by a deal they managed to negotiate between the cartel and the FBI, allowing Camila to launder drug money through the casino and travel as she pleases, Marty and Wendy to be free from their obligations to the cartel, and Ruth safe from the law, all in exchange for a cut of the money in question. As Camila observes in her conversation with the Byrdes: “Don’t pretend like this is for my benefit. If I run the cartel with the approval of the FBI, that means they’ll stop investigating you, and you’ll be free to run your foundation and play kingmaker.”

Ethical questions are rarely on the table in the version of the American Dream that *Ozark* portrays. The final deal is presented as a win-win to all interested parties. This twist in the narrative, orchestrated by Wendy, is exactly where the storyline intersects with the series’ gothic *mise-en-scène* to form a perfect whole. At this point, the Ozarks, pictured as a bleak, overbearing locale brimming with poverty, violence, and stereotypes, overflows onto the map of the whole country. The survival of the family that profits and grows from crime, or rather its vindication, is making *Ozark* a disturbing lesson in the class- and region-based injustice inherent in the pursuit of happiness.

Conclusion

As this paper aimed to demonstrate, *Ozark* is a multilayered show inviting analysis from diverse angles — agency of its women characters, the role of the location, and its deconstruction of the myth of the American (upper) middle-class family. Many of these are, however, tied to the concept of class, which has only recently gained critical attention. Class in *Ozark* is the dominant lens through which major narrative twists are written into the series — the class background sets the limits for female agency, privileging upper-middle-class Wendy Byrde over the endeavors of both Ruth and Darlene, class divisions guide the approach to the setting as dangerous and incomprehensible, inhabited by cultural stereotypes of hillbillies, rednecks, and “white trash” people.

Class governs the way regional culture and history is presented. As the Langmores and the Snells get more screen time, their stereotypical characteristics fall apart and the “us” versus “them” reading is no longer feasible, making way for a more complex view of the intersections of class, gender, and region. The deaths of almost all the members of the Langmores and Snells, following a long struggle with the Byrdes and the cartel over what the locals perceived as their land and birthright, cast them as truly tragic personas and an indictment of the unholy nature of American inner colonization.

The *mise-en-scène* of *Ozark* presents a specific analytical challenge, as it performs a double role — on the one hand, it supports the view of the location as somber and full of

implicit dangers that need to be eradicated, on the other, the drone shots and bluish hues invite a non-human perspective, as if nature and the lake themselves were given agency unavailable to any of the human characters. While the locals have learnt to accept this condition, the newcomers, be it the Byrdes or the cartel members, are startled by such helplessness and respond with violence and exploitation. The wasteland that the Byrdes turn the community into demonstrates the toxic nature of their presence at Lake Ozark and carries a profoundly disturbing message of the show — the pursuit of wealth and family well-being in the current economic setup leads over dead bodies of people from lower classes and rural areas.

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Filmography

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Gone Girl (David Fincher, 2014)
Succession (Jesse Armstrong, 2018–2023)
This Is Us (Dan Fogelman, 2016–2022)

True Detective, season 3 (Nic Pizzolatto, 2019)

Winter's Bone (Debra Granik, 2010)

Biography

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Filmový formát 9,5 mm coby obchodní artikl

*Historie firmy Cinéma v kontextu českého amatérského filmu
v letech 1932–1952*

The 9.5 mm Film Format as a Commercial Product
*The History of the Cinéma Company in the Context of Czech Amateur
Filmmaking Between 1932 and 1952*

Abstract

At the end of 1922, the French company Pathé Cinéma introduced a new system called Pathé-Baby to the film equipment market, specifically designed for the lay public, with the aim of commercially exploiting its potential interest in sharing cinematographic experiences also in the home environment, in the circle of family and friends. The 9.5mm format with typical centrally located perforation enjoyed considerable popularity among amateur and family filmmakers, and in Czechoslovakia it achieved its greatest boom in the 1930s.

The text describes the history of this format in the Czechoslovak, especially Prague, user environment, focusing primarily on the institutional background created by commercial entities (Optikotechnika, Cinéma, Foto-Kino-Pop) and their connection with the activities of amateur filmmakers associated in the Prague Pathé club.

The study deals most comprehensively with the existence and functioning of the Prague trading company Cinéma, the exclusive sales representative of the French company Pathé Cinéma in Czechoslovakia. Using the example of Cinéma, managed by Karel Pop, an active amateur filmmaker, the text documents the wide possibilities of business in the field of amateur film in the 1930s – the sale of technical equipment, laboratory processing of film material and the lending of prints of professional movies in the 9.5mm format for home screening.

The text broadly covers the period 1925–1952, defined by the first relevant information on the functioning of the format in our territory and the definitive demise of the existing associations or private businesses after the communist coup in 1948.

Klíčová slova

amatérský film, formát 9,5 mm, Pathé Cinéma, obchodní firma Cinéma, Pathé klub Praha

Keywords

amateur film, 9.5 mm gauge, Pathé Cinéma, Cinéma company, Pathé klub Prague

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Od roku 2000 se Národní filmový archiv (dále NFA) cíleně věnuje amatérským a rodinným filmům v minulosti natáčeným na tzv. úzké formáty, mezi které patří také filmový pás šířky 9,5 mm s typickou centrálně umístěnou perforací, jež se stala vizuálním symbolem systému uvedeného na trh francouzskou firmou Pathé Cinéma na konci roku 1922. V současnosti je tento formát laické veřejnosti takřka neznámý a také povědomí většiny profesionálů o něm je spíše podprahové, neboť se na výsluní zájmu filmové historiografie ocitá jen výjimečně, při mimořádných příležitostech podobných nedávnému stoletému výročí jeho zrodu. Vzhledem k tomu, jak velkou dynamiku formát přinesl rozvoji amatérského filmování, bylo by poněkud nespravedlivé s odeznívajícími oslavami nechat tento fenomén zase ustoupit do stínu bádání zasvěceného profesionální kinematografické produkci. Už proto, že permanentně inovovaná řada výrobků 9,5 mm zastávala po několik desetiletí roli jednoho z hegemonů obchodu s kinoamatérskou technikou a za podpory mateřského koncernu Pathé Frères úspěšně odolávala zámořské konkurenci představované především systémy firmy Kodak – 16 mm a 8 mm (Normal 8 mm a Super 8 mm), jež se na trhu objevily postupně mezi roky 1923 až 1965.

Z výše zmíněných formátů zastoupených mezi amatérskými a rodinnými filmy, které se nacházejí v NFA, zaujímají 9,5mm materiály významné postavení ani ne tak kvantitou, ale spíše kvalitou odvedené filmařské práce a koncentrovaností tohoto specifického segmentu filmů do poměrně krátkého období druhé čtvrtiny 20. století, kdy se v meziválečném a částečně i v poválečném Československu zařízení Pathé Cinéma intenzivně používala.¹⁾ Nedlouhý časový úsek existence systému 9,5 mm na našem území je zásadním způsobem podmíněn poválečnou politickou situací. Tehdy byl československý stát začleněn do sféry vlivu Sovětského svazu, což provázelo postupné utlumení kontaktů mezi kapitalistickým a socialistickým blokem, včetně zavádění obchodních bariér. Z těchto důvodů se filmařské vybavení značky Pathé stalo pro naše amatéry za vlády komunistického režimu téměř nedostupným zbožím. Základ kolekce filmů 9,5 mm dochované v NFA tak představuje především amatérská produkce z 30. let, jež zůstala uchráněna, na rozdíl od některých okolních států středoevropského regionu, například Polska a Maďarska, před pustošícími následky druhé světové války.²⁾

1) Filmy šířky 9,5 mm tvoří z celé amatérské a rodinné kolekce NFA přibližně 11 %. Toto číslo je pohyblivé, jelikož kolekce je v neustálém procesu budování / rozšiřování, přičemž většinu části 9,5 mm tvoří pozitivní materiály ve formě inverzních originálů a filmových kopií — výrazně menší zastoupení mají negativy. Nejstarší v archivu dochovaná filmová díla tohoto formátu pocházejí z roku 1925 a vedle klasických rodinných snímků od vícero tvůrců k nim patří i krátké hrané skeče brněnského autora Bedřicha Valenty, v nichž vystupují dospělí a dětští „herci“. Na druhém konci časové osy se coby nejmladší obrazový záznam nachází filmová reportáž pražského filmaře Jana Exnera, kterou natočil během rodinné návštěvy Vídně v roce 1965.

2) Dvouměsíční obléhání Budapešti na konci 2. světové války mělo devastující dopad nejen na záchranu mezi-

30. léta minulého století lze bez přehánění označit za období mimořádného rozvoje amatérského filmování, při kterém formát 9,5 mm sehrál významnou úlohu. Cílem této studie je detailněji popsat, jakým způsobem se dařilo francouzský systém prosadit a etablovat na našem území. Na základě výzkumu archivních pramenů a dobového odborného tisku určeného amatérským filmařům se text zaměří hlavně na institucionální pozadí tohoto procesu, přičemž v obchodně-distribuční oblasti bude hlavní pozornost věnována komerčním aktivitám společnosti Cinéma pražského obchodníka Karla Popa. Od počátku 30. let Popova firma dovážela produkty Pathé pro zdejší kinoamatéry a při tomto podnikání dokázala využít občanské sdružovací tendence v oblasti volnočasových aktivit, jež se v dané době projevovaly vznikem klubů, spolků či zastřešujících národních svazů.

Začátky Pathé-Baby na území současné České republiky

Promítačka Pathé-Baby byla prvním přístrojem z řady kinematografického příslušenství pro filmový pás šířky 9,5 mm, který firma Pathé Cinéma představila veřejnosti na konci roku 1922. Už ve fázi příprav nového systému se plánovalo seznámit veřejnost nejdříve s projektorem a kameru uvést na trh později. Charles Pathé, iniciátor vzniku nového modelu, byl přesvědčen, že stejné zařízení by nemělo sloužit k promítání i k natáčení filmů, jak tomu bylo dříve, například u prvních přístrojů průkopníků kinematografu bratrů Lumièreových. Jeho rozhodnutí vycházelo z předpokladu existence dvou rozdílných skupin budoucích zákazníků. A to skupin s různou mírou technické vyspělosti potřebné jednak k základní obsluze projektoru v domácím prostředí, jednak k podstatně náročnější manipulaci s kamerou při pořizování vlastních záběrů. Úvaha o odlišnosti těchto dvou typů uživatelů, promítače/diváka a filmaře, se v budoucnu ukázala jako prozíravá a z hlediska úspěšného prodeje tohoto sortimentu zcela oprávněná vzhledem ke specifickým požadavkům spojeným s hlavní činností každého z nich.³⁾

Současně s promítačkou vydala společnost Pathé Cinéma už v říjnu 1922 katalog obsahující 194 profesionálních titulů na filmových kopiích tohoto úzkého formátu, s možností jejich zakoupení nebo zapůjčení k domácímu promítání. Filmový pás 10 metrů dlouhý⁴⁾ byl navinut v malé černé kovové krabičce (kazetě), která materiál chránila před poškozením, bránila jeho přímému kontaktu s rukou uživatele a také usnadňovala zavedení pásu do malého projektoru. Na začátku existence Pathé-Baby se jednotlivé tituly promítaly většinou ze dvou až osmi kazet, podle celkové délky díla. Jak v následujících letech docházelo k technickým inovacím původního produktu, navyšovalo se postupně i množství filmového pásu na jednom nosiči, a to až k délce 100 m v roce 1927. Stometrový fil-

válečné profesionální produkce, ale také archivu amatérských filmů spravovaného tamním národním svazem — Magyar Amatőrfilm Szövetség. Márton Kurutz, „A 9,5 mm-es filmek átmentése a Magyar Nemzeti Filmarchívumban“, *Filmkultúra Online*, 2001, cit. 14. 4. 2025, <https://filmkultura.hu/regi/2001/articles/essays/amatorfilm.hu.html>.

3) Anne Gourdet-Marès, *Projecteurs&caméras: La collection de la Fondation Jérôme Sedyoux-Pathé* (Paris: Fondation Jérôme Sedyoux-Pathé, 2024), 117.

4) Tehdy používanou frekvencí 16 fps trvala projekce materiálu dlouhého 10 m minutu a 22 vteřin. Další délky: 20 m = 2:44; 60 m = 8:12; 100 m = 13:40.

mový pás byl navinut na odkryté cívce a tuto novinku firma nabízela zákazníkům pod označením Super Pathé.⁵⁾

I když cena prvních zařízení nebyla zanedbatelná, například ve Francii a na jihu Španělska, v katalánské provincii Barcelona, odpovídala měsíčnímu dělnickému platu,⁶⁾ zámožnější milovníky kinematografu od možnosti sledování filmů v privátním prostředí neodradila. Naznačuje to i příklad reklamní inzerce v novinách *La Vanguardia* ze začátku ledna 1924, jež čtenáře informuje o prodeji 1 500 projektorů nabídnutých distributorem klientům z Barcelony a přilehlých oblastí pro předvánoční trh a o zásilce dalších 500 kusů firmou očekávaných již v únoru, včetně nových kamer stejného názvu Pathé-Baby.⁷⁾ Na takovém obchodním výsledku měly jistě významný podíl konkrétní podmínky v daném regionu, kromě početnosti klientely s dostatečnou kupní silou také agilnost a velikost místního distributora. V citovaném případě sehrál roli i fakt, že provincie Barcelona leží nedaleko hranice s Francií, což jistě usnadňovalo operativnější a flexibilnější kontakt mezi oběma partnery – výrobcem a zahraničním prodejcem.

Je tedy přirozené, že míra prosazení filmové techniky u rodinné a amatérské klientely se v různých státech Evropy dost lišila. Opačný příklad rozpačitých začátků nepřilíhly dynamicky se rozvíjejícího trhu s přístroji Pathé-Baby nabízí právě Československo, resp. teritorium Čechy a Morava, a to přesto, že ve vzpomínkách několika tehdejších průkopníků kinoamatérů je zmíněna pražská firma Optikotechnika coby společnost, která se prodejem přístrojů Pathé-Baby zabývala už od přelomu let 1922–1923.⁸⁾ Navzdory tomuto tvrzení není obchodní aktivita Optikotechniky všeobecně dávana do přímé spojitosti s rozmachem tuzemského amatérského filmování. Důvody částečně naznačuje inzerce v dobovém tisku, z níž vyplývá, že podnikání pražské firmy bylo zacíleno hlavně na poskytování techniky a služeb pro profesionální filmaře a majitele biografů, tudíž se dá předpokládat, že kinoamatéři zůstávali stranou pozornosti vedení firmy a vybavení nezbytné pro provozování svého koníčka si opatrovali z jiných zdrojů.

Jedním z nich byli progresivní lokální obchodníci, jak ukazuje případ Bedřicha Valenty, který si kameru, projektor a další náležitosti zakoupil údajně v brněnské drogerii Medek na Kobližné ulici,⁹⁾ což se i vzhledem k dataci Valentových dochovaných raných filmů muselo uskutečnit nejpozději v roce 1925. Chemikálie potřebné k vyvolání exponovaného filmového (i fotografického) materiálu byly v drogeriích zákazníkům dostupné, ovšem zdali sortiment těchto prodejen zahrnoval i vlastní fotografická a filmová zařízení, je otázkou. Nicméně, podle dobové inzerce v tisku (*Lidové noviny*) na adrese Kobližná 10 sídlil obchod s elektrotechnickým zbožím Josefa Medka, který prodával mj. součástky do rádií,

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- 5) Laurent Creton, „Ekonomika a trhy amatérského filmu: dynamika vývoje“, *Iluminace* 16, č. 3 (2004), 39; Patrick Moules – Paul Van Someren, „The Story of 9.5mm in Eight Chapters“, in *The 9.5mm Vintage Film Encyclopedia*, eds. Garth Pedler – David Wyatt – Patrick Moules (Kibworth Beauchamp: Matador, 2020), 1019.
- 6) Gilles Ollivier, „Histoire des images, histoire des sociétés: l'exemple du cinéma d'amatateur“, 1895, *revue d'histoire du cinéma* 10, č. 17 (1994), 120; Enrique Fibla-Gutierrez, „A Vernacular National Cinema: Amateur Filmmaking in Catalonia (1932–1936)“, *Film History* 30, č. 1 (2018), 6.
- 7) Fibla-Gutierrez, „A Vernacular National Cinema“, 6–7.
- 8) -ak, „Včera a dnes: Vzpomíná Miroslav [sic!] Procházka“, *Amatérský film* 3, č. 10 (1971), 208; -ak, „Včera a dnes: Vzpomíná K. Kameník“, *Amatérský film* 3, č. 6 (1971), 102.
- 9) Ota Gajdoš, „Padesátiletý koníček Bedřicha Valenty“, *Amatérský film* 4, č. 1 (1972), 4–5.

takže v rámci zaměření na tehdejší výdobytky moderní techniky se mohly v nabídce prodejce objevit také přístroje Pathé-Baby.

Jiný způsob získání promítačky popisuje R. M. Procházka, jenž sám sebe zpětně označil za pravděpodobně prvního českého majitele projektoru Pathé-Baby. Procházka si přístroj přivezl z Francie, jak se vyjádřil, již v roce 1922, byť podle jeho cestovního dokladu se tak mohlo stát nejdříve o půl roku později, v létě 1923.¹⁰⁾ Každopádně tyto alternativní možnosti získání filmařského vybavení nedokázaly plnohodnotně nahradit progresivního distributora, jenž by soustavně zásoboval okruh potenciálních zákazníků a cílenou propagací postupně rozšiřoval tuzemské odbytiště francouzských výrobků. Naplnit toto obchodní zadání se však Optikotechnice v průběhu 20. let nepodařilo.

Optikotechnika, společnost pro obchod technickými, zvláště kinematografickými, optickými a jemnomechanickými potřebami, jak je uveden její celý název na ustavující listině (dále Optikotechnika), vznikla 20. prosince 1920 na základě smlouvy mezi velkostatkářem Jindřichem Kolowratem a společností Slavia, všeobecnou kinematografickou a filmovou společností s r. o. (dále Slavia), jejíž vedení byl Jindřich Kolowrat také součástí.¹¹⁾ Ovšem více než Jindřich byl ve filmovém oboru známější jeho starší bratr Alexander Joseph Kolowrat-Krakowský, který se kromě letectví a aktivního provozování automobilového sportu s podnikatelskou vášní věnoval od roku 1910 také kinematografii, nejprve na svém zámku Velké Dvorce, odkud podnikání přemístil o čtyři roky později do Vídně. Během následujících let příjmení Kolowrat-Krakowský stálo v pozadí vzniku několika filmových společností, které na konci 10. let zastřešila vídeňská firma Sascha Film Industrie AG. Její výkladní skříní byla výroba hraných velkofilmů, pro které bývá Alexander Kolowrat řazen k zakladatelům rakouského kinematografického průmyslu.

Filmové podnikatelské impérium šlechtické rodiny Kolowratů tvořilo na počátku 20. let několik finančně a personálně propojených společností českých a rakouských, mezi nimiž Optikotechnika zaujímal spíše okrajovou pozici. V jejím portfoliu nabízeného kinematografického zboží dominovaly v polovině 20. let profesionální projektory (Hahn-Goerz; Leitz-Rastatt), vysokofrekvenční přijímací a kopírovací stroje (André Debrie) – a vedle nich také přijímací komory a předváděcí domácí kino Pathé-Baby, přičemž v rámci celostránkové inzerce publikované v oborovém časopise *Film* bylo toto zařízení zmíněno až na posledním místě, zcela dole.¹²⁾ Tato pozice signalizovala, jaký „význam“ v té době náležel produktům Pathé Cinéma v celkové nabídce Optikotechniky, byť rozvržení stránkové reklamy mohlo ovlivnit zaměření měsíčníku na profesionální klientelu. Potvrzovala by to i skutečnost, že v inzerci firmy uveřejňované v tomto měsíčníku průběžně v roce 1925 se systém Pathé-Baby objevil pouze dvakrát – v květnovém a listopadovém čísle, ve druhém případě zřejmě v souvislosti s blížícími se vánočními svátky (obr. 1). Kromě inzerce adresované odborným kruhům se stejnou střídmostí vyznačovala také reklama, jež se snažila oslovit přímo cílovou skupinu rodinných a amatérských filmařů. Výzvy pro tento typ uživatelů byly publikovány ojediněle a nepravidelně v denících či společen-

10) „Cestovní pas, republika Československá. Robert Procházka“, Praha, 2. 7. 1923, 4, Národní archiv (NA), f. Pš. II – vs, s. P 3736/1, k. 9133.

11) „Žádost o zapsání firmy do obchodního rejstříku“, Praha, 27. 5. 1921, Státní oblastní archiv v Praze (SOA Praha), f. Or, s. C XIII/280, k. 2300.

12) Reklama Optikotechnika: *Film* 5, č. 11 (1925), 1b.

**ÚPLNĚ
ZAŘÍZENÍ BIOGRAFŮ**

Předváděcí stroje Hahn-Goerz,
které byly uznány v Německu za nejlepší.

Zrcadlové lampy Hahn-Goerz,
Elektrické zařízení kabin.

Specialita Leitz-Rastatt:
„Machau-Projektor“
nejnovější předváděcí stroj — triumf techniky.

Sklápěcí křesla a židle.

Vysokofrekvenční přijímací a kopírovací stroje firmy
André Debrie, Paříž.

Osvětlovací zařízení fotoatelérů
„JUPITER“.

Nejnovější a nejmenší filmová foto-komora
„LEICA“
na 36 snímků s objektivem Tessar 1:3, 5.

Přijímací komora a předváděcí domácí kino
„Pathé Baby“
dodá za nejlevnější ceny

OPTIKOTECHNIKA
s. s. r. o. V PRAZE I, Lvovská 3.
Číslo telefonů: 5461 a 9930.

Obr. 1: Reklama firmy Optikotechnika
v oborovém časopise *Film*, listopad
1925

V roce 1913 snil malý Max, že jest kinooperátorem.
V roce 1925 se jeho sen splnil :



**FILMUJE
KAMEROU
PATHÉ-BABY
OPATŘENOU
TESSAREM
1:3,5**

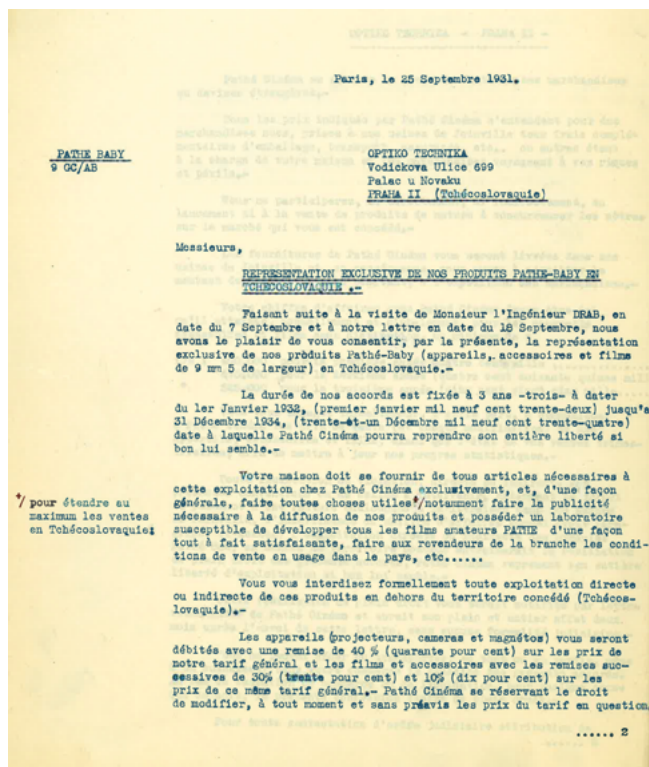
a předváděcím
přístrojem Pathé-
Baby pořádá do-
ma každý večer
kino-představení.

Fotografuje také
a to jen kamerou
LEICA
výrobkem fy Leitz
ve Wetzlaru,

kteřá obsahuje 3 kasety po 36 snímcích, jest malá a lehká, opatřena jest štěrbinovou
uzavírkou až 1.500 vt., anastigmatem 1:3,5, jednolobový obrázek stojí až 10 hal. (Agla).
Nabídka a ilustr. prospektů zaslá za Kč 2.— ve známkách
gen. zastupitelstvo uved. továren

„OPTIKOTECHNIKA“, s. s. r. o., Praha I.,
Lvovská ulice č. 3.

Obr. 2: Reklama firmy Optikotechnika
na zařízení Pathé-Baby, *Pražský
ilustrovaný zpravodaj: Společenský
nepolitický týdeník*, 1925



Obr. 3: První strana smlouvy mezi firmami Pathé Cinéma a Optikotechnika z 25. 9. 1931. Fondation Jérôme Seydoux-Pathé

ských týdenících ve formě prostého textu¹³⁾ nebo i pro čtenáře v atraktivnějším provedení, např. s kresbou fiktivní „postavy“ Maxe – filmaře a fotografa amatéra¹⁴⁾ (obr. 2).

Ani v jednom případě výše zmíněných inzercí z roku 1925 není Optikotechnika prezentována jako generální zástupce Pathé Cinéma pro Československo. O získání tohoto statusu se veřejnost dozvěděla hned na počátku následujícího roku, mj. v krátké zprávě publikované v časopise *Fotografický obzor*.¹⁵⁾ Ve stejném roce Optikotechnika prochází zásadní změnou ve vlastnické struktuře v podobě prodeje stoprocentního podílu, který aktuálně patřil společnosti Slaviafilm zastupované při tomto právním úkonu Alexandrem Kolowratem a který si nově rozdělila trojice majitelů firmy – Jindřich Kolowrat, Růžena Čermáková a hrabě Jeroným Colorado-Mansfeld.¹⁶⁾

Odchod významné kinematografické společnosti jako by předznamenal budoucí potíže Optikotechniky, jež na přelomu 20. a 30. let zesílily navzdory výhradnímu právu na obchodování s výrobky Pathé Cinéma u nás. O pokračování tohoto partnerství vedení Optikotechniky usilovalo i do budoucna a počítalo s ním jako s jedním z důležitých předpokladů konsolidace firmy. V rámci těchto plánů navštívil zástupce společnosti Ing. Dráb

13) Reklama Pathé-Baly [sic!]: *Večerní list*, č. 305 (1928), 2.

14) Reklama Optikotechnika: *Pražský ilustrovaný zpravodaj: Společenský nepolitický týdeník*, č. 241 (1925), 14.

15) „Zpráva obchodní“, *Fotografický obzor* 34, č. 10 (1926), 127.

16) „Smlouva o převodu kmenového kapitálu firmy Optikotechnika“, Praha, 27. 5. 1926, SOA Praha, f. Or, s. C XIII/280, k. 2300.

na počátku září 1931 Pathé Cinéma v jejím pařížském sídle, aby zde vyjednal prodloužení smlouvy na další tři roky (1932–1934), což byl časový úsek, na který francouzská firma v případě Optikotechniky kontrakty uzavírala.¹⁷⁾ Podpis smlouvy je datován 25. září 1931, ale k faktickému naplnění obsahu dohody po celé stanovené období nedošlo (obr. 3). Stupňující se krize Optikotechniky vyústila v její likvidaci na základě podnětu společnosti Ernst Leitz Westzlar, německého dodavatele optických zařízení, kterého žádosti o navrácení zboží, jež se nacházelo ve skladu pražské firmy, bylo v únoru 1933 vyhověno.¹⁸⁾ Již v době prohlubujících se potíží Optikotechniky se prodeji výrobků značky Pathé Cinéma věnovaly v Československu i jiné subjekty, z nichž se ve 30. letech dokázala nejvýrazněji prosadit společnost Cinéma, založená na jaře 1932, pro kterou amatérská filmová technika znamenala hlavní oblast obchodního podnikání.

Cinéma

Je trochu paradoxní, že krátce poté, co v září 1931 Optikotechnika získala od Pathé Cinéma prodloužení kontraktu, se na tuto společnost obrátil další pražský zájemce, firma Karel Pop, jak je titulována v dochované korespondenci, a to rovněž s žádostí o výhradní spolupráci s francouzským výrobcem.¹⁹⁾ Reakce na tuto nabídku byla poněkud nestandardní v podobě návrhu budoucí obchodní dohody, v níž coby partner Pathé Cinéma figurovala dosud neexistující společnost, k jejímuž založení byl Karel Pop v podstatě vyzván, včetně určení termínu 29. února 1932, do kdy měla tato firma vzniknout. Takové řešení mohlo mít několik příčin: buď obchod Karla Popa nepředstavoval pro Pathé Cinéma partnera dostatečné velikosti a významu, resp. uzavření smlouvy vyžadovalo určitý typ podnikatelského subjektu, nebo návrh datovaný 19. ledna 1932 zohlednil podněty obsažené již v Popově prvotní výzvě k obchodní spolupráci. Budoucí společnost měla podle návrhu Pathé Cinéma disponovat základním kapitálem ve výši jednoho milionu Kč. Kromě obecných organizačně-finančních podmínek (postupně rostoucí hodnota vzájemného obrátu, procentuální množstevní slevy na dodávané zboží a dal.) stojí za zmínku požadavek vybudovat v Praze funkční laboratoř pro vyvolávání filmových materiálů formátu 9,5 mm, jehož náročnost realizace francouzský partner možná kompenzoval nabídkou méně obvyklé pětileté smlouvy.²⁰⁾ Jeden odstavec budoucí dohody se také věnoval otázce vztahu nového obchodního zástupce k již fungujícím prodejcům na daném teritoriu, aniž by výslovně

17) „Representation exclusive de nos produits Pathe-Baby en Tchecoslovaquie“, Paris, 25. 9. 1931, Fondation Jérôme Seydoux-Pathé (FJSP), f. HIST-F-385. Pražská společnost je v archivních dokumentech Pathé Cinéma uváděna jako OPTIKOTECHNIKA nebo OPTIKO-TECHNIKA.

18) „Dopis Jana Čermáka Krajskému obchodnímu soudu“, Praha, 3. 6. 1936, SOA Praha, f. Or, s. C XIII/280, k. 2300.

19) Zřejmě tuto fázi zahájení firemní korespondence má na mysli amatérský filmař a činovník R. M. Procházka, když zmiňuje vlastní zásluhy o zprostředkování smlouvy mezi oběma stranami. Srov. -ak, „Včera a dnes: Vzpomíná Miroslav [sic!] Procházka“, 208.

20) Podle dobové korespondence týkající se udělení generálního zastoupení pro obchodování s produkty Pathé-Baby v různých státech (Polsko, Maďarsko, Československo, Ekvádor), která se dochovala v archivu Fondation Jérôme Seydoux-Pathé (FJSP), lze předpokládat, že obvyklá doba trvání kontraktu tohoto typu byla tři roky.

zmiňoval možné paralelní aktivity dosavadního generálního reprezentanta Pathé Cinéma v Československu – Optikotechniku.²¹⁾

I když v následujících měsících vývoj událostí neprobíhal zcela podle předběžně určeného plánu, mezinárodní firemní kooperace, jejíž důležitou částí se stala čerstvě ustavená pražská společnost s názvem Cinéma, se začala zdárně rozvíjet. Z dnešního pohledu je zajímavé, že administrativně stály za jejím založením tři podnikatelky – Božena Popová, Ludmila Klečková a Alžběta Čermáková, které 24. března 1932 podepsaly zakládací smlouvu firmy Cinéma, společnosti s r. o., jejíž činnost byla specifikována jako obchod s přístroji a potřebami kinematografickými (dále Cinéma). Základní jmění nového subjektu bylo ve srovnání s navrženým milionem pouze 300 000 Kč. Na této sumě se nejvyšší částkou podílela Božena Popová (180 000 Kč), zatímco Ludmila Klečková a Alžběta Čermáková do firmy vložily každá 60 000 Kč, přičemž první dvě jmenované dámy coby jednatelky společnosti disponovaly podpisovým právem.²²⁾ Kromě vykonávání funkce jednatelek archivní dokumenty neobjasňují, jakým praktickým způsobem společnice ovlivňovaly, resp. řídily chod Cinémy. Zřejmé nejsou ani osobní motivace, které dotyčné vedly k zaměření jejich aktivit zvoleným směrem, zda šlo o hlubší zájem o kinematografický obor nebo o obchodování samotné, bez nutně preferovaného odvětví působnosti. Nabízí se zcela prosté vysvětlení, že v jejich podnikatelském rozhodnutí se odrážela převládající dobová zvyklost společensky charakterizovat ženy středních a vyšších vrstev pomocí profesního uplatnění jejich chotí, tedy coby manželky obchodníků, bankovních úředníků apod., což potvrzují i formulace obsažené v zakládací smlouvě. Za hlavního iniciátora vzniku Cinémy tak lze i na základě výše zmíněné dochované korespondence s určitostí považovat manžela Boženy Popové a zároveň švagra Ludmily Klečkové Karla Popa, který se již několik let předtím zabýval prodejem fotografických potřeb a který po celou dobu existence Cinémy v této firmě zastával funkci obchodního ředitele.

Počátky působení bývalého bankovního úředníka v oboru fotografie, k němuž později přibyl také film, spadají do roku 1927, kdy si společně s Františkem Čermákem zřídili obchod s fotografickými aparáty a potřebami, nacházející se na adrese Myslíkova 25.²³⁾ V květnu o dva roky později Karel Pop ohlásil zrod vlastního podniku, jehož sídlo zůstalo na původním místě, zatímco František Čermák začal podobný sortiment nabízet zákazníkům asi o 500 metrů blíž centru – v ulici V Jámě. S osamostatněním se Pop začal intenzivně věnovat propagaci zboží a poskytovaných fotografických služeb. O zviditelnění firmy se snažil se značnou invencí a s důrazem na pestrost formy, kterou přizpůsoboval požadavkům různých cílových skupin zákazníků. Např. v roce 1931 vydal čtyřicetistránkovou knihu *Žánr fotografie výjevů* napsanou výraznou osobností moderní fotografie první poloviny 20. století u nás Přemyslem Koblicem, nadšeným šřítelem osvěty mezi fotografy amatéry prostřednictvím praktických kurzů a přednášek, s nimiž navštěvoval tehdejší kluby. Karel Pop funkčně spojoval vstřícný přístup ke klientům s důmyslnou

21) „Representation exclusive de nos produits Pathé-Baby en Tchécoslovaquie“, Paris, 19. 1. 1932, Fondation Jérôme Seydoux-Pathé (FJSP), f. HIST-F-385.

22) „Žádost o zapsání firmy do obchodního rejstříku“, Praha, 24. 3. 1932, SOA Praha, f. Or, s. C XIX – 1, k. 2759.

23) *Trh československý: Seznam a popis nákupních pramenů Československé republiky* (Praha: Obchodní a živnostenská komora, 1929), 2696.

a účinnou reklamou jako v případě nápadu s instalací skříněk na třech nejfrekventovanějších pražských nádražích, v nichž mohli výletníci při nedělním návratu do Prahy zanechat exponované negativy k vyvolání a druhý den si v prodejně vyzvednout hotové fotografie.²⁴⁾ Stranou pozornosti majitele obchodu nestála ani skupina ambicióznějších fotografů, kteří se zdárně účastnili mezinárodních soutěžních výstav. Firma „Foto – aparáty a potřeby, Karel Pop Praha“ tak na začátku roku 1931 vyhlásila, že v tomto roce odmění deset úspěšných autorů zboží v hodnotě sto korun podle jejich vlastního výběru jako kompenzaci nákladů vynaložených na zasílání fotografií na akce v zahraničí.²⁵⁾

Jak je patrné, Popův přístup k podnikání charakterizovaly mimořádná činorodost a akcent na osobní kontakt s potenciálními zákazníky, v němž se projevovaly jeho nadstandardní sympatie a pochopení pro oblast amatérské fotografie, vyplývající ze zkušeností s vlastními tvůrčími pokusy. Podobný styl, prověřený několikaletou praxí, Karel Pop přenesl také do obchodování s kinoamatérskou technikou: nejprve jako řadový prodejce a od roku 1932 coby držitel licence na výhradní zastoupení značky Pathé Cinéma na československém trhu. Stejně jako dříve podporoval amatérské fotografie v jejich činnosti, tak se na konci roku 1931 začal pravidelně stýkat s okruhem pražských kinoamatérů. Prostory obchodu v Myslíkově ulici zahrnovaly i menší místnost přizpůsobenou promítání úzkých filmových formátů, tedy především šířky 9,5 mm. Tuto místnost Karel Pop nabídl skupině zájemců o amatérské filmování k občasným schůzkám. Účastníci těchto setkání přicházeli s nápady, jak moderní koníček více rozvinout nejen zvýšením počtu aktivních provozovatelů, ale také zlepšením dostupnosti potřebného kinematografického vybavení a položením základů organizované klubové struktury po vzoru už fungující rozsáhlé sítě fotografických spolků, v jejímž rámci se někteří z návštěvníků filmařských sezení už nějaký čas pohybovali.

Se zázemím formujícího se okruhu filmových nadšenců, k nimž náležel i francouzštinu velmi dobře ovládající R. M. Procházka, navázal Karel Pop první kontakt s pařížským partnerem a posléze začal s intenzivnějším propagováním svého obchodu coby specializovaného prodejce amatérské filmové techniky. Jedním z jeho nejvýznamnějších počínů té doby byla firemní účast na rozsáhlé prezentaci s názvem Film a fotografie v rukou amatérůvých, kterou pořadatel Pražské vzorkové veletrhy učinil součástí Mezinárodní výstavy filmové, jež se konala 13.–20. března 1932. Hlavní pozornost organizátorů výstavy se zaměřila na dějiny profesionální kinematografie, kterou dokumentovaly historické rekvizity dodané Technickým muzeem československým v Praze (dnešní Národní technické muzeum). Ale podle zpráv v dobovém odborném tisku část věnovaná amatérské fotografii a filmu svým provedením a rozsahem profesionálům velmi zdárně konkurovala.²⁶⁾ Největší pozornosti diváků se těšily prezentace zahraničních firem – americké Kodak, jež zde předváděla kamery a promítačky formátu 16 mm, a francouzské Pathé Cinéma, která díky úsilí českého zastoupení pouštěla v improvizovaném promítacím prostoru filmy natočené přístrojem Pathé-Baby. Přítomnost týmu Karla Popa na výstavě zcela splnila stanovené cíle a naděje do ní vkládané: samotná firma na sebe upozornila příchozí odbornou a laic-

24) Anon., „Expresní služba všem fotoamatérům“, *Polední list* 6, č. 92 (1932), 5.

25) Anon., „Firma Karel Pop v Praze II.“, *Fotografický obzor* 39, č. 1 (1931), 17.

26) Anon., „Mezinárodní výstava filmová v Praze“, *Fotografický obzor* 40, č. 4 (1932), 70–71.

kou veřejnost a prezentační stánek se proměnil v místo, kde se mohli potkat a navázat potřebné kontakty amatérští filmaři věnující se své zálibě dosud soliterně. Podle tvrzení jednoho z pionýrů kinoamatérismu u nás Čeňka Zahradníčka, někteří již zkušenější a průbojnější tvůrci dokonce přispěli do programu veřejně předváděných projekcí vlastním dílem:

Natočili jsme tenkrát takový reklamní film, v němž jsme předváděli všelijaké triky a kouzla, které bylo možno s tehdejší „devítkou“ provádět. Film jsme nabídli k promítnutí pracovníkům vystavující firmy Cinema [sic!]. Byli velice překvapeni a ihned zavolali svého šéfa, který nám sdělil cenné informace a hlavně jména dalších filmových amatérů.²⁷⁾

Cinéma a Pathé klub – období intenzivní součinnosti

Nejen díky zmíněné veletržní akci počet těch, kteří docházeli do obchodu v Myslíkově ulici, neustále narůstal. Mezi novými návštěvníky se objevovali filmaři disponující kromě bohatých praktických zkušeností s prací s kamerou a natáčením filmů, jako výše citovaný Čeněk Zahradníček, také dovednostmi z oblasti vyvolávání filmového materiálu, znalostí různých procesů odpovídajících typu použité filmové suroviny, v čem zvláště vynikal Zahradníčkem zmíněný kolega architekt Vincenc Beer. Dynamika stále se rozšiřující komunity vzbuzovala u filmařů optimistické vyhlídky do budoucna a situace směřovala k založení kinoamatérského spolku, na jehož vzniku se začalo intenzivněji pracovat v červnu 1932.²⁸⁾ Současně s tím Karel Pop pokračoval ve firemní propagaci formou veřejného promítání filmů 9,5 mm, pro které si pronajal sál v nedávno dobudovaném Lékařském domě na Sokolské třídě. Na přípravě této akce mu pomáhali i členové oficiálně ještě neexistujícího amatérského spolku. Základní dramaturgii zde předvedených titulů si lze odvodit z podoby pozdějších filmových představení, už inzerovaných coby veřejná předvádění Pathé klubu, z nichž první se uskutečnilo opět v Lékařském domě, a to 6. prosince 1932. Ať už se jako hlavní organizátor prezentovala firma Cinéma nebo Pathé klub, program vždy tvořila kombinace původních filmů od českých amatérů a divácky přitažlivých profesionálních titulů, které Pathé Cinéma vydávala v úpravě primárně pro soukromá promítání. V případě dalších veřejných projekcí se vzájemný poměr děl z těchto dvou zdrojů výrazně měnil ve prospěch těch amatérských, až do stadia, kdy profesionální film kinematografická setkání diváků s formátem 9,5 mm obvykle uzavíral. Například v rámci prosincového uvedení připadla úloha závěrečné filmové atrakce veselohře Arnolda Francka *Velký skok* (Der grosse Sprung; 1927), v níž se před kamerou objevila Leni Riefenstahl.²⁹⁾

Profesionální titul byl pravidelnou součástí pásma nejen z důvodu větší přitažlivosti nabízeného programu, ale také jako důležitý prostředek propagace pražské Půjčovny fil-

27) Čeněk Zahradníček, „Malé vzpomínání“, *Filmovým objektivem*, č. 8 (1966), 154.

28) O vzniku Pathé klubu podrobněji v textu: Jiří Horníček, „Amatéri, ozvěte se!“, K historii pražského Pathé klubu a filmu šířky 9,5 mm“, *Filmový přehled*, 2025, cit. 26. 8. 2025, <https://www.filmovyprehled.cz/cs/kontexty/amateri-ozvete-se-k-historii-prazskeho-pathe-klubu-a-filmu-sirky-95-mm>.

29) Srov. MIB, „Několik poznámek“, *Pathé-revue* 2, č. 1 (1933), 8.

mů Pathé 9,5 mm. Ta začala fungovat souběžně se zahájením činnosti společnosti Cinéma, která vedle distribučních a prodejních aktivit souvisejících s přístroji (projektory a kamerami) a jejich příslušenstvím byla z pohledu širší veřejnosti nejvíce spojována právě s krátkodobým poskytováním filmových kopií pro domácí kino. Intenzita reklamy podporující povědomí o této službě naznačuje její podstatný ekonomický význam pro celkovou podnikatelskou úspěšnost kinematografických firem spojených osobností Karla Popa. Ostatně půjčování filmů a jejich prodej přinášely značné zisky už francouzskému výrobcí v počátcích existence systému 9,5 mm. Na obsahu neustále se rozšiřujícího nabídkového katalogu se od roku 1922 podílel v rámci Pathé Cinéma průkopník rané kinematografie, režisér a scenárista Ferdinand Zecca, a právě jím řízený pečlivý výběr titulů bývá považován za jeden z důvodů velké zákaznické obliby a z ní plynoucího komerčního úspěchu.³⁰⁾ Není divu, že se tento prvek stal důležitým také v rámci obchodní agendy pražské Cinémy, i když v návrhu smlouvy z počátku roku 1932 není tento druh podnikání detailněji specifikován.

Po vzoru francouzskou společností již prověřeného a zavedeného způsobu fungování půjčovny také Cinéma vydávala jako hlavní komunikační prostředek tištěnou brožuru. Třicetistránková knížka obsahovala seznam dostupných titulů strukturovaný do několika žánrových kategorií, dále instrukce k organizaci výpůjček a řešení případů poškození filmového pásu. Proces objednávání usnadňoval systém značení filmů totožný pro distributory na celém světě, který zájemci umožňoval určit čas promítání vybraného díla a tomu odpovídající typ a velikost nosiče, tj. kazety nebo cívky. V polovině 30. let byly v nabídce pražské půjčovny zastoupeny filmy čtyř různých metráží – 10, 20, 100 a 125 metrů. Mezi uživateli katalogu se těšily velké oblibě série zábavných grotesek s populárními protagonisty, ať už animovanou postavíčkou kocoura Felixe, nebo americkými hereckými hvězdami – Charliem Chaplinem, Snubem Pollardem, Haroldem Lloydem a podobně. Ovšem výběr Pathé Cinéma se nesoustředil pouze na divácké tituly, ale zahrnoval i originálně a filmařsky kvalitně zpracovaná dramata, takže se amatérští filmaři mohli inspirovat zhlédnutím mimořádných děl režisérských osobností vrcholné éry němé kinematografie konce 20. let, například *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927), *Piccadilly* (E. A. Dupont, 1929) či *Casanova* (Alexandr Volkov, 1927).³¹⁾

Když Zemský úřad v Praze schválil 27. října 1932 žádost o založení Pathé klubu,³²⁾ završilo se tím zhruba po roce snažení pražských amatérských filmařů, používajících 9,5mm filmový materiál, o vytvoření organizace s jasně stanovenými pravidly fungování. Úředně potvrzenou existenci nového sdružení provázely další plánované kroky, které ostatním kinoamatérům naznačovaly jeho velmi těsné sepětí s generálním zastoupením Pathé Cinéma v Československu. Karel Pop byl jedním ze zakládajících a nutno také zdůraznit filmařsky aktivních členů spolku, ale přitom nepatřil k jeho užšímu vedení. Daleko kontroverzněji působilo jméno francouzské značky, které se objevilo nejen coby součást názvu spolku, ale také nově vydávaného klubového časopisu *Pathé-revue*. Ovšem za největší problém, jak se později ukázalo, považovala část členů hlavní podmínku stanov, za-

30) Moules – Van Someren, „The Story of 9.5mm in Eight Chapters“, 1013.

31) *Filmový archiv Pathé* (Praha: Půjčovna filmů Pathé, b.d.).

32) „Stanovy Pathé klubu v Praze“, Archiv hlavního města Prahy (dále AHMP), fond Spolkový katastr, sign. XIV/1137, k. 647.

vazující členstvo pracovat výhradně s 9,5mm formátem, čímž se cítila být nucena k používání produktů dodávaných Cinérou. Vlastní časopis byl důležitou a obvyklou součástí aktivit národních svazů nebo klubů většího významu. *Pathé-revue* sloužila jako ideální prostor pro sdílení poznatků jak v oblasti práce s filmovou formou, tak praktických dovedností technického rázu. Samozřejmě platilo, že se její stránky daly využít pro inzerci zboží určeného pro specifickou skupinu zákazníků a tím dosáhnout maximální účinnosti. V tomto směru získalo podnikání Karla Popa, který v *Pathé-revue* pravidelně upozorňoval na zdokonalená technická zařízení nově dostupná na trhu nebo na novinky připravované místní půjčovnou, mimořádnou výhodu oproti konkurenci – především zdejšímu zastoupení firmy Kodak, konkurujícímu Cinému nabídkou 16mm formátu. Zatímco se Cinéma mohla v tištěné inzerci spolehnout na klubový měsíčník, pražský Kodak, spol. s r. o. musel v první polovině 30. let při zadávání reklamy cílit na širší spektrum zdejších společenských periodik – *Pestrý týden*, *Eva*, *Letem světem*, *Měsíc* a další.

Při volbě technického vybavení hrála u filmových amatérů důležitou roli ekonomická náročnost provozování nového koníčka. Srovnání dvou v té době dominantních formátů po stránce nutných finančních výdajů se řešilo nejen v *Pathé-revue*. Velmi podrobný rozbor přinesla série článků publikovaná v roce 1932 v časopise *Fotografický obzor*. Autor textu se zaměřil na ceny tehdy dostupných přístrojů, a také na náklady spojené s nákupem a vyvoláním inverzního materiálu potřebného k natočení scény trvající 40 vteřin, což odpovídalo délce 4,8 m úzkého filmu. Zatímco srovnání projektorů a kamer nepřineslo vzhledem k množství typů a různých značek výrobců (obzvláště u šestnáctky) jednoznačně průkazný výsledek, v případě filmové inverze autor dospěl k závěru, že pořízení a vyvolání materiálu 9,5 mm přijde asi 2,5× levněji (9,60 Kč) než u formátu 16 mm (25 Kč).³³⁾ Ovšem Cinéma o tuto výhodu zanedlouho přišla, neboť v roce vydání textu Kodak amatérům představil nový cenově dostupnější systém 8 mm.

Ambivalentnost vztahu Pathé klubu a Cinémy je zřejmá. Od listopadu 1931 až do března 1933 se kinoamatéři scházeli v zázemí Popova obchodu v Myslíkové ulici, než se kvůli rostoucímu počtu členů Pathé klub přemístil do provizoria suterénu restaurace Praha (Na Příkopě č. 15),³⁴⁾ odkud se přestěhoval do budoucího stálého sídla na Smíchov, do Holečkovy ulice. Snaha o vybudování vlastního klubového zázemí se společenskou místností, resp. sálem, knihovnou a laboratoří, signalizovala vůli, alespoň u části členů, rozvolnit provázanost klubu s konkrétní obchodní značkou, a to navzdory některým sdíleným cílům. Z nich šlo v první řadě o získání co nejvyššího počtu členů, v případě Cinémy potenciálních zákazníků firmy, u Pathé klubu pravidelných přispěvatelů do spolkové pokladny. Tato ryze pragmatická pohnutka spojovala obě strany při popularizaci a propagaci amatérského filmování, zvláště v prvním roce, roce a půl společného konání.

Dlouhodobě nekomfortní finanční situace motivovala výbor Pathé klubu k hledání vlastních zdrojů. Jednou z možností byla pražská veřejná předvádění, z nichž první dvě proběhla s odstupem čtyř měsíců – 6. prosince 1932 a 30. března 1933 za vstupné ve výši jedné koruny, resp. 2–3 Kč.³⁵⁾ 9. února 1933 byl zahájen I. začátečnický kurs Pathé klubu,

33) Ing. Eduard Felix, „O amatérské kinematografii“, *Fotografický obzor* 40, č. 6 (1932), 89–93.

34) Anon., „Život v klubech: Důležité upozornění!“, *Pathé-revue* 2, č. 3 (1933), 47.

35) Tamtéž.

který v průběhu sedmi sobotních večerů a nedělí seznámil přihlášené formou přednášek (V. Beer, P. Koblic, Č. Zahradníček) a praktických cvičení se základy natáčení a laboratorního zpracování filmového materiálu úzkého formátu 9,5 mm. I když hlavní cíl akce spočíval v kinoamatérské osvětě a vzdělávání, nezanedbatelnou byla i stránka ekonomická, neboť 18 frekventantů se účastnilo kurzu za poplatek 100 Kč (nečlenové klubu), resp. 30 Kč (členové).³⁶⁾

Pro mimopražské obdivovatele amatérského filmování se na počátku existence Pathé klubu organizovaly tzv. výjezdní přednášky, jejichž program se skládal z úvodního odborného proslovu a pásma filmů. Na přípravě akcí se vždy podíleli místní prodejci filmové techniky, podnikatelé v jiných oborech nebo představitelé tamních samospráv. Mezi prvními navštívenými městy byly například Pardubice, Kutná Hora, Turnov či České Budějovice. Účast na těchto projekcích dosahovala pravidelně počtu kolem sta návštěvníků a zástupci klubu se snažili organizátorům maximálně vyjít vstříc a program přizpůsobit místním podmínkám. Například v Turnově se mezi promítanými tituly objevila nově natočená reportáž *Manévry turnovské Národní gardy*,³⁷⁾ v Českých Budějovicích, kde měl výjezd podobu dvoudenní akce, přednáška první den proběhla v češtině a druhý den si ji vyslechli obyvatelé města hovořící německy.³⁸⁾ Zřejmě největšího ohlasu se dostalo zástupcům Pathé klubu v Plzni, kde tamní kino Universita navštívilo 130 diváků a setkání vyústilo v příslib pořadatelů založit v brzké době místní pobočku pražského spolku.³⁹⁾

Hlavní tíhu realizace přednášek mimo Prahu nesli především lidé z vedení Pathé klubu. Společnost Cinéma v případě nutnosti pomohla s poskytnutím promítacího zařízení a prostřednictvím půjčovny dodala kopii filmu profesionální produkce. Na poli kinoamatérských projekcí vedení Cinéma přicházelo s vlastními komerčněji zaměřenými aktivitami, kdy v předvánočním čase roku 1933 využilo výlohu obchodu v Myslíkově ulici k promítání animovaných snímků a hraných grotesek kolemjdoucím. Příznivá odezva vedla k myšlence pokračovat s tímto typem projekcí po několika úpravách i v příštím roce. Projekční plátno velikosti 80 × 50 cm se z výlohy přesunulo nad vchod obchodu a promítat se mělo denně, a to v zimních měsících mezi 19–20 hod. a v létě mezi 21–22 hod. Místní policejní oddělení sice vyjádřilo určité pochybnosti ohledně možného narušení pouličního provozu, ale proti předloženému záměru nemělo námitek.⁴⁰⁾ Zda se plánovaná promítání opravdu uskutečnila, se nepodařilo v archivních pramenech ani v dobovém tisku ověřit. Nicméně, Karel Pop ve své podnikavosti neochaboval, jak to potvrzuje úspěšná žádost o licenci na pořádání bezplatných přednášek s filmovým doprovodem za účelem propagace amatérské kinematografie během plánovaných obchodních cest po Čechách. Výše popsaná podnikavost a činorodost byla pro Popa typická a díky ní se mu podařilo čelit změnám, které se v jeho oboru odehrály v polovině 30. let.

36) Anon., „I. začátečnický kurs Pathé klubu“, *Pathé-revue* 2, č. 2 (1933), 19.

37) Anon., „Život v klubech“, *Pathé-revue* 2, č. 1 (1933), 14.

38) Anon., „Život v klubech“, *Pathé-revue* 2, č. 2 (1933), 30.

39) Anon., „Život v klubech“, *Pathé-revue* 2, č. 5 (1933), 78.

40) „Promítání filmů obchodního rázu ve výkladu obchodu“, Praha, 31. 12. 1933, Národní archiv (NA), f. Pě. II – vs, s. P 2958/5, k. 8934.

Konkurence v oboru sílí

Na počátku roku 1935, tři roky po navázání spolupráce s Pathé Cinéma, se situace Popových podniků jevila jako úspěšně nastartovaná a stabilizovaná. Firmy zdárně fungovaly a Karel Pop se jejich prostřednictvím stal nepřehlédnutelnou a vlivnou osobností v obchodu s kinoamatérskou technikou. Ovšem následující měsíce ukázaly, že v oblasti amatérské kinematografie a obchodování s amatérským filmovým vybavením se nahromadily problémy, kvůli nimž obor spěje k přenastavení vztahů mezi jeho hlavními aktéry a k novému rozvržení sfér vlivu na domácím trhu.

Celkovou situaci v tehdejší Československu výrazně ovlivnil nárůst aktivit zdatné konkurence. Jak už bylo dříve zmíněno, 8mm formát se stal mezi kinoamatéry velmi oblíbeným. Společnosti Kodak se jeho uvedením na trh v roce 1932 podařilo vyvinout výrobek zákazníkům cenově dostupnější než předchozí systém 16 mm. Větší konkurenceschopnosti Kodaku napomohlo i postupné zlevňování 16mm technického vybavení, včetně filmové suroviny. Z pohledu filmařů tím 9,5mm formát ztrácel dřívější atraktivnost, jež vyplývala z příznivého poměru mezi náklady na provozování koníčka a kvalitou technických a obrazových parametrů. Jak se dva formáty firmy Kodak mezi amatéry stále více prosazovaly, narůstala u některých členů Pathé klubu nespokojenost s výlučným statusem 9,5mm formátu. Nespokojenost, která sílila v reakci na pasivitu klubového výboru nehodlajícího nově vzniklou situaci zohlednit a řešit.

Názorový střet mezi oběma skupinami vyvrcholil na jaře 1935, kdy přibližně sedmnáct členů opustilo Pathé klub na protest proti jeho těsnému spojení s firmou Cinéma a francouzskou značkou Pathé. Jejich rozhodnutí bylo reakcí na neúspěšné hlasování, v němž se nepodařilo prosadit tři základní požadavky – změnu názvu klubu, možnost natáčet na všechny úzké formáty a vydávat vlastní časopis, nezávislý na jednom prodejci amatérského filmového vybavení. Všechny uvedené cíle se odchozím podařilo do konce roku samostatně uskutečnit: založili Český klub kinoamatérů (dále ČKK), který během následujících dvou let dosáhl počtu více než sta členů, získali rozsáhlé klubové prostory a začali vydávat vlastní časopis pod názvem *Československý kinoamatér*.⁴¹⁾ Ovšem nezůstalo pouze u tohoto aktu vzpoury, se zpožděním několika měsíců za ním následovaly další výrazné změny. V prosinci 1935 vyšlo poslední číslo *Pathé-revue*, takže Cinéma přišla o pro ni nadstandardně vstřícného poskytovatele inzertních služeb. Náhradou za zaniklý měsíčník se stala nově založená *Amatérská kinematografie*, jejíž redakce už v lednovém čísle 1936 jasně vyhlásila, že se jedná o časopis určený všem kinoamatérům.

V cizině byli po řadu let kinoamatéři informováni svými časopisy, kteroužto funkci u nás převzala *Pathé-revue* s tou výhradou, že její zprávy směřovaly ponejvíce k „devítkářům“, kdežto amatéři, pracující na 16 mm a 8 mm filmu, byli odkázáni na časopisy výhradně cizozemské. Náš časopis je určen všem kinoamatérům, bez rozdílu, na jakém filmu pracují, neboť vycházíme z toho stanoviska, že je lhostejné, na jakém formátě amatér své myšlenky vyjádří, nýbrž hodnotíme je podle toho, jak je vyjádřil. A to slovo je pro nás směrodatné.⁴²⁾

41) Jiří Stolm, „Jak vznikl Československý klub kinoamatérů“, *Československý kinoamatér* 2, č. 1 (1937), 8.

42) Redakce, „Doba žádá...“, *Amatérská kinematografie* 1, č. 1 (1936), 3.

Signály ohledně neudržitelnosti bezvýhradného lpění na jednom formátu přicházely z vícero stran, na což představitelé Pathé klubu a Karel Pop byli nakonec nuceni reagovat. V případě amatérského spolku došlo oficiálně ke zrovnoprávnění formátů až na počátku roku 1937 schválením nově upravených stanov, v nichž byla také úředně potvrzena změna jeho názvu na První klub kinoamatérů Praha. Jak je patrné z inzerce na stránkách *Amatérské kinematografie*, daleko pohotověji se zachovala firma, která od počátku roku 1936 zvala do obchodu Foto-Kino-Pop zákazníky k odborným konzultacím ohledně natáčení na všech třech úzkých formátech. Od února již nabízela vyvolávání a kopírování šestnáctek⁴³⁾ a od září pak bylo možné v obchodě zakoupit kameru Kodak a materiál Kodachrome pro oba formáty americké firmy.⁴⁴⁾ Mezi inzerenty *Československého kinoamatéra* žádnou z Popových firem v prvním roce existence měsíčníku nenajdeme, ale už v následujícím ročníku se zde reklama, byť v menším měřítku, na výrobky Pathé Cinéma objevuje.

Navzdory silící konkurenci a měnícím se poměrům v tuzemské amatérské kinematografii se Karel Pop se svojí reprezentativní značkou Cinéma pořád držel mezi nejvýznamnějšími prodejci kinoamatérského zařízení u nás. Popularita jím nabízených produktů se mohla opřít také o úspěchy filmařsky invenčních a progresivních osobností, s nimiž úzce spolupracoval za průkopnických časů rodícího se amatérského filmového hnutí a které stále zůstávaly věrné Pathé technice. Potvrzuje to i pohotové využití triumfu 9,5mm formátu na III. celostátní soutěži na nejlepší amatérský film roku 1937 pro propagaci Cinémy v *Amatérské kinematografii*. Z pohledu firmy šlo o mimořádně povedený soutěžní ročník, neboť z celkového počtu zúčastněných titulů byla polovina natočena 9,5mm kamerou a všechna porotou udělená první místa (v kategorii hraného, reportážního, dokumentárního a kresleného filmu) získali filmaři pracující s devítkou, což patřičně vyzdvihla graficky působivá celostránková inzerce.⁴⁵⁾

Karel Pop posiloval exkluzivitu služeb týkajících se systému 9,5 mm snahou o modernizaci technického zázemí. Jako další příklad jeho aktivního přístupu může sloužit instalace originálního vyvolávacího automatu Pathé Cinémy, zásluhou kterého se pražská reprezentace výrazně vzdálila konkurenci. Automat byl vybaven fotoelektrickou buňkou a vyrovnávačem expozičních chyb způsobených nezkušeností kinoamatéra při natáčení. Podle firemní inzerce služba měla začít fungovat od poloviny roku 1937, ale ve skutečnosti byl provoz zařízení zahájen až po letních dovolených, v září toho roku.⁴⁶⁾

Podnikatelský epilog pod tlakem geopolitických změn

Zatímco na poli filmového obchodu Karel Pop velmi zdatně odolával proměňujícím se podmínkám československého trhu, jeho podnikání začala negativně ovlivňovat zhoršující se politická situace ve střední Evropě. Vznik druhé republiky jako důsledek mnichovské

43) Anon., „Jaro se blíží“, *Amatérská kinematografie* 1, č. 2 (1936), 41.

44) Anon., „MAGAZIN – CINÉ – KODAK 16 mm“, *Amatérská kinematografie* 1, č. 9 (1936), 177.

45) Anon., „Přinášíme důkazy o kvalitě devítky“, *Amatérská kinematografie* 2, č. 7 (1937), 149.

46) Anon., „Expoziční chyby kinoamatéra...“, *Československý kinoamatér* 2, č. 3 (1937), 46.

dohody s sebou přinesl odstoupení pohraničí Československé republiky Německu (1. říjen 1938) a vyhlášení autonomií východních částí státu, tj. Slovenska a Podkarpatské Rusi, které vešly v platnost 23. listopadu resp. 16. prosince 1938. Karel Pop reagoval na politické dění už v polovině listopadu zmíněného roku, kdy kontaktoval francouzského obchodního partnera s žádostí o úpravu stávajícího kontraktu v duchu aktuálních geopolitických změn. Pathé Cinéma jeho návrhu vyhověla a připravila tři nové smlouvy s platností do prosince roku 1943 – každou z nich pro jedno teritorium vždy s poznámkou, že se jedná o územní část Československa, jak je také obsaženo v interní korespondenci mezi obchodním a právním oddělením firmy Pathé Cinéma:

- 1/ Čechy – Morava – Slezsko
- 2/ Slovensko
- 3/ Podkarpatská Rus⁴⁷⁾

Ovšem netrvalo ani čtyři měsíce a tyto smlouvy se staly zastaralými, jelikož 15. března 1939 začala okupace Čech, Moravy a Slezska německými vojsky, slovenští politici představitelé vyhlásili vznik Slovenského štátu a Podkarpatská Rus byla násilím připojena k Maďarsku.

Navzdory neustále se měnící situaci se dařilo firmu Cinéma udržet v chodu, i když ani ona se nevyhnula obtížným obdobím, jako se to stalo v roce 1939. Společnost za tento rok vykázala ztrátu ve výši 170 520 K, ale jak konstatovala valná hromada svolaná na červen 1940, její aktiva k 31. prosinci 1939 (hotovost, zásoby, pohledávky, inventář a zařízení) stále umožňovala podniku pohledávky věřitelů vyplatit. (Do poslední položky je započítána hodnota výše již zmíněného vyvolávacího automatu.) Přes omezený provoz firmy její vedení považovalo ekonomický výsledek pouze za přechodný jev a podle zápisu očekávalo v aktuálním roce uzávěrku finančně příznivou. Z tohoto důvodu valná hromada rozhodla, aby v provozu podniku bylo pokračováno.⁴⁸⁾ I na základě citovaného dokumentu lze předpokládat, že chod Cinéma zajišťoval existenci jejím majitelům a zaměstnancům během celého protektorátního období.

Po překonání obtížné doby válečných let Karel Pop doufal v pokračování svého podnikatelského snažení z meziválečného období. Ostatně tuto iluzi plynulého navázání na předválečnou éru podporovalo také aktuální dění v amatérském filmovém hnutí, v jehož čele působily stejné osobnosti jako před válkou. Reprezentace celostátního svazu obnovovala zprerhané mezinárodní kontakty a filmoví amatéři se opět začali pozvolna potkávat na mezinárodních kongresech a soutěžních přehlídkách, přičemž hostitelem této akce pro rok 1948 bylo vedením celosvětové kinoamatérské asociace UNICA vybráno Československo a místem konání Mariánské Lázně.

Představu o návratu k normálnímu podnikatelskému prostředí zcela rozvrátil komunistický puč v únoru 1948. Do stále se rozšiřující sítě komunisty iniciovaných a schvalovaných zákonů namířených proti soukromým podnikatelům se dostala i obchodní společ-

47) „Vente de nos produits Pathe en Tcheoslovaquie“, Paris, 28. 11. 1938, Fondation Jérôme Seydoux-Pathé (FJSP), f. HIST-F-385.

48) „Zápis z valné hromady společnosti Cinéma“, Praha, 10. 6. 1940, SOA Praha, f. Or, s. C XIX – 1, k. 2759.

nost Cinéma, a to na základě zákona o organizaci velkoobchodní činnosti a o znárodnění velkoobchodních podniků č. 118/1948 Sb. Popova firma totiž vlastnila velkoobchodní licenci a byla s největší pravděpodobností také členem Hospodářské skupiny velkoobchodu a zahraničního obchodu.⁴⁹⁾ Jelikož Cinéma významně působila v oblasti zahraničního obchodu, ohledně nařízení národní správy vstupovala střídavě do jednání s ministerstvem vnitřního obchodu a ministerstvem zahraničního obchodu. První z nich bylo v postupu vůči ní nekompromisní a uvalilo na firmu národní správu už 25. března 1948, když jako obor obchodování výměr mylně uváděl dovoz a vývoz slídy.⁵⁰⁾ Tato chyba poskytla Karlu Popovi čas k jednání s úředníky ministerstva druhého v pokusu zachovat chod firmy za pomoci francouzského partnera dohodou o zrušení vlastněné velkoobchodní licence a jejím nahrazením udělenou licencí jednatelskou. Za tímto účelem měl do Prahy přijet ohledně setkání s ministerskými úředníky zástupce Pathé Cinéma a ještě v březnu 1949 se zdálo, že tento nouzový plán uspěje a jednatelskou licenci společnost Karla Popa získá. Nakonec se však ministři obou nejvyšších správních institucí dohodli, že agendu Cinéma přeče jen dořeší ministerstvo vnitřního obchodu, které s firmou opětovně zahájilo správní řízení a na podzim roku 1949 jmenovalo trojici národních správců.⁵¹⁾ V případě uvalení národní správy existovaly dvě možnosti finálního řešení, buď po určitém čase došlo ke znárodnění, nebo, jestliže podnik nebyl shledán natolik významný pro budoucí chod hospodářství, k likvidaci. Tento verdikt padl i v případě firmy Karla Popa, takže po úředních peripetiích trvajících ještě další dva roky společnost Cinéma v roce 1952 zanikla.

Závěr

Když v roce 1922 Pathé Frères přišla na filmový trh s 9,5mm formátem, jednalo se už o druhý pokus této společnosti o vytvoření kinematografického systému určeného k použití laickou veřejností v domácím prostředí. Projekt z roku 1912 nazvaný Pathé Kok byl založen na filmovém pásu šířky 28 mm a primárně cílil na movitější klientelu. Vysoká pořizovací cena a přetrvávající technické potíže s dostatečnou světelností projektorů představovaly jedny z hlavních důvodů nižšího zájmu ze strany potenciálních zákazníků. Předchozí negativní zkušenosti byly vedením podniku zohledněny při plánování systému Pathé-Baby, což se příznivě odrazilo v realističtějším odhadu potřeb a očekávání budoucích uživatelů, který vedl, jak ukázal další vývoj, k nesrovnatelně příznivějším obchodním výsledkům než před deseti lety.

49) Co se týká velikosti Popových firem, ze zpráv z dobových periodik vyplývá, že podnikatelské zázemí Karla Popa se skládalo ze čtyř hlavních částí, které byly rozesety na různých místech Prahy. K původnímu obchodu fungujícímu od roku 1929 v Myslíkově ulici se v roce 1932 přidala firma Cinéma. Její kanceláře a laboratoře sídlily mimo centrum města ve Hvězdové ulici, zatímco předváděcí síň a půjčovna filmů se nacházely vedle obchodu na adrese Myslíkova 27. Tato struktura zřejmě zůstávala stejná, jen se měnily adresy sídel některých subjektů, např. Cinéma jistý čas sídlila ve Spálené ulici č. 11, odkud se v květnu 1936 přemístila do Jeruzalémské ulice, v roce 1940 přejmenované na Sedmihradskou. Obchod Foto-Kino-Pop se od roku 1935 nacházel ve Spálené ulici č. 5, od roku 1937 fungovala ještě jeho pobočka v budově YMCA, Na Poříčí 12.

50) „Výměr o zavedení národní správy a jmenování národního(ch) správce(ů)“, Praha, 25. 3. 1948, SOA Praha, f. Or, s. C XIX – 1, k. 2759.

51) „Výměr o jmenování národní správy“, Praha, 18. 10. 1949, SOA Praha, f. Or, s. C XIX – 1, k. 2759.

Na rozdíl od jiných evropských zemí, například domácí Francie, Španělska či Anglie, patřilo meziválečné Československo zpočátku mezi teritoria, kde se produkty Pathé-Baby prosazovaly pomaleji a trvalo téměř deset let, než se z této značky stal v první polovině 30. let jeden z nejvíce používaných formátů českých amatérských filmařů. Vývoj událostí na území nynější České republiky nabízí v případě Pathé-Baby zajímavou možnost srovnání různých obchodních přístupů a strategií dvou tuzemských firem dovážejících stejný typ zboží na zdejší trh.

První z nich, společnost Optikotechnika, působila coby generální zástupce Pathé Cinéma v Československu od roku 1926, než ji v roce 1932 nahradil podnik Cinéma, vedený obchodním ředitelem Karlem Popem. Zatímco u Optikotechniky byly přístroje Pathé-Baby součástí širší obchodní nabídky, v níž převažoval sortiment pro profesionální filmové výrobny a provozovatele biografií, Cinéma se specializovala na přístroje a filmový materiál používané amatéry. Ve svém přístupu k tomuto druhu zákazníků Karel Pop využíval předchozích zkušeností, jež získal coby prodejce a majitel obchodu s fotografickými potřebami, který navštěvovalo mnoho fotografů – amatérů. Coby aktivní fotograf a později i filmař Karel Pop těžil ze svých osobních kontaktů z tohoto prostředí a přizpůsoboval velmi citlivě nabídku poskytovaných služeb praktickým potřebám kolegů – amatérů. Popův neformální přístup k propagaci a zviditelnění firmy se projevil v podpoře průkopníků amatérského filmu a v účasti na založení prvního pražského klubu kinoamatérů – Pathé klubu, jehož se stal také jedním z prvních členů. V letech 1932–1935 tak došlo k zajímavé formě intenzivní spolupráce a vzájemné podpory mezi obchodní společností a vedením klubu kinoamatérů na rozšíření společenství amatérských filmařů používajících 9,5mm formát.

Úspěšnost firem vedených Karlem Popem byla založena na širším záběru podnikatelských aktivit zaměřených na 9,5mm formát – prodej přístrojů a filmového materiálu, laboratorní vyvolávání filmové suroviny, půjčování profesionálních filmů k domácímu promítání. Snižovalo se tak riziko ekonomického propadu Popova podnikání jako celku, jestliže některá z oblastí nepřinášela zisk. Tímto způsobem se dařilo překonat zvyšující se tlak konkurence v druhé polovině 30. let i obchodně nepříznivé období během 2. světové války. Teprve státní aparát ovládaný komunistickou stranou dokázal provoz prosperující společnosti ukončit. Po čtyřech letech úředních sporů, v roce 1952, byla Cinéma poslána národním správcem do likvidace. Jejím ředitelem Karlu Popovi bylo tehdy 49 let.

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Biografie

Jiří Horníček pracuje v Národním filmovém archivu jako kurátor se specializací na amatérskou a rodinnou kinematografii. V archivu zajišťuje nové akvizice filmových materiálů, podílí se na jejich katalogizaci a prezervaci. Příležitostně publikuje v tuzemských odborných časopisech a publikacích (Ivo Habán, ed., *Nové realismy*) a účastní se odborných konferencí (Film Restored, Berlin; PAF Olomouc). Je autorem monografie o režisérovi Gustavu Machatém a spolueditorem (s Evžením Brabcovou) knihy o experimentujícím filmaři, surrealistovi a jazzovém kytaristovi Ludvíku Švábovi.

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Death as a Theme

An Interview with Cristi Puiu

Abstract

This is a seven-hour long conversation that explores the theme of death between two colleagues of the same generation. In this personal documentary project, Lucian Georgescu engages directly with Cristi Puiu, “the Bergman of the East,”¹⁾ an auteur known for weaving the Grim Reaper as a fundamental, consistent theme throughout his films, including *Stuff and Dough* (2001), *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* (2006), *Aurora* (2010), *Sieranevada* (2014), and *Malmkrog* (2020). The dialogue ventures into the elusive, fragile, and often hidden realms of the auteur’s creative process, striving to grasp the origins of thematic inspiration. Drawing on sources such as Ernest Becker’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Denial of Death* (1973) and his subsequent theory of terror management, explored in *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life* (Greenberg, Solomon, and Pyszczynski, 2015), and touching on Gnostic theories, Georgescu engages Puiu in a frank, intimate exchange. The result is a profound radiography of a major contemporary filmmaker’s creative process and a nuanced portrait of an influential yet socially controversial Romanian auteur. The dialogue, published on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of *Lăzărescu*, offers insights into the deeply personal art of screenwriting and filmmaking.

Keywords

New Romanian Cinema, Cristi Puiu, *The Death of Mr Lăzărescu*, screenwriting, auteur cinema

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Cristi Puiu (b. 1967) is a Romanian film director and screenwriter, widely recognized as a pioneering figure in the New Romanian Cinema (NRC) movement. Initially educated as a painter in Romania and (partially) at Geneva’s École Supérieure d’Arts Visuels, Puiu tran-

1) Lucian Georgescu, *Texticole: Texte și articole despre cinema 1990–2025* (Cluj: Presa universitară clujeană / UBB, 2025).

sitioned to filmmaking in the mid-1990s. He returned to Romania to craft his debut feature, *Stuff and Dough* (Marfa și banii; 2001), a low-budget road movie regarded as the inaugural film of the new wave of Romanian cinema. In 2004, he won his first international award, the Golden Bear for Best Short with *Cigarettes and Coffee* at the Berlin International Film Festival, further cementing his early reputation. A long list of awards and honors followed since then.

Puiu's breakthrough came with *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* (Moartea domnului Lăzărescu; 2005), a darkly comic examination of an old man's final hours that earned the *Un Certain Regard* award at Cannes and garnered numerous international prizes. This achievement — Romania's first major Cannes award in decades — not only affirmed Puiu's status as a leading auteur but also brought global attention to Romanian cinema. He followed with *Aurora* (2010) and *Sieranevada* (2016), both of which premiered at Cannes (the latter competing for the Palme d'Or). More recently, the period drama *Malmkrog* (2020) earned Puiu the Best Director award in the Berlin International Film Festival's *Encounters* section. Across these works, Puiu has maintained a distinctive realist style characterized by long takes, dark humor, and naturalistic detail.

Critics note that a consistent engagement with mortality and “final matters” runs through Puiu's filmography, from the literal confrontation with death in *Lăzărescu* to the post-mortem family tensions in *Sieranevada*. His films combine unflinching existential inquiry with subtle irony, reflecting the complexities of post-communist Romanian society and the human condition at large. As a result, Puiu's oeuvre has significantly shaped both national cinema and modern realist storytelling, earning him a legacy as one of Europe's most influential contemporary filmmakers. After writing his first two features with his friend and fellow writer, Răzvan Rădulescu, Puiu embarked on a solo auteur career, consistently returning to a single, overarching theme. In 2001, when the first real Romanian indie film, *Stuff and Dough*, was produced, the Romanian cinema was in full mourning, with less than a few mediocre features per annum. The appearance of repatriated Cristi Puiu²⁾ was like the neon light in a mortuary. The members of the deceased's “family” are not the only ones dazzled, the Western neighbors who saw the film at the *Quinzaine des Réalistes* in Cannes are equally impressed. Additionally, the film received an award from FIPRESCI in Thessaloniki. Two years later, Puiu won the *Golden Bear* for short film in Berlin,³⁾ and in 2005, *Un Certain Regard* and dozens of other awards for *Lăzărescu*. The talk in the halls of Cannes in that year was, “Did you see that three-hour Romanian film? Oh, boy. You've got to see it.”

It is the “moment of grace” for Romanian cinema⁴⁾ when a small and insignificant country is suddenly noticed on the map of the seventh art. The critics praised Puiu;

2) Cristi Puiu graduated in film from the ESAV (today, HEAD) Geneva school, dropping out of the painting class after a conflict with his teacher.

3) *Cigarettes and Coffee* (Un cartuș de Kent și un pachet de cafea; Cristi Puiu, 2004).

4) Andrei Gorzo, “Moartea domnului Lăzărescu,” in Andrei Gorzo, *Viața, moartea și din nou viața criticii de film* (Bucharest: Polirom, 2019), 231. Also in a German version, see Andrei Gorzo, “Der Tod des Herrn Lăzărescu,” in *Klassiker des rumänischen Films*, eds. Stephan Krause, Anke Pfeifer, and Dana Duma (Marburg: Schüren, 2024), 133–140.

Lăzărescu was included in all classifications from “the best thousand films”⁵⁾ to “the best of the decade”⁶⁾ and even ranked fifth in the “twenty-five best films of the 21st century.”⁷⁾ The term New Romanian Cinema (NRC) was coined to describe the series of Romanian successes that emerged, characterizing a generation with Puiu as its spiritual leader.

Rising like a comet in the night, Cristi Puiu remains the beacon of Romanian cinema, continuing his string of successes with each of his films. *Aurora* (2010) was selected for *Un Certain Regard* and won the *East of the West Award* in Karlovy Vary; *Sieranevada* (2016) was nominated for the *Palme d'Or* and won the *Best Director Award* at the Chicago IFF, where Martin Scorsese acclaimed it, and *Malmkrog* (2020) won a similar award in Berlin in the *Encounters* section.

Romanian film critics finally find a *raison d'être* and embrace the NRC religion, no longer doubting its mission like Doubting Thomas (the title of the Andrei Gorzo book, “The life, the death and again the life of the film criticism” — meaning the resurrection of the local film criticism alongside the national cinema — is relevant in this respect).⁸⁾ After a long period of fasting, the emaciated orthodox apostles of national film criticism, now bulimic jet-setters, replace their solitary penance with joyful travel, parties, and social events, going on tour to places they would never have dreamed of visiting (Cannes, Berlin, Venice, Toronto, San Sebastian, Sarajevo, New York, Locarno, Sundance, Locarno, Busan, etc.) without being considered the poor relative at the funeral table. The Transylvania International Film Festival is becoming the place to be for European cinephiles and filmmakers. In June you can hardly find a room (more expensive than in Berlin anyway) in the hotels of Cluj, the once poor socialist hostels that are not very different from the one where Mr. Lăzărescu is picked up by the ambulance.

I have had my share of crumbs from the coleslaw, sorry, canapés from the film premiere. I pride myself on having published the “world’s first review”⁹⁾ of *Lăzărescu*, though it was pure coincidence. At that time, I was writing film reviews for a glossy magazine printed abroad; I had to see films at least two months before their premiere. I met Alex Munteanu, *Lăzărescu*’s producer, at the CNC in the spring of 2005 in the festival office with a VHS tape in his hand. He agreed to give me a copy of the film on the condition that the article would not be published before Cannes and whispered to me anxiously: “It seems we’ve been selected, but don’t let anyone know.” When I got home, I slammed the tape into the video player, determined to dislike it. I didn’t know Puiu personally, but from the outside, he seemed a shabby, awkward, blunt, unpleasant, uncomfortable artist-turned-blockboy type of guy. Although (or maybe because?) he was similar to my personality, something whispered to me that we could not be friends. I hoped that *Stuff and*

5) “The 1,000 Greatest Films (by Ranking),” *They shoot pictures, don’t they?*, accessed February 21, 2025, http://www.theyshootpictures.com/1000_gf1000_all1000films.htm.

6) “Best of the Decade #18: The Death of Mr. Lazarescu,” *Reverse Shot*, accessed February 26, 2025, https://reverseshot.org/symposiums/entry/5/18_death_mr_lazarescu.

7) “The 25 Best Films of the 21st Century So Far,” *The New York Times*, sec. Movies, June 9, 2017, accessed February 21, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/06/09/movies/the-25-best-films-of-the-21st-century.html>.

8) Gorzo, *Viața, moartea și din nou viața criticii de film*.

9) Lucian Georgescu, “Cinematograful după Cristi,” *CLASS*, March–April 2005, 8. For a version of the text published see Georgescu, *Texticole*.

Dough was the only exception to a type of cinema I could not fall in love with. But it was a *coup de foudre*.

I finished the screening late after midnight (only Daneliuc had ever made a film this long in Romanian cinema). Someone gave me his phone number, and I called Puiu right then in the middle of the night to warmly declare my admiration. It was a way of apologizing for my petty feelings, and we have, I dare say, remained close friends ever since. That night, I finished the text — a short, passionately written review. I used the jargon I had adopted at the beginning of this text, which always seems to suit Puiu's cinema. The title is a play on words, deliberately exaggerated (Cristi/Christ), because the article was to be published in the holy week after Orthodox Easter. I was well aware that from then on, Romanian cinema would be discussed diachronically as if it was “before and after Cristi,” a miracle, a resurrection:

The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu is a slap on the back of the Death of Romanian cinema, a candlelit not for mourning but for celebration. [...] It is a talk in the desert of suspense because although you know the ending from the title and every sequence is narratively predictable, Puiu's film keeps you breathless until Lăzărescu's last breath.¹⁰⁾

Warm, humane, and generous, Puiu was always ready to talk about cinema, literature, philosophy, and about his art and its purpose. Conversations with him are like his films: long, deep, slow, and with multiple layers of meaning. Puiu does not waste words, but he needs many; he is a lover of logos, not logorrhea. Every idea of his is carefully weighed, and the Socratic, doubting attitude he adopts, that of the man who “knows nothing,” is not a social mask — as is often the case with others — but the essence of his way of seeing and representing the world. As I have written, Puiu is “born, not made.” His speeches constitute a veritable *ars poetica*, taken up by NRC filmmakers, consciously or not, and publicly acknowledged only by very few, one of them being Corneliu Porumboiu, who once declared that the success of this so-called “New Wave” was due to Puiu. Porumboiu was referring not only to the fact that Puiu had paved the way for international awards but also to a stylistic and thematic direction that Puiu had established. Therefore, to say that the NRC had no “master,”¹¹⁾ or mentor, can perhaps only be applied with a strict reference to the role played by theoreticians in the completion of movements — such as Umberto Barbaro in the case of neo-realism, André Bazin and the Cahiers du Cinema group for the French New Wave, or Lotte Eisner for the New German Film. The theoretician for the NRC is the practitioner, Cristi Puiu. None of the other NRC exponents has crystallized such a consistent and coherent theory through discourse as he has. Finally, he is the only Romanian auteur who systematically, consistently, and obsessively returns to the same central theme: man confronted with death.

“I can't imagine talking about anything else,” he says in the interview I have recorded below, a transcript of a seven-hour long discussion on the topic of death. Regarding the-

10) Ibid.

11) Doru Pop, “The Grammar of the New Romanian Cinema,” *Acta Universitatis Sapientia: Film and Media Studies*, no. 3 (2010), 28.

matic consistency, Puiu is the most consistent Romanian filmmaker, the last Mohican of the tribe of auteurs on the verge of extinction. In what follows, we will discuss the “auteur theme” as the most crucial element in the writing of the screenplay and its filming. In preparation for this discussion, I found it helpful to use other interviews in which Cristi returns to the theme of death as a central element of his poetics. I chose three¹²⁾ from the national premiere of the film *Sieranevada* and supplemented them with an in-depth interview from the magazine *Film Menu*¹³⁾ and one of his most recent interviews.¹⁴⁾

Initially, our conversation was not intended for a press article; a double, common denominator, all personal needs drove it. I was going through a troubled period of physical uncertainty and metaphysical restlessness. I had begun to document the theme of death in filmed encounters with friends and loved ones, trying to find out how they felt about a death that was getting closer and closer, whether they were colleagues of a generation or older friends, all of them going down the slope of life. I filmed our meeting and then transcribed the dialogue for the edit. The discussion lasted almost seven hours, and the transcript is one hundred and forty pages long. When I finished, I realized I was holding a *fundamental discourse on the theme*, the cornerstone of the screenplay and art in general. The seeming digressions (the shooting in the Romani villages, the description of Costel Cochechi’s funeral, and the scenes of Ozana’s neighborhood) are concentric circles of death that hover over the life, and over each story of Cristi Puiu, the Bergman of the East.

Over the years, we have met several times and each time it has been a long, complex conversation, whether intimate or public, as in the series *Romanian Realism*,¹⁵⁾ filmed at the Cervantes Institute in Bucharest. One of our last meetings was in Cluj, at the Transylvania International Film Festival, when Puiu launched the DVD version of *Stuff and Dough*, twenty years after its official premiere. We met at the hotel for breakfast in the morning and left the dining room at eight in the evening; neither of us had seen a film at the festival that day.

I am grateful to him not only for the films he made and the thoughtful care with which he led those discussions but above all for his unwavering humanism, the fundamental note of his cinema, and the defining trait of the man Puiu. I thank him; I am honored to have met him in this life, and I know our paths will cross again sometime.

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12) “Ce ai face dacă ai afla după moarte că Dumnezeu există?”, *Adevărul.ro*, accessed February 20, 2025, <https://adevarul.ro/stil-de-viata/cultura/cristi-puiu-daca-afla-dupa-moarte-ca-dumnezeu-1732137.html>; “Cristi Puiu: De frica de aparatul de filmat nu scapă decât oamenii cu adevărat înțelepți,” *News.ro*, August 27, 2016, accessed February 21, 2025, <https://www.news.ro/cultura-media/interviu-cristi-puiu-de-frica-fata-de-aparatul-de-filmat-nu-scapa-decat-oamenii-cu-adevarat-intelepti-192240002700201608121555220>; “Cristi Puiu: Nu sunt un regizor,” *Scena 9*, accessed February 20, 2025, <https://www.scena9.ro/article/cristi-puiu-sieranevada-cannes>.

13) “Cristi Puiu — Interview,” *Film Menu.ro* (blog), November 30, 2014, accessed February 21, 2025, <https://filmmenu.wordpress.com/2014/11/30/interviu-cristi-puiu/>.

14) “Cristi Puiu: Un singur lucru poți să faci în viața asta: să fii!,” *Liternet*, accessed February 20, 2025, <https://atelier.liternet.ro/articol/40108/Claudia-Nedelcu-Duca-Cristi-Puiu/Un-singur-lucru-poti-face-in-lumea-asta-SA-FII-Noptile-albe-ale-filmului-romanesc-la-TV.R.html>.

15) “Realismul românesc cu Cristi Puiu (partea 1),” *CINEPUB*, accessed February 26, 2025, <https://en.cinepub.ro/movie/episode-4-icar-romanian-realism-with-cristi-puiu-1st-part/>.

The best camera position is the one where you have the best view of death.

Cristi Puiu

Interior, room: late autumn, a weekend afternoon in the quiet Bucharest, where noise has fled beyond the city walls. “Little Paris” is bathed in the rays of a golden sun, literally and figuratively decadent, reminiscent of the glorious afternoons of childhood. We have improvised a brunch at my place, just the two of us, middle-aged men: Cristi was born in April 1967, and I, a month later, both conceived just before the “Decree”¹⁶⁾ came into force. Our parents may have wanted us, so that means our lives are not coincidental?! Neither I nor my guest have anyone else to ask. But what about death? [...] Cristi picked up a book I had left on the windowsill and read the title:

CP: The Denial of Death.

LG: Yes. By Ernest Becker.¹⁷⁾ A book about man’s flight from death. It later became the theory of terror management,¹⁸⁾ the basis of which is the expression “the worm at the core,” a visualization of the obsessive idea of death from which man is always trying to escape.

CP: And this idea is the worm.

LG: Yes. I wanted to talk to you about death, Cristi, because you’re an expert.

CP: Me, an expert on death? I’m more of an expert on *the fear of death*...

LG: But you told me that your fear of death was postponed when Zoe¹⁹⁾ was born.

CP: It’s something I felt physically, like a kind of postponement. I now have some fatherly concerns: until the child takes flight, I’m responsible for someone, to something. We set these age limits according to certain transient demands and linked them to our interests of the moment. If you turn the clock back 100 years, women married at 16 and had children. Now, because of this... (hesitates) I don’t know what they call it, because I don’t want to call it technological evolution; I don’t think there is evolution, just some changes that have taken place in our lives. For example, now it’s the middle of November, the day after the celebration of St. Michael and Gabriel, but outside, it’s like summer. Things change, times change, and we adapt. I filmed in 1997 in a gypsy community (I still have the footage, but I didn’t edit it for financial reasons); some friends, Jean and Corina, asked me to do it. They were having a project of education through painting, and they went to Roma villages in three communities, one of them in Coltău, an impoverished village, half Hungarian, half Gypsy. It’s a community that has been grafted onto this Hungarian village. They used to steal from the Hungarians in the garden; they were destitute. Ceausescu had once built a brick factory there, but they were bricklayers, so they took the bread out of their mouths. Very poor gypsies, and an extraordinary experience. Then I went to rich ones in Sibiu and to Mangalia. It wasn’t that great, money changes people a lot. I filmed at a wedding where the groom was 11 and the bride was only 10. I think the world as it is today pushes us through technology to make choices that we now automatically take for

16) Decree No. 770 of 1 October 1966, a notorious piece of legislation by the Ceausescu communist dictatorship that banned abortion and aimed to accelerate population growth.

17) Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press [and others], 1973).

18) Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski, *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life* (London: Penguin UK, 2015).

19) Zoe is the youngest of Anca and Cristi Puiu’s three daughters.

granted because we don't realize where they come from because they're falsely natural. The world is changing around you, and you're being carried along by these currents, and you think it's normal. You think you're living, but you're being lived.

LG: Have you always been aware of the theme of death that recurs in all your films as a super-theme, a fundamental, central concept? Did you think about it as a series?

CP: You mean if I set out to do it from the beginning? No, I didn't think about it initially, but somehow, I noticed it from the outside. Later the realization happened when I thought about what I was doing in *Sieranevada*, or maybe even in *Aurora*.

LG: You said, when we were talking about *Stuff and Dough*, that the accident in the film represents a significant event in your biography.

CP: This is the starting idea of the screenplay. It's the re-enactment of an accident, the representation of death, of a family tragedy. In 1998, Anca's brother Adi was killed in a car accident. He was the model boy every mother wanted: good at school and serious. He was about three years younger than me, and we didn't necessarily have a relationship. We were always mischievous, football, things like that; he wasn't; he was good, and he and his sister Anca were good students, prize winners; we were far from that. With the fall of Ceausescu, there was an opportunity to do business. Adi had a kiosk and a coffee shop, and at the same time, he went to school. He was a student in two faculties, Cybernetics and Automatics, and then he had a business and private life. It was an enormous amount of pressure. He asked me to put him in touch with the head of Perrier Romania; I returned from Switzerland in 1996 and knew the man there. He had made a mineral water called Ana Vie. I thought it was a foolish title, but I still think it's a stupid one. Adi was hired to sell this water on the Black Sea coast; he worked very hard. The accident happened, I think, around two in the morning. I'd come home from a friend's house and had some wine. Anca told me that Adi had an accident. I was half awake and asked: "Is it serious?" "No, he's in hospital," she didn't know he was dead. I was still numb from the alcohol and mumbled, "Hey, I told him not to drive tired like that," and then I fell asleep. Then Radu, a colleague of his, called. And suddenly Anca started screaming and went to her mother, who was asleep, and told her screaming, "Adi is dead, Mummy! Mummy, wake up, he's dead!" And her mother woke up from her sleep, and so did I, with this screaming, with this terrible news, and all the anesthesia was gone. Mum was rolling around screaming in the middle of the room, and Anca was crying in the corner. We all lived in her family's block flat; we married in April, and Adi died in August. I grew up in a working-class neighborhood, Ozana, where people were vociferous, and I saw much of that. In the old days, when someone died, the streets would rumble, and we, as children, would follow the funeral procession. At the crossroads, people would throw money in front of the coffin, and we would collect it and buy Polar ice cream for one buck or Sport for 75 cents. I grew up in the cult of heroic death, of heroes, Vasile Roaită,²⁰⁾ and others like him. Just think of *The Freckled*

20) Vasile Roaită was a young worker in the Romanian railway workshops of Grivița during the 1933 workers' mutiny. He was one of the symbols of communist propaganda in Romania, transformed from an accidental victim of a revolt into a true national hero. His death was idealized, the inert hand of the shot hero continuing to be called to fight. This powerful scene of official Soviet-sounding fiction shaped the childhood of generations of many Romanians.

One²¹⁾, which was on TV when we were growing up. Do *The Freckled One* and *All Sails Aloft*²²⁾ have another pair? They're all stories full of death and the danger of losing one's life. The fairy tale of my childhood that petrified me, brought me down, destroyed me, crushed me, and shattered my confidence and my hope is *Youth Without Age and Life Without Death*.²³⁾ The scene where Death slaps the hero and he crumbles to dust... to powder...

LG: You visualized the void?

CP: Yes. The end. Absolutely. The stories that marked my childhood are *Youth Without Age and Life Without Death*; and, oh yes, *Bambi*!²⁴⁾ *Bambi*, because Mom is dying.

LG: So, a childhood fairy tale triggered your awareness of death?

CP: Awareness? I don't know. But an episode that made me really aware of it was the death of Costel Cocheci, a neighbor boy. The Cocheci family lived one floor above us; we were a sort of "symmetrical" family in this working-class block; we were three children — Florentina, myself, and Iulian, and the Cocheci children too, an older sister and two brothers: Titela, Costel, and Florin. We were the same age as Costel, friends, as in the block. One evening, Mr. Cocheci came to my father and told him that Costel was very ill. My father worked at the hospital, and he also gave injections in private, as was the case then; the neighbors knew him. They put him in the car and drove to the hospital, but at the tram stop, a drunk from the Ozana restaurant appeared; they hit him, stopped, put Costel in a taxi, and when they got to the hospital and laid him on the table, the doctor on duty said, "He's bleeding internally. I don't think we can do anything. I'll open him up, but I can't guarantee anything." Anyway, that's what my dad told us the next day. We had to go to bed early; we were schoolchildren, and the next morning, when we woke up, my mother told us that he had died. At the funeral, we said goodbye to him, as is customary at our funerals, and that is the moment I remember vividly. Costel had a sore on his lip. I remember this very well because it was my only worry. It was a bizarre thing, a confusion, because in my mind, herpes belonged to living people, and Costel was dead. But I kissed him goodbye. When the others kissed the dead, I kissed him. I obeyed because we were raised to behave and to do what everyone else does. And yes, he had herpes. But then something even stranger happened. The Cocheci family was from Oltenia, and the Oltenians have an ancient custom whereby the family whose child dies "adopts" one of its friends. And they adopted me; I became their child. They bought me clothes, a desk for school, school supplies, and toys. And then there was a whole ritual that I had to go through. His mother was devastated, crying all the time, and he, Costel, was lying there on the dining room table. Then, after the funeral, she called me into a room and told me to take off my clothes and put on the new suit she'd bought me. I was humiliated to undress in front of her. She cried and said, "Don't be ashamed, dear. My child is dead, and I am like your mother." Then I

21) *The Freckled One* (Pistruitul; Francisc Munteanu, 1973), whose director was in the close circles of the Romanian Communist Party.

22) *All sails aloft!* (*Toate pânzele sus*; Mircea Mureșan, 1977), one of the most famous TV series of the communist period, adapted from a novel by Radu Tudoran.

23) *Youth Without Age and Life Without Death* is a classical Romanian folktale, see Petre Ispirescu, "Tinerete fără bătrânețe și viață fără de moarte," in Petre Ispirescu, *Legende sau basmele românilor: Adunate din gura poporului* (București: H. Steinberg, 1892) a classical Romanian folktale.

24) *Bambi* (David D. Hand, 1942).

was embarrassed that I was ashamed. I undressed awkwardly, then dressed again, and sat at the table in my new suit. After that, I tried to live up to their expectations, to behave with Florin, the younger brother, as if he was my brother, to adopt him somehow. And we had a good relationship for a long time.

LG: In *Sieranevada*, we're after the funeral; the point of view, the subjective angle of the camera, is that of the ghost floating through the room, right? We're in the bardo, looking from his point of view... I think his name is Emil, right?

CP: My father, yes!

LG: Not only your father but also the one whose ceremony feast we are attending in *Sieranevada*.

CP: Well, yes, that's exactly why he is so-called.

LG: Emil, your father, and Iuliana, your mother, appear episodic in *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu*. They are the patients in the corridor when Lăzărescu is taken to the CT scanner. Did you want to immortalize them, to have a photograph of them for when they're gone?

CP: Yes. That's why I cast them, and that's why I told Fiscuteanu²⁵⁾ to lift his head from the stretcher, turn around, and look at him (Figure 1). And he said, "Why should I look at him?" I said, "Well, it's like recognizing the one coming after you and saying, you're following me." And that's what happened. Lăzărescu dies in the film, and my father died a year after him.

LG: Does this mean he took him by the hand to hand him over?

CP: Yes, of course. He was diagnosed with cancer in the same year, 2005, but my father's health had not been good for a long time, and I knew that he was going to leave in the near or distant future. I chose to link him to the main character in my story because it



Fig. 1: Ion Fiscuteanu (Mr. Lăzărescu) looks at Emil Puiu (the Patient). Credits: Oleg Mutu (*The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu*, Cristi Puiu, 2006), courtesy of Mandragora

25) Ioan Fiscuteanu, the actor who plays Remus Dante Lăzărescu, the protagonist of the film.

seemed infinitely more important to me that he be linked to the resurrected Lazarus than anything else. My father collapsed while I was on the Cannes jury in 2007. My brother called me halfway through the festival. We were at a film screening from Paraguay; I'll never forget it. When I left the cinema, I had nine missed calls, and I knew he was dead. I told Thierry Frémaux²⁶⁾ I was going to Bucharest and said goodbye but never returned. [...] The feeling of death is a feeling that comes with subtle signals. The fear of death is for me is the fear of separation. I'm not afraid of death; I'm afraid of separation. When I close a novel and finish it, I've separated myself from it; I've died a bit there. And it's hard for me; it stays on my bedside table; I come back to it to stay with these people, these characters, to keep it going. It seems to me it's about fidelity.

LG: But it's human nature, not necessarily just you.

CP: Yes, it's the fear — and now we're going to use some strong words — of falling away from God. Do you understand? It's the fear of somehow breaking away from the flagship. When you die, you fall off, like a leaf that falls off the tree and gets lost.

LG: Maybe we think that way, but I don't believe it's like that.

CP: I don't believe either; it's just a lack of faith. When there is faith, the fear goes away. I try to be as honest as I can with myself and my conscience. It's not hard to say that I don't know anything, but it's very easy to avoid it because you're afraid to do it in relation to someone else, and you think it might be used against you. But let's take the case where you are alone in front of the mirror. You know you don't know anything. All these stories about Jesus being a Buddhist, or not being a Buddhist, or being an alpinist, or whatever, are all mind games. It's speculation that leads nowhere but to despair.

LG: Is despair a lack of faith?

CP: And lack of humility. All these things, all that we are, are part of this knowledge, which, in the end, is not even called knowledge. Proper knowledge, as I understand it, is that moment that lasts for a split second when we are unconscious, a split second, and that intuitive knowing is *being*. It is the moment when *knowing* overlaps with *being*. And that is peace. I mean, *knowing* is *being*. But that implies not only belief but trust! And so you get to a point where you can't communicate what you're experiencing; you start to speak disjointedly. And people say, "Man, this guy's crazy!" Because these things can't be put into words.

LG: And you think they can be translated into films? No, that's why many people don't understand your movies.

CP: They can't be put into cinema, but what can be related to both words and cinema is understanding that humility has an epistemological dimension. If I were a priest talking to people, I would say to them, "It's important to be humble." Not because it's a matter of morality but primarily because it's a matter of epistemology. If you don't humble yourself and you think *you know*, you won't see, and you won't understand. Because you assume that you *know*. But you have to believe that you don't know, that you are zero, a handful of dirt at the bottom of the pit, as Father Cleopa²⁷⁾ said, and look at the world clean, unencumbered by this consciousness that you know something. You don't know shit! This ab-

26) The then director of the Cannes Film Festival.

27) Canonised as a saint by the Romanian Orthodox Church in 2024, monk Cleopa is considered as an outstanding spiritual leader of the 20th century in Romania.

solute zero state is the only one we can aspire to. But we're embarrassed and don't want to admit it; what Ionescu or Popescu says is more important. It's as if you're trapped in a cage cut to your size, and you can't communicate with others who are also in their cages. And those cages might as well not exist if you accept that nothing can bind us together if there is not this binding bond, which is called love. I think we both take what you say for granted. But if there is suspicion instead of love, the worm in the apple you spoke of will appear, and I'll suspect you of hidden interests.

LG: You told me that you want to make two films. Why are you still making them? Do you have to? Or because you're scared not to separate yourself from something you know? Why do you still make films, Cristi?

CP: I don't want to make films anymore. But I've already contracted them. The time has passed, and now, honestly, I wouldn't want to do them anymore, but I must.

LG: And if someone came and said it's done, don't worry, you don't have to film anymore; what would you do?

CP: I would return to painting. To Buzău, a county that has nothing to do with me or my family or where we come from. Anca and I have been looking for a house since *Stuff and Dough*, in 2001. It's already a quarter of a century; can you imagine? And we've only just found it in Buzău, in Pietroasele, at the end of the "wine road." From there, if you concentrate, you can see the whole south, the Balkans, maybe to Sofia. That's the opening, the horizon that goes on relentlessly to nowhere. And there, in spring, everything blossoms, from the arbutus to the cherry and whatever else man has. It's such a joy. And I said to myself, "Let's use this house for the film production," first, but afterward, I felt it might be my tomb.

LG: The last place, is that what you meant?

CP: I think that when a man is looking for a home, he is looking for his grave. You're not looking for a house; you're looking for a place to die. Yes, it's about the grave.

LG: But what do you do with the fickle, so to speak?

CP: It doesn't exist. It's just a way to cheat death, but you must be an idiot. How can you cheat death if you're not Ivan Turbinca?²⁸⁾ The point is, if you want to cheat death, to trick it, you're cheating God. You'd rather say, "God, I'm here too, I'm not tied to you, and I'm autonomous." Then say, "Thank you, God, and I'm glad, God, that you've taken me under your wing." There is also a cold, dark side to us, to the individual. Because freedom and autonomy are essential, and it's hard to reconcile them with faith in God and the shelter His wing gives you.

LG: You say that if you have faith, you don't have to be afraid of death.

CP: It's not that you "don't have to;" you simply don't fear death if you have faith. Period!

LG: You're not afraid of death?

CP: I'm not a good Christian... I'm afraid of separation because, as I told you, for me, death is the fear of separation.

LG: Which is also a kind of death.

CP: Of course.

LG: So, you see yourself painting in Buzău? But aren't you very... urban?

CP: I'd be in coffee shops if I were very urban. But I'm not.

28) Hero of Ion Creangă's story, who faces death with great wit and common sense.

LG: Sounds like you get all your juice from the block stairs, right?

CP: Well, these are lived experiences. I was in the military, the standard service at that time. Does that make me an *apevist*?²⁹⁾ I don't even know if it's Bucharest that I can't stand or... Cities have a dynamic; they change and don't keep up with you. The thing is, the moment you retrace your steps, you don't find the same place. When I go to Ozana, there aren't the same people, the neighborhood has changed; that one isn't there anymore, that one went to France, that one went to Italy... I feel the need for eternalization, for eternity. The confirmation of eternity. That's what it's about. I want to be able to say something about it: it exists!

LG: Well, Ozana exists, doesn't it?

CP: It doesn't. Don't you understand, or are you crazy? You can't superimpose the present on the past. When you go back into your history, you must find what you left there, according to the map you've constructed. But you see a tail! And not a hard one. It's one of those soft, false, approximate, sad things. Why am I here? Where are we going, sir?

LG: You say you're not afraid of death, but the fingerprints of death are all over your films.

CP: Well, yes, but it's not consciously done.

LG: What do you mean? It just comes out of the ether and sits there by itself.

CP: If the question is how the story is born, I tell you very clearly that I can never imagine myself doing a story that has nothing to do with death. I can't; it doesn't interest me. But yes, I can watch films that have nothing to do with death. As a spectator, I can take in a lot of stories, the whole ROGVAIV spectrum, but as an author and filmmaker, the choices are somehow made from the start about the relationship I have with death. I can't tell the story of young people who go to the seaside, have fun, and return to Bucharest, and everything is... "cool."

LG: We should presume that your next films will again be about death?

CP: Yes, if God gives me days and strength, but can I know what tomorrow will bring? If I have days, I will make them. One is *Sântandreiul Lupilor*, and the other is *The Bald Singer*, after Ionesco. We are a generation that grew up in libraries, which is why the new Romanian wave could only be a narrative, a story with a moral, with a plot, in a world that has lost it. We live in a world that is still negotiating its meaning.

LG: Are the protagonists of your films your alter ego?

CP: It's not my decision; whether I think about it or not, I can't get rid of this identification. What could be the individual's capacity to get out of his mind and fly like that autonomously? You are a prisoner of your mind and the education you have received. Someone once asked me in an interview what the best camera position was. And I had then this sudden epiphany that the best camera position is the one from which you can best see death. It came to me spontaneously, and afterward, when I came back and thought about it, I started to think about it consciously, that there is no correct answer because you can consider all sorts of spatial cues and narrative cues. "In this story, the character is drinking a glass of milk at the table." You must see the glass of milk on the table... but maybe you don't; perhaps you just have to shoot his eye. The criteria are completely different, but

29) Abbreviation of the term "army-for-life," which was used to designate career military personnel.

in the beginning, you are bound to the narrative, and I think it is also very accurate that someone — I can't remember who — said that "the story does not belong to the cinema; the cinema has been taken over by the story." Cinema is not storytelling; it is beyond story. And if you manage to use the story as a lure for the spectator, to lead him into that cinematic territory, then you're in heaven, but it's hard and not up to you anyway. But that's the ideal, that in certain moments — and this has nothing to do with the film born of pure fiction, if there could be such a thing, like in specific segments of *The Straight Story*,³⁰⁾ for example, how metaphysical that film is, it makes you realize that cinema is beyond the story being told! The only thing I can point to that contains this infinity of the world, of creation, is the gaze of the man in front of the camera, the gaze that includes the individual's history. It doesn't matter who the character is, the individual matters. And it's impossible to decipher. It is infinitely mysterious because there is a lot of suffering, joy, and a whole history in a person's gaze, which the actor cannot fake. He can move the eye muscles, but he cannot intervene in the content of the gaze. And that's the joy of being a director because you know that the look is essential. I know that when I cast an actor, I cast him for the content of the look. I'm not interested in what he can do and in his performance. I'm interested in the fact that he's not uptight and that he doesn't smudge that look. God, grant he listens to you because he has to move inside and do things in a certain cadence, but that's all. Just the look and saying things correctly because that look is everything; there's nothing else apart from that! If I had to force a definition of cinema, there couldn't be a more precise definition than "the author's gaze on the character's gaze." The author's gaze records how the character's gaze looks at the world. And that has to do with separation. *E la nave va*³¹⁾... It gives me goosebumps that, at some point, we're going to separate and part.

LG: Does your current position as a new grandfather change things?

CP: No, they might even get worse. Because of the people coming after us, I don't know if they are better or worse prepared; I don't care, but they are prepared differently; they come from a different world. Their world is the computer, and their interest in the person next to them diminishes. The goal that man has set for himself, consciously or unconsciously, is to reach a higher level and transcend his condition, but this taste for it...transhumanism, as it is called today, does not make you more potent than the man you were. It only makes you more blind and deaf to the suffering of your neighbor, more selfish, and more self-centered. Because you put money and rational thinking before everything else, and you cancel out all emotion.

LG: Humanity has never excelled at loving one another.

CP: If it weren't, it wouldn't be said... Why else would Christ say, "Love your neighbor as yourself," if you had already done it? He said it because you didn't. The Ten Commandments were given to the people precisely because people didn't keep them.

LG: You originally called the series *Six Stories from the Outskirts of Bucharest*. *Lăzărescu* is part of that series, right?

CP: *Lăzărescu*, yes. And after that, *Aurora* and *Sieranevada*, in my mind, I counted them as coming from there.

30) A film by David Lynch from 1999.

31) *And the Ship Sails On* (*E la Nave Va*; Federico Fellini, 1983).

LG: And do you want to finish the series of six, or is the number irrelevant?

CP: It was relevant at the time because I was in a Rohmer period of inspiration, with his packages of *Six Moral Tales*³²⁾ and *Comedies and Proverbs*³³⁾ and *Stories of the Four Seasons*³⁴⁾, each season being a film. I found this *feuilleton* idea interesting. Then there is the influence of Truffaut because the French New Wave writers who have influenced me are Rohmer and Truffaut. Not Godard, who I find very sad. But we like to say “Godard” because it’s *de bon-ton*, right? And Louis Malle impressed me, although I never thought I’d say that.

LG: Why, because he’s *calophilic*?

CP: No, he didn’t impress me with the films he made during the French New Wave period, but with his later films, *Uncle Vanya on 42nd Street*³⁵⁾ and *My Dinner with André*³⁶⁾, which seem to me to be like make-believe films, films that change you in many ways when you see them. Because filming is such a hard thing to do, the energy you have to put into it is enormous. Talking about filming in the hospital: it’s so tough. One day, at Lăzărescu, I was filming at night, a long winter night, in the CT scanner. Around five in the morning, when we were leaving the set walking towards the lift, two stretchers with a corpse in a black bag approached the corridor. One of them, a tall one with a glass eye, grinning at us, took the corpse’s hand out and hurried it out of the plastic bag like this: “Goodbye!” A Lynch scene. It was after a night of shooting, I was exhausted, in a hostile environment, where the CT nurse was keen to tell us that in her hospital, they didn’t say “pops” when we gave the dialogue cues for the shot. “But why don’t you call him ‘daddy’ or ‘pops’?” I asked her. “Well, the management told us not to.” “Ah, you told him anyway, so he told you not to.” “Yes, but he never peed on our CT, even if he’s an old man, like in your film.” And just that day, the film was stopped, the CT scanner was running, and we were sneaking between cases with the shooting, and they stopped us because they brought in an emergency an older man, put him on the CT scanner, and the first thing he did was pee all over the place. She wouldn’t even look at us. The CT doctor was a great guy; a year after we finished filming, I went to see him for a CT scan. My dad had bowel cancer. I’ve had CT since; the last one was before the pandemic.

LG: Are you nervous when you do this?

CP: Every time. I prepare myself for death, but not in a Zen way, you know? I’m not a samurai. I prepare myself like an “auntie.” In an “auntie” mind (and we all have an “auntie” mind), we think we’ll manage somehow... but it doesn’t work that way; it’s tricky.

LG: Aren’t you afraid of the road? Of the gradual, physical deterioration?

CP: It must be so. Steinhardt³⁷⁾ said, “Being a Christian is hard because you have to realize that (rough quote) every day you have to start from scratch and that nothing you did yesterday matters.” That is, if I was good yesterday, it doesn’t mean I have the freedom to-

32) *Six moral tales* (Six contes morales; Éric Rohmer, 1963–1972).

33) *Comedies and Proverbs* (Comédies et proverbes; Éric Rohmer, 1981–1987).

34) *Tales of the Four Seasons* (Contes des quatre saisons; Éric Rohmer, 1998–1990).

35) *Uncle Vanya on 42nd Street* (Louis Malle, 1994).

36) *My dinner with André* (Louis Malle, 1981).

37) Nicu-Aurelian Steinhardt (1912–1989) was a Romanian writer, Orthodox monk and lawyer. His book, *Jurnalul Fericiirii*, is considered to be a seminal text of 20th century Romanian literature and a pre-eminent example of anti-Communist literature.

day to be more relaxed about the moral imperatives of being a Christian. We always start again. We have to struggle.

LG: I'm scared of death, Cristi.

CP: You're not scared of death. You're afraid of separation. We're all fearful of separation.

(Bucharest, November 2024)

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And the Ship Sails On (E la Nave Va; Federico Fellini, 1983)
Aurora (Cristi Puiu, 2010)
Bambi (David D. Hand, 1942)
Cigarettes and Coffee (Un cartuș de Kent și un pachet de cafea; Cristi Puiu, 2004)
Comedies and Proverbs (Comédies et proverbes; Éric Rohmer, 1981–1987)
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My dinner with André (Louis Malle, 1981)
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The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu (Moartea domnului Lăzărescu; Cristi Puiu, 2005)
The Freckled One (Pistruiatul; Francisc Munteanu, 1973)
The Straight Story (David Lynch, 1999)
Uncle Vanya on 42nd Street (Louis Malle, 1994)

Biography

Lucian Georgescu is a filmmaker and professor of screenwriting at the National University of Theatre and Film, Bucharest, and visiting professor of audiovisual arts at Babeș-Bolyai University in Cluj. His research interests include narrative paradigms in road movies, the application of open-source principles to film distribution, and the impact of streaming on film language. A trailblazer in national cultural marketing, Georgescu founded cinepub.ro, a curated platform for national independent cinema.

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From *Homo Sovieticus* to Many Selves Unraveling Identities in (Post)-Soviet Cinema

Heleen Gerritsen and Irina Schulzki, eds., *Decolonising the (Post-)Soviet Screen* (Berlin: Apparatus Press, 2024).

Alena Kolesnikova
(FAMU, Czech Republic)

The anthology *Decolonizing the (Post)-Soviet Screen* (2024) serves as a unifying collection of works by authors sharing the same goal: to rediscover and reevaluate the Soviet and post-Soviet film legacy. Edited by Heleen Gerritsen and Irina Schulzki, the book focuses on the decentralization of the long-standing Soviet film hegemony — with its center in Moscow — and examines how decolonization theories are applied to works submitted by two dozen scholars, filmmakers, curators, and culturologists from the former “peripheries” of the Soviet Union and its successor empire.

It needs to be acknowledged that the ambitious task of decolonizing this cinematic heritage is anything but simple. It requires a nuanced analysis of over sixty years of film and animation history, varying by region. Nonetheless, the anthology presents a wide range of research, colored by personal, and sometimes brightly colonial, experiences, helping readers piece together the puzzle of decolonization processes. The feeling of connecting lost and found fragments into a coherent picture pervades the book's structure and discourse. Arguably, such a complex subject could only be presented effectively through the form of an anthology.

A notable companion volume in discourse, form, and size is *Postcolonial Approaches to Eastern European Cinema* (2014), which also analyzes regional films through a decolonial lens.¹⁾ These two sistering volumes are united not only by their anthological form, but also by their theoretical foundation — drawing mainly on Alexander Etkind's concept of “internal colonization,” Edward Said's work on Orientalism and the application of “otherness,” and Homi Bhabha's “hybridization.” This academic arsenal helps to redefine the analyzed regions and their connections to hegemonic powers, spanning widely from Eastern Europe to Central Asia, covering an enormous ideological archipelago once ruled by the Soviet Union.

1) Ewa Mazierska, Lars Kristensen, and Eva Närepea, *Postcolonial Approaches to Eastern European Cinema: Portraying Neighbours on Screen* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014). The book investigates the mutual perception of neighboring countries and their portrayal in cinema; it explains the issue of Eastern European evolution after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The concern with the redefinition of space — alongside its embedded culture — stands as a gravitational point in every chapter. The introduction to the volume, “Decolonizing Minds,” is presented by the academic duo Irina Schulzki and Natascha Drubek. Although Drubek is not one of the book’s editors, her role as a founder of the open-access journal *Apparatus* and the recently established publishing house Apparatus Press — both dedicated to rethinking the media cultures of Eastern, Central, and South-Eastern Europe — provides a strong reasoning for her involvement. Their research aligns with the book contributors’ motivation, where they altogether “underscore the pressing necessity of reevaluating the cinematic legacy of the Soviet and post-Soviet eras within global decolonisation processes” (12). The essay raises questions about terminology and regional identity, corresponding to the polemics of how we ourselves define Eurasia. Does it depend on the viewer’s perspective or on geopolitics? How many regions that share similar experiences of the weight of authoritarian control yet distinct, historical traumas, can be encompassed under a single narrative? What countries qualify as “post-Soviet,” and how shall we look at them? Is there such a thing as a post-Soviet identity, and can it ever be unified? The volume does not seek to provide easy answers. As the authors note, “the use of ‘post-’ within this volume’s title bears witness to the imminent travails of shedding imperial legacy, even in geopolitical (self-) nomination” (10). This ambiguity invites readers to an individual journey of creating your own name for the region(s), as well as breaking from imposed imperial homogeneity. As the authors emphasize, “one should, by all means, start by decolonising one’s own mind” (10).

As the authors underscore (10), the urgent need to reexamine the Soviet legacy is central to understanding both the past and the present — cinematically and culturally. In these terms, they consider the absence of institutional recognition regarding the complexity and diversity of post-Soviet identities the main struggle for fighting an omnipresent Soviet narrative. In this situation I would like to note that many Western universities have only recently begun reevaluating Slavic studies,²⁾ which illustrates how firmly Moscow’s cultural hegemony continues to shape our perception of the East. Russia’s long-standing position as the established gatekeeper to the Slavic world and its culture has allowed imperial perspectives on geopolitical and cultural “peripheral” regions to be bypassed.³⁾ This situation highlights, on the one hand, the unfortunate academic simplification of a complex cultural constellation within Western institutions,⁴⁾ and on the other, Russia’s successful usurpation of Slavic studies. These dynamics are, unfortunately, not addressed in the volume. This omission is understandable, as including them would have shifted the book’s focus away from its central focus on cinema. Aligning with and supporting the need to reevaluate the contemporary Slavic cultural space, the authors of the book em-

2) See Ewa Thompson, “The Field Isn’t ‘Slavic Studies’ at All — It Should Be Called ‘Russian Propaganda Studies’ — A Few Exceptions Only Confirm the Rule,” *Ukrainian Studies*, December 21, 2023, accessed September 1, 2025, <https://ukrainian-studies.ca/2023/12/21/interview-with-ewa-thompson-the-field-isnt-slavic-studies-at-all-it-should-be-called-russian-propaganda-studies-a-few-exceptions-only>.

3) Academics such as Susan Smith-Peter and the CORUSCANT collective acknowledge the Russo-centric orientation of Slavic studies, Russian studies, and Russian history, and argue for a process of repositioning and decolonial readjustment within these fields. Susan Smith-Peter and Sheldon Pollock, “How the Field Was Colonized: Russian History’s Ukrainian Blind Spot,” *Russian History* 50, no. 3–4 (2024), 145–156. CORUSCANT, “Our Manifesto,” *CORUSCANT (the European branch of the Russia Program)*, accessed September 1, 2025, http://coruscant.therussiaprogram.org/manifesto_en.

4) We also need to take into consideration that Slavic studies, with their emphasis on Russia, partly emerged from post-WWII US politics in response to the perceived threat from the Soviet Union. As Tomasz Kamusella argues, this dynamic set off a chain reaction that resulted in Russian dominance within the field. Tomasz Kamusella, “War and Russian Studies in the West,” *Wachtyrz*, 2022, <https://wachtyrz.eu/war-and-russian-studies-in-the-west1/>.

phasize the urgency of shifting perspectives. Also, they call for redirecting “researchers’ and film festival programmers’ focuses, a rigorous revision of (film) history, and [adopt] a new, more inclusive, and respectful language in film studies and the humanities in general” (12).

The introduction to the book and the chapter written by Serhii Ksaverov (“Losing Identities: Horror Narratives in Two Late Soviet Ukrainian Films”) suggest one of the reasons why we face a reality where Soviet cultural diversion is absent in our imagination. Ksaverov highlights the concept of *homo sovieticus*⁵⁾ as one of the central inventions of Soviet ideology. This creation, as a product of intense propaganda, presented a new identity, a “type dreamed of by early communists and actively mythologised in Soviet cinema” (292). This collective identity turned into a Soviet archetype that ostensibly unified people as different as the Chukchee, Belarusians, Chechens, and other nations. This instrument served the USSR well, particularly through Socialist Realism and its emphasis on *camaraderie*, leading to the erasure of national histories under the promise of a utopian future and ultimately producing a homogenized Soviet identity (134).

In the context of East-West institutional negotiations, I would like to comment on western participation in creating the image of a homogeneous Soviet identity. We can recall an archetypal image in American films produced in different genres and timeframes, as for example *Ninotchka* (Ernst Lubitsch, 1939), *The Iron Curtain* (William A. Wellman, 1948), *Walk East on Beacon* (Alfred L. Werker, 1952).⁶⁾ Here we must recognize that the cinematic propaganda machines of the two Cold War rivals were launched on both ideological fronts, pursuing the same mission of constructing the contradicting identities of *us* and *the others*. In my opinion, this heavily contributes to the reasons why the image of a homogeneous Soviet identity became successfully established in both East and West. From this perspective, the anthology aims to demystify this monolithic cultural narrative by highlighting unique national experiences and breaking the established portrayal. As noted, “this volume critically assesses how filmmakers, through both the Soviet era and its dissolution, grappled with and portrayed complex identities amidst shifting imperial and national landscapes” (11). This multiplicity of past and contemporary identities is articulated through the voices of many nationalities, offering a short introduction to the subject and film history of each country.

Methodologically, the essays vary depending on their focus but tend to include textual and comparative analysis, qualitative research, and narrative critique. The writing style remains flexible and largely determined by the authors’ preferences, which leaves a lot of room for freedom and creative expression. I find this to be a positive sign — it invites readers from outside academic spaces to engage with the material and mirrors the book’s broader goals of inclusion and decolonial practice (12).

The structure of the book consists of four sections, along with a prologue, introduction, and epilogue. Each section explores a distinct topic, connecting various authors through shared research. The volume opens with a prologue by Heleen Gerritsen on the late-Soviet Ukrainian film *Decay* (Belikov, 1990), examining the parallel between atomic decomposition and “cultural and geopolitical disintegration and the epistemological shifts it entails” (13). The nuclear tragedy of 1986 — and the radioac-

5) *Homo sovieticus* is a term describing a communist ideology centered around the creation of a “New Soviet Man.” This creature is characterized by a set of shared values, comradeship and obedience. During the 1980s, this term was re-appropriated and turned into a satirical anti-communist form of expression of identity.

6) The investigation on the image of communism was done by Yasmine Lyna Benali with the analysis of Hollywood films from around the mid-1900s. Yasmine Lyna Benali, “The Visual Rhetoric of the Early Cold War: The Representation of Anti-Communist Propaganda in Hollywood Movies (mid-1900s)” (Master’s thesis, Université Jean Monnet Saint-Étienne, 2023–2024).

tive particles that spread across European streets — once again finds its metaphorical mirroring in the omnipresence of an imperial narrative. The article envisions the disintegration of Block №4 as a symbolic transformational point, examining how the collapse of the Soviet Union impacted cinematic production across the post-Soviet landscape. It introduces readers to the persistence of both internal and external Russian colonialism, where film production is actively used as a soft power instrument of propaganda in the “internal regions” (27). Gerritsen investigates the ideology underlying this cinematic monolith and traces the development of contemporary Russian films that deviate from the established colonial framework. These films open debates on forced assimilation, the loss of traditions, and other traumatic experiences, as described by autochthonous filmmakers from regions such as the Caucasus, Sakha, Tatarstan, and others. Gerritsen therefore calls for recognition and support of this ongoing disintegration, advocating the use of a “Fourth Cinema” perspective and the creation of platforms for films that, while classified by production origin as “Russian,” are in essence “anything-but-Russian.” Such works enrich cinematography with authentic specificity, a quality that is explored in greater detail in the second section of the volume.

In practice, as the author emphasizes, amplifying the voices of these decolonizing filmmakers prompts a “[reassessment] of the film history of the republics and ‘regions,’ beyond the dominating Russian-Soviet film legacy” (29). Gerritsen’s argument aligns with broader evaluations of colonial practices in the film industry and Western visual culture. A foundational work in this area is by Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, who analyze the principle of focalization in cinematography and media, as well as mechanisms that enforce a dominant perspective — resulting in misrepresentation, stereotyping, and the marginalization of “the others” within their own lands and cultures.⁷⁾ Similar practices are taken up by some contributors in the following essays of the edition under discussion, with particular attention to the eastern cultural and cinematic sphere.

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The first chapter, “On (Post)-Soviet Orientalisms and Internal Colonies,” investigates the identity and cultural nuances of countries such as Tajikistan, Georgia, and Kazakhstan. The collection of essays, contributed by Anisa Sabiri, Dušan Radunović, Nino Dzandzava, and Assiya Issemberdiyeva, aims to deconstruct these regions’ portrayals, which are often embedded in romanticized Russian imagery (51). The choice of authors reflects the broader aim of introducing authentic marginalized voices, as discussed in the previous chapter. The theoretical framework for this inquiry draws on Edward Said’s analysis of West–East negotiations,⁸⁾ alongside works by David Chioni Moore, Alexander Etkind, and other scholars advancing postcolonial debate. This foundation provides readers with an opportunity to engage with a nuanced vision of colonial history and the lasting influence on these regions. The section guides the reader through depictions of the Caucasus mountains and Kazakh steppes as romantic wildernesses — landscapes where women and lands are portrayed as heavenly beautiful, and nights as

7) Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London: Routledge, 1996).

8) Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978). The author argues the cultural representation of the “Orient” and its distortions in culture, romanticization, emphasizing the aspect of ‘enlightenment’ leading to multiple imperial incursions into Asian and North African territory. The politics of the Russian and Soviet Empire were methodologically similar.

dark as the local scoundrels' intentions toward outsiders.⁹⁾ Deconstructing this imagery is essential for the research presented here.

Radunović's essay builds on this theme by examining the implementation of cultural colonial practices and the responses of Georgian artists. His study is particularly noteworthy for its depth: he grounds the discussion in literature before moving into Georgian Soviet cinematography, analyzing the historical colonial context and cinematic semantics in tandem. The related issues of imperial and colonial representation — including self-exoticization and self-stereotyping — form the core of Dzandzava's essay. Her colonial reading of Soviet films by Georgian directors provides a striking example of how native culture was misrepresented, in ways that continue to "inspire colonial aspirations, strengthen clichés, and feed prejudices about Caucasians among people born even in the post-Soviet era" (85).

The whole section investigates the complexities of national and colonial identities and how these were manipulated in Soviet cinema. It emphasizes re-engaging the "colonial subject" with their land and history through film narratives as a form of emancipation, while also studying how cinematic structures presented the sovereign identities and traditions of local peoples. The ongoing decolonial debate, as this chapter demonstrates, is highly complex, and this case study offers valuable insights into the experiences of the Caucasus and Central Asia — highlighting parallels with certain Western colonial practices.

Nevertheless, as noted in the book's introduction, readers are encouraged to treat the Western decolonial perspective not as a replacement of prior discourses, but rather as an "optics" or "alternative path" for exploring these dynamics. From this standpoint, the contributors introduce new dialectics into decolonial discourse by exposing both past and ongoing tensions between the hegemonial center and the regions. While the section touches upon the term "settler colonialism," a form of colonialism in which outsiders displace or assimilate Indigenous populations,¹⁰⁾ it does not fully apply this framework to these areas. This omission seems a missed opportunity to provide an additional lens for understanding these regions as internal colonies — first Russian, and later Soviet. The next chapter takes up this notion more directly, applying it to the Caucasus and several inner Russian republics while accounting for historical and cultural differences.

The second section, "Echoes of Empire: White Feminism and Colonised Landscapes," analyzes films and literature produced by Indigenous authors from oppressed regions within modern-day Russia, such as Kabardino-Balkaria and Sakha, with a cover of Soviet and contemporary films. Presenting works by academics such as Serian Carlyle, Caroline Damiens, Adelaide McGinity-Peebles, and Natalya Khokhlova, the section's aim is to emphasize how these republics preserve and reassert their distinctive cultural identities through cinema. The whole section challenges the notion of "inner Russian"

9) Personal artistic interpretations based on Susan Layton, *Russian Literature and Empire: Conquest of the Caucasus from Pushkin and Tolstoy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). The book presents a wide study on the imperial depiction of the Caucasus region with a textual analysis of Russian classic literature. Some of the techniques are identical to the depiction of North Africa and Asia by the West, such as the feminization of the land, romanticization, exoticization and civilizing rationale as concealed instruments of colonization.

10) See Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012), 1–40. Tuck and Yang identify additional methods of settler colonialism that are relevant to this section — for example, transforming Indigenous land into settlers' new home and disrupting the established relationships between local communities and their land. The practice of colonial subjugation and enforced control emerged after local resistance to Soviet collectivization processes, as stated by Serian Carlyle in the following section (126).

cinema by presenting dissenting films as “decolonising entities, reclaiming Sakha cultural identity and history after centuries of Imperial Russian, Soviet, and indeed, post-Soviet Russian oppression” (175). The articles achieve such tasks by investigating the colonized-colonizer relationship (123) and the portrayal of decolonial attributes in female protagonists (175), who are enriched with specific national cultural markers. The section sets the stage for both academics and cinephiles to recognize Indigenous filmmaking and to help relocate the “center” of Russian film production to the “periphery” by highlighting local stories, shaping together a “multipolar, decolonized cinema history” (169). It offers rich textual analyses of films and their protagonists’ behavior, whose alienation, nonconformism, and occasional subordination to hegemonic ideology reflect imperial, Soviet, and contemporary Russian systems of oppression.

The third section, “Intersecting Ecologies and Ideologies: Ecocriticism and the Path to Decolonising Spaces,” centers on the Soviet regime’s exploitation of nature and the representation of ecological tragedies and emotional reflection in visual art. The projects and professional approaches of filmmakers and artists are showcased, for example, in an interview by Lukas Brasiskis and Masha Shpolberg (*Icy Water, Acid, and Free Forests — The New Ecocinema from East-Central Europe: Interview with Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė, Ian Soroka and Emilija Škarnulytė*). It serves as an insightful, practical methodology for engaging with these themes in the cinema industry. The analyses of films and image cultures by Ksenia Bespalova and Martyna Ratnik offer an alternative path for uncovering how generational trauma, politics, and environmental degradation are intertwined.

The chapter opens powerfully with an exploration of the cinematic depiction of the Aral Sea disaster, caused by a 1960 Soviet irrigation project. This examination of ecocide becomes a tool for “understanding the fractured relationships between local inhabitants and their environment” (15). The section highlights authentic artistic strategies for approaching and processing ecological disasters through film, in many cases independently of whether they are framed as Soviet or post-Soviet experiences. Through their interviews and analyses, filmmakers and theorists demonstrate inspiring solidarity and openness in constructing a united eco-centric vision and in developing new ways of addressing both past crises and future environmental challenges. The geographical scope of the section may appear complex for some readers, since the discourse does not focus solely on eco-cinema from neighboring Soviet regions but extends to works from West and Central Asia, the Baltics, and even several Western countries. At the same time, this broader approach serves as a powerful reminder of interconnectedness — one that transcends the boundaries of time, space, and nation.

The final section, “Resisting Genres, Decolonial Discourses and Platforms,” presents various forms of artistic expression within decolonial discourse. By analyzing genres such as horror and animation, it showcases a wide range of resistance practices employed by Soviet and post-Soviet filmmakers and artists. Readers encounter processes of reevaluating old narratives and readjusting them to modern decolonial perspectives and histories, as well as examples of methodological deviations in film production and animation that articulated alternative visions while still circumventing Soviet censorship.

The chapter opens with two essays on the horror genre. Alesha Serada examines Belarusian horror media, while Serhii Ksaverov analyzes Ukrainian horror films from the late Soviet period. United by genre and thematic concerns, the essays highlight tensions in the relationship between the individual and the state, with attention to the artistic instruments used to portray them. Serada emphasizes the reactivation and reevaluation of folklore narratives within a contemporary frame, while Ksaverov focuses on the distinctive identity of Ukrainian horror at the end of the Soviet era and its contextual comparison to both Western and Soviet film traditions.

The next subsection turns to animation, criticizing the narrative of ideological unity within Soviet film production. The exploration of Estonian animation influenced by Pop Art by Andreas Trossek's analysis of Estonian animation influenced by Pop Art and Olga Blackledge's study of Davyd Cherkas'skyi's Ukrainian animated trilogy reveal subtle departures from mainstream Soviet animation aesthetics, creating small but significant "glitches" in the system. Blackledge argues that Cherkas'skyi's animations, with their hybrid origins, open a new space through the remediation of popular colonial narratives such as stories of voyagers and discoverers. Her detailed examination of the trilogy's visual strategies, such as cut-outs, caricatures, character morphs, and other visual stylizations, underscores its distinctiveness from Soviet animation of the time. Moreover, she shows how the remediation of scenarios and characters subverts colonial romantic tropes, transforming them into dynamic postmodern comedies open to alternative interpretations. These essays demonstrate how stylistic "otherness" carved out space for artistic autonomy in the face of Soviet homogeneity and censorship.

The section concludes with an interview conducted by August Schaller and Masha Shpolberg, which offers a perspicacious discussion on the artistic and production struggles of contemporary Ukrainian filmmakers. The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine has forced rapid change within the filmmaking community, creating acute difficulties for both national and arthouse cinema industries, making this contribution particularly timely.

While this section is intellectually rich, it can feel somewhat overloaded due to its engagement with multiple genres. Although the theme of artistic adaptiveness during Soviet rule and wartime provides a coherent through-line, dividing the section into smaller thematic units might have enhanced readability. Nevertheless, the chapter effectively demonstrates the many forms of creative disobedience and cultural survival under hegemonial pressure — from stylistic divergence against state filmmaking prescriptions, to hybridization of forms, and ultimately to the emergence of distinct film identities.

The volume's epilogue, delivered as a personal story, focuses on the making of the famous Georgian film *Repentance* (Tengiz Abuladze, 1987). The film is framed as an allegorical depiction of a totalitarian "imagined" reality, and the essay invites readers on a journey to reconstruct the film's adventurous and provocative production under Soviet rule. The epilogue can be seen as an allusion to the decolonial discourse of the book, manifesting the filmmaker's courage and commitment to reevaluate past events. Fifty years ago, Abuladze and his film crew could not refrain from addressing the traumas and crimes of the Soviet regime. With *Repentance*, they established an artistic precedent for depicting and criticizing Stalinism, thereby sparking public awareness and initiating a debate on Stalin's terror.¹¹⁾ With a charming intimacy, the story acts as an inspirational postscript and invites us to participate in a "mysterious act of creating harmony from chaos" (355).

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One of the central challenges in dismantling Soviet propaganda narratives is the need to construct a new myth — or set of myths — with which a nation can identify. The loss of identity is simultaneously a process of creating one. This is a nuanced issue: the collapse of *homo sovieticus* calls for the birth and recognition of new subjectivities, not only from within post-Soviet countries but also in the per-

11) The movie depicts some parallels to the Josef Stalin's politics of terror, such as the Great Purge, deportations, censorship and the campaign against religion, along with characters' justification or denial of committed crimes. Some of the stories and names mentioned in the film are based on or identical to real people and events.

ception of the wider world. Yet questions remain: must this new, mystified subject become *homo patrioticus*, or should it incline towards Western internationalism, which risks reproducing neocolonial dynamics and circling back to self-colonization?¹²⁾ It seems that the volume and its contributors do not attempt to define these new identities within such fixed binaries. Instead, they reflect the complexity of negotiations between authentic national and Soviet inheritances, or, alternatively, between hybridized and post-Soviet identities. Research on films produced during the Soviet era demonstrates the successful deconstruction of both mythological frameworks and the applied Soviet standardization of cinematography, identity, and culture more broadly.

Importantly for *Iluminace's* readers, contemporary post-Soviet cinema continues to grapple with struggles similar to those found in East-Central European cinema, particularly around self-identification and self-colonization. Jana Dudková's analysis of Slovak cinema, for example, highlights the marginalization and detachment of characters from the "center."¹³⁾ From a broader perspective, such analyses open discourse on the nuanced relationship between the "margins of empires" and their processes of self-exploration and self-nomination. This narrative offers a unifying perspective between post-Soviet and Central European identities, rather than reinforcing their polarization within an East–West dichotomy.

Overall, the book offers a wide range of different and unique research, essays, and reflections contributing to the topic of decolonization. One of its biggest achievements, in my opinion, is the authors' and editors' effort to represent the broadest range of (post)-Soviet countries, upholding their national visual cultures as well as challenges that they faced during film production under the Soviet regime. That said, it should be noted that Chechen, Crimean, and Armenian past and contemporary films along with their reflections were missing from this anthology. Including the histories and experiences of these nations would enrich future volumes and further decentralize the post-Soviet cinematic narrative. This omission points to fertile ground for future research by scholars, editors, and artists — perhaps even giving rise to a sequel volume in the years to come.

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Biography

Alena Kolesnikova is a Ukrainian multimedia artist and filmmaker working and living in Prague, Czech Republic. Her works include multimedia installations, videos, photographic projects, and vr collaborations. She concentrates on themes of human connection, the inner and outer self, and societal constructs. Her works were shown in various Prague, as well in other Czech, German, and Colombian art galleries.

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VÝZVA K AUTORSKÉ SPOLUPRÁCI

NA MONOTEMATICKÝCH BLOCÍCH DALŠÍCH ČÍSEL

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Short Film in the Balkans and Eastern Europe

Deadline for abstracts: February 15 2025; deadline for submissions: May 15 2025.

Guest Editors:

Fabio Bego (Independent Researcher)

Ana Grgic (Babeş-Bolyai University, Romania)

Irina Tcherneva (CNRS — Centre national de la recherche scientifique, France)

Archives are spaces of power expressions. They are places where power is stored and information is selected and converted (Azoulay 2019). At their foundation, archives are essentially patriarchal, paternal, and colonial institutions designated to preserve and expand the political order which founded them (Derrida 1996), however archives are also “sites of memory” (Nora 1989) which preserve traces of cultural and social experiences, practices, and resistances. For this special issue, we invite scholars to consider how short films reinforce and challenge archival power. Our aim is to draw attention to the way in which short films reverberate and reflect the (dis)continuities of state-building projects, political activism, and regime changes in the Balkans and Eastern Europe throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. More than thirty years after the end of the Cold war, the region now demands a decolonial view of its past, archives and memory, one that is shaped by “a multivocal discourse” (Sendyka 2022), encompassing multiplicity of creative expressions and intersected temporalities (Petkovska 2024). This special issue aims to shift film studies perspective in four ways: by focusing on short films (non-fiction, fiction, and hybrid forms) that tend to have a marginalised position within distribution circuits as a result of social, cultural, and economic practices, and technological advancements; by approaching their aesthetic, political and narrative specificities, their artistic and archival re-usage in contemporary times; by examining transnational connections, networks, and exchanges of filmmaking practices; and, finally, by decentering our gaze on the context of the Balkans and Eastern Europe. Doing so, we hope to make a contribution at the intersection of area studies, film studies and postcolonial studies (see Mazierska, Kristensen, & Naripea 2014). Ultimately, we seek to understand how the meanings, histories, and practices of the short film have contributed to reinforcing or challenging categories, taxonomies, and relations which have served to shape our knowledge of the Balkans and Eastern Europe, given that the short film has rarely attracted scholarly attention.

While the history of “author”-centric and national cinemas of Eastern Europe and the Balkans is quite well-established (see Imre 2005, 2012; Iordanova 2001, 2003; Mazierska & Goddard, 2014), the histories and filmmaking practices of abundant and varied short film forms are lesser known and rarely considered (see Česálková & al, 2024). We are interested in original research on hybrid and experimental works, newsreels, and documentaries made by filmmakers, artists, amateurs, and film professionals both within smaller state-funded studios and within film clubs, film collectives, and other institutions. This special issue also invites scholars to engage with the historicity of short formats by questioning the connections between short film practices, archives, and their dependence on the political conjectures throughout

the 20th and 21st centuries. What room for manoeuvre did the short format allow for collectives, minority groups, filmmakers and political activists? To what extent was the short film affected by censorship practices within specific national contexts? And how did the short format contribute to forms of alternative filmmaking practices (in terms of film expression and sometimes political orientation)? How did the intertwining of the market economy, political liberalism, and the predominant role of festivals and archives in the film industry since the 1990s shape the directions it took?

Furthermore, the uniqueness of short formats should be seen as contributing to cultural exchanges between the various blocs during the Cold War. After World War II, films were used as a way of stimulating collaboration and solidarity between the socialist Eastern European and Balkan countries and the communist and socialist movements of (post)colonial states and societies (see Salazkina 2023). With the end of communism, a major part of this film heritage was deemed as mere propaganda and marginalised by the dominant discourse in national film histories and historiographies. However, these films remain relevant today, since the discourses and events that marked the history of Eastern Europe and the Balkans echo the imperial and colonial politics prevalent in other parts of the world. Through the analysis of short films, we aim to reflect on the way in which the wake of democratic regimes and “Westernisation” affected conceptions of race and politics of transnational relations.

Through this special issue, we also hope to reconsider such films, in order to explore the memories and limits of decolonial politics in state socialism and beyond. What was the role of film in fostering direct and flexible transnational connections between the countries of Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and the rest of the world? How did coproductions affect short film plots, creativity and the perspectives through which stories are told? Could these connections be mapped out dynamically, and what form might they take at the beginning of the 21st century? We are especially interested in case studies which explore the relations between Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and (post)colonial states in Asia, Africa, and South America through fiction and non-fiction short films (e.g. films or newsreels documenting anti-colonial movements, such as the Angolan war of independence, the anti-apartheid movement, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Cuban revolution, the Vietnam war, etc.).

Possible topics include, but are not limited to:

- The aesthetics and history of an evolving short cinematic form (politics of production and usage of audiovisual archives in Eastern Europe and the Balkans; censorship in archival film practices and creative approaches used in short films to circumvent censorship, etc.)
- Exhibition practices and spaces (film festivals and short films; film collections and modes of programming short film; film museum exhibitions; curation and programming of archival short films in cinemas; short film programmes on TV and digital streaming platforms, etc.)
- Short film and archives (short film archives, regional cooperation and civic engagement; low budget and DIY approaches to experimenting with short forms and archives; queer film history and archiving in the context of the short form; community and collective archiving, resistance archives and short audiovisual forms)
- Short film and memory (transition from analog to digital in the context of film archives and accessibility; memory and short cinematic forms in a digital age; re-use of archival short films in compilation film; curating and exhibiting short films in film museums or cinemateques)
- Transnational perspectives, inter-regional connections, and decolonial practices (third cinema; the non-aligned movement; militant films, newsreels and anti-colonial move-

ments; feminist movements and short film practice; short films and post-colonial/post-imperial histories in the Balkans and Eastern Europe)

Submission Guidelines:

We invite scholars to submit papers that engage with these topics, offering fresh perspectives and rigorous analysis. Submissions should be original, unpublished works that contribute to the study of the short film form in the Balkans and Eastern Europe.

Please send an abstract (250 words + 3–5 bibliographic references) and a short bio (150 words) to lucie.cesalkova@nfa.cz, jiri.anger@nfa.cz, irina.tcherneva@cnrs.fr, bego.fabio@gmail.com and ana.grgic@ubbcluj.ro by **February 15, 2025**. The authors will be informed of the decision by **February 28, 2025**. The deadline for submitting the full article is **May 10, 2025**. The special issue is slated for publication in January 2026. The detailed submission guidelines can be found on our journal's website here.

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ILUMINACE

je recenzovaný časopis pro vědeckou reflexi kinematografie a příbuzných problémů. Byla založena v roce 1989 jako půlletník. Od svého pátého ročníku přešla na čtvrtletní periodicitu a při té příležitosti se rozšířil její rozsah i formát. Od roku 2004 je v každém čísle vyhrazen prostor pro monotematický blok textů. Od roku 2005 jsou některé monotematické bloky připravovány ve spolupráci s hostujícími editory. Počínaje rokem 2022 Iluminace vychází třikrát ročně a v roce 2023 přešla do režimu Open Access. Iluminace přináší především původní teoretické a historické studie o filmu a dalších audiovizuálních médiích. Každé číslo obsahuje rovněž překlady zahraničních textů, jež přibližují současné badatelské trendy nebo splácejí překladatelské dluhy z minulosti. Velký prostor je v Iluminaci věnován kritickým edicím primárních písemným pramenů k dějinám kinematografie, stejně jako rozhovorům s významnými tvůrci a badateli. Zvláštní rubriky poskytují prostor k prezentaci probíhajících výzkumných projektů. Jako každý akademický časopis i Iluminace obsahuje rubriku vyhrazenou recenzím domácí a zahraniční odborné literatury.

POKYNY PRO AUTORY:

Nabízení a formát rukopisů

Redakce přijímá rukopisy v elektronické podobě v editoru Word, a to e-mailem na adrese lucie.cesalkova@nfa.cz. Doporučuje se nejprve zaslat stručný popis koncepce textu. U původních studií se předpokládá délka 15–35 normostran, u rozhovorů 10–30 normostran, u ostatních 4–15; v odůvodněných případech a po domluvě s redakcí je možné tyto limity překročit. Všechny nabízené příspěvky musí být v definitivní verzi. Rukopisy studií je třeba doplnit filmografickým soupisem (odkazuje-li text na filmové tituly — dle zavedené praxe Iluminace), abstraktem v angličtině nebo češtině o rozsahu 0,5–1 normostrana, anglickým překladem názvu, klíčovými slovy v češtině i v angličtině, biografickou notickou v délce 3–5 řádků, volitelně i kontaktní adresou. Obrázky se přijímají ve formátu JPG (s popisky a údaji o zdroji), grafy v programu Excel. Autor je povinen dodržovat citační normu časopisu (viz „Pokyny pro bibliografické citace“).

Pravidla a průběh recenzního řízení

Recenzní řízení typu „peer-review“ se vztahuje na odborné studie, určené pro rubriku „Články“, a probíhá pod dozorem redakční rady (resp. „redakčního okruhu“), jejíž aktuální složení je uvedeno v každém čísle časopisu. Šéfredaktor má právo vyžádat si od autora ještě před započatím recenzního řízení jazykové i věcné úpravy nabízených textů nebo je do recenzního řízení vůbec nepostoupit, pokud nesplňují základní kritéria původní vědecké práce. Toto rozhodnutí musí autorovi náležitě zdůvodnit. Každou předběžně přijatou studii redakce předloží k posouzení dvěma recenzentům. Recenzenti budou vybíráni podle kritéria odborné kvalifikace v otázkách, jimiž se hodnocený text zabývá, a po vyloučení osob, které jsou v blízkém pracovním nebo osobním vztahu s autorem. Autoři a posuzovatelé zůstávají pro sebe navzájem anonymní. Posuzovatelé vyplní formulář, v němž uvedou, zda text navrhuji přijmout, přepracovat, nebo zamítnout. Své stanovisko zdůvodní v přiloženém posudku. Pokud doporučují zamítnutí nebo přepracování, uvedou do posudku hlavní důvody, respektive podněty

k úpravám. V případě požadavku na přepracování nebo při protichůdných hodnoceních může redakce zadat třetí posudek. Na základě posudků šéfredaktor přijme konečné rozhodnutí o přijetí či zamítnutí příspěvku a toto rozhodnutí sdělí v nejkratším možném termínu autorovi. Pokud autor s rozhodnutím šéfredaktora nesouhlasí, může své stanovisko vyjádřit v dopise, který redakce předá k posouzení a dalšímu rozhodnutí členům redakčního okruhu. Výsledky recenzního řízení budou archivovány způsobem, který umožní zpětné ověření, zda se v něm postupovalo podle výše uvedených pravidel a zda hlavním kritériem posuzování byla vědecká úroveň textu.

Další ustanovení

U nabízených rukopisů se předpokládá, že autor daný text dosud nikde jinde nepublikoval a že jej v průběhu recenzního řízení ani nebude nabízet jiným časopisům. Pokud byla publikována jakákoli část nabízeného textu, autor je povinen tuto skutečnost sdělit redakci a uvést v rukopise. Nevyžádané příspěvky se nevracejí. Pokud si autor nepřeje, aby jeho text byl zveřejněn na internetových stránkách časopisu (www.iluminace.cz), je třeba sdělit nesouhlas písemně redakci.

Pokyny k formální úpravě článků jsou ke stažení na téže internetové adrese, pod sekci „Pokyny pro autory“.

Knihovna Národního filmového archivu nabízí zahraniční filmové databáze

<https://nfa.cz/cz/knihovna/licencovane-database/>

Ve studovně Knihovny NFA (KNFA) jsou v roce 2020 uživatelům (pro registrované uživatele i ve vzdáleném přístupu) k dispozici pro náš obor vybrané elektronické informační zdroje (EIZ). Kromě původních databází NFA (Filmový přehled, Digitální knihovna NFA, Online katalog Knihovny NFA), jsou to licencované elektronické zdroje (mediální databáze, zahraniční filmové databáze). Konkrétně v případě zahraničních filmových databází se jedná v rámci České republiky o jedinečnou kombinaci EIZ, která bude navíc našim čtenářům dostupná až do roku 2022.

Zahraníční filmové databáze v Knihovně NFA:

1. Screen Studies Collection (dříve FIO — Film Indexes Online)

nabízí komplexní nástroj pro přístup k aktuálním publikacím zaměřeným na filmovou vědu spolu s podrobnými a rozsáhlými filmografiemi.

Kolekce zahrnuje indexy a filmografie

- a) American Film Institute (AFI) Catalog
- b) Film Index International (FII)
- c) FIAF International Index to Film Periodicals

a) American Film Institute (AFI) Catalog

Filmografická databáze zaměřená na americkou produkci poskytující podrobné informace o dlouhometrážních hraných filmech vyrobených na území USA nebo financovaných americkými produkčními společnostmi v období 1893–1972. Databáze obsahuje více než 48000 záznamů filmů s produkčními informacemi, technickými údaji, údaji o tvůrcích, hereckém obsazení a ztvárněných postavách; dále záznamy obsahují podrobný obsah filmu, poznámkový aparát, žánrové zařazení filmu a citační odkazy. Nové údaje jsou vkládány dvakrát ročně. Klíčový zdroj doporučený pro výuku, výzkum a studium filmového umění.

b) Film Index International (FII)

Filmografický informační zdroj vytvářený British Film Institute (BFI). Představuje světově nejrozsáhlejší profesionálně budovanou filmovou knihovnu s více než 100000 podrobných záznamů o filmech ze 170 zemí od prvních němých filmů do současnosti s více než milionem odkazů na herecké obsazení a technické údaje. Dále 500000 odkazů na bibliografické citace k jednotlivým filmům a filmovým tvůrcům, 40000 profesních profilů filmových tvůrců, informace o získaných cenách na prestižních filmových festivalech.

c) FIAF International Index to Film Periodicals

Databáze obsahuje více než 230 000 záznamů o člancích s filmovou tematikou od roku 1972 do současnosti z více než 345 filmových akademických i populárních periodik z celého světa. Roční přírůstek činí 12000 záznamů. Každý záznam sestává z bibliografických údajů, abstraktu a záhlaví (jména autorů, filmové tituly, předmětová hesla). Databáze obsahuje také záznamy o televizi od roku 1979 (cca 50000 záznamů), od roku 2000 se omezila na články s televizní tematikou pouze z filmových periodik.

2. JSTOR

zkratka z anglického Journal Storage (úložiště časopisů)

Digitální knihovna pro studenty a výzkumníky poskytující přístup k více než 12 milionům akademických článků, knih a primárním zdrojům z mnoha disciplín včetně filmu.

Představuje špičkovou on-line databázi digitalizovaných plných textů z více než 2000 vědeckých časopisů. Každý časopis je plně digitalizován od prvního čísla prvního ročníku až po pohyblivou hranici (moving wall), což je obvykle „tři až pět let od současnosti“.

3. EBSCO

Megazdroj vědeckých informací pro společenské a humanitní obory.

Databáze EBSCO vychází vstříc požadavkům všech výzkumníků a nabízí elektronickou knihovnu obsahující desítky tisíc časopisů, magazínů a reportů a mnoha dalších publikací v plném textu.

EBSCOHost je jednotné rozhraní umožňující přístup k vybraným bibliografickým a plnotextovým databázím.

V Knihovně NFA jsou k dispozici dvě databáze megazdroje EBSCO:

a) Academic Search Ultimate

Databáze byla vytvořena v reakci na zvyšující se nároky akademické komunity a nabízí nejširší kolekci recenzovaných plnotextových časopisů, včetně mnoha časopisů indexovaných v předních citačních indexech. Obsahuje tisíce plnotextových časopisů v angličtině i jiných jazycích, publikovaných na severoamerickém kontinentu, v Asii, Africe, Oceánii, Evropě a Latinské Americe, a nabízí tím pádem jedinečné regionální pokrytí. Databáze integruje lokální obsah předních územně specifických zdrojů z celého světa a umožňuje tak studentům pohled na jejich studium a výzkum z globální perspektivy. Cennou součástí obsahu je i kolekce videozáznamů (více než 74000) od agentury Associated Press. Při vyhledávání se na seznamu výsledků zobrazují v karuselu relevantní videa. Databáze obsahuje videa předních zpravodajských agentur publikovaná od roku 1930 do současnosti a je aktualizována každý měsíc.

b) Film and Television Literature Index with Fulltext

Online nástroj pro výzkum v oblasti televize a filmu. Databáze pokrývá problematiku filmové a televizní teorie, uchovávání a restaurování, produkce, kinematografie, technických aspektů a recenzí. Obsahuje kompletní indexování a abstrakty 380 publikací (a selektivní pokrytí téměř 300 publikací), dále plné texty více než 100 časopisů a 100 knih. Databáze Film & Television Literature Index with Fulltext navíc obsahuje i filmové recenze z předního zdroje Variety, datované od roku 1914 do současnosti, a více než 36 300 obrázků z archivu MPTV Image Archive.

Databáze Evropské audiovizuální observatoře (European audiovisual observatory)

O Evropské audiovizuální observatoři

Evropská audiovizuální observatoř (EAO) vznikla roku 1992 jako následnická organizace Eureka Audiovisuel, jejím sídlem je Štrasburk. Činnost této instituce spočívá ve sběru a šíření informací o audiovizuálním průmyslu v Evropě. V současné době sdružuje 41 členských států a Evropskou unii, zastoupenou Evropskou komisí. Je financována přímými příspěvky členských zemí a příjmy z prodeje svých produktů a služeb.

Posláním EAO je poskytovat informace profesionálům v oblasti audiovizuace a tím také přispívat k větší transparentnosti audiovizuálního sektoru v Evropě. EAO sleduje všechny oblasti audiovizuálního průmyslu: film, televizní vysílání, video/DVD a nová média. O každé z těchto oblastí poskytuje informace ve sféře trhu a statistiky, legislativy a financování výroby audiovizuálních děl. EAO sleduje a podrobně analyzuje vývoj audiovizuálního sektoru v členských státech.

Působí v právním rámci Rady Evropy a spolupracuje s řadou partnerských a profesních organizací z oboru a se sítí korespondentů. Kromě příspěvků na konference jsou dalšími hlavními činnostmi vydávání ročenky, zpravodaje a zprávy, kompilace a správa databází a poskytování informací prostřednictvím internetových stránek observatoře (<http://www.obs.coe.int>).

Česká republika je členem EAO od roku 1994.

LUMIERE VOD je adresář evropských filmů dostupných na vyžádání v Evropě. Najděte služby a země, kde je film uveden na VOD, a zkombinujte vyhledávací kritéria a vytvořte seznam dostupných filmů podle režiséra, země nebo roku výroby.

Prezentační video je k dispozici https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wxp_SwD3BZg.

Tento projekt, spravovaný Evropskou audiovizuální observatoří, je podporován programem CREATIVE EUROPE Evropské unie.

LUMIERE VOD je databáze evropských filmů dostupných na placených videích na vyžádání (transakční a předplatné VOD). Poskytuje seznam filmů dostupných v daném okamžiku ze vzorku služeb na vyžádání působících v Evropské unii.

LUMIERE VOD je primárně určen pro profesionály v audiovizuálním průmyslu : autory, producenty, distributory, filmové fondy a regulátory, aby jim pomohl sledovat využití filmů na VOD a posoudit složení katalogů VOD. Účelem není usnadnit pronájem nebo nákup filmů ani předplatné služby.

LUMIERE VOD řídí Evropská audiovizuální observatoř na základě maximálního úsilí. Adresář je aktuálně v beta verzi a obsahuje asi 300 katalogů VOD. Počet sledovaných katalogů a frekvence aktualizací se bude postupně zvyšovat.

Poskytnuté informace

Databáze je prohledatelná podle řady kritérií. Upozorňujeme, že:

- všechna metadata jsou poskytována s maximálním úsilím;
- zahrnuli jsme možnost vyhledávat filmy podle originálních nebo alternativních titulů. Na stránkách výsledků se zobrazí pouze původní název;
- země produkce uvádějí různé země podílející se na výrobě filmu. Země produkce uvedená na prvním místě označuje zemi, která údajně nejvíce přispěla k financování filmu. Nejedná se o ofi-

ciální státní příslušnost filmu, jak je posouzeno národním filmovým fondem nebo národním regulátorem.

I když byla věnována maximální pozornost zajištění přesnosti, není poskytována žádná záruka, že materiál neobsahuje chyby nebo opomenutí. Naším cílem je udržovat tyto informace aktuální a přesné. Pokud budeme upozorněni na chyby, pokusíme se je vyřešit. Můžete nás kontaktovat ohledně jakýchkoli technických informací v adresáři pomocí kontaktního formuláře.

Evropská audiovizuální observatoř (EAO) vznikla roku 1992 jako následnická organizace Eureka Audiovisuel, jejím sídlem je Štrasburk. Činnost této instituce spočívá ve sběru a šíření informací o audiovizuálním průmyslu v Evropě. V současné době sdružuje 41 členských států a Evropskou unii, zastoupenou Evropskou komisí. Je financována přímými příspěvky členských zemí a příjmy z prodeje svých produktů a služeb.

Posláním EAO je poskytovat informace profesionálům v oblasti audiovize a tím také přispívat k větší transparentnosti audiovizuálního sektoru v Evropě. EAO sleduje všechny oblasti audiovizuálního průmyslu: film, televizní vysílání, video/DVD a nová média. O každé z těchto oblastí poskytuje informace ve sféře trhu a statistiky, legislativy a financování výroby audiovizuálních děl. EAO sleduje a podrobně analyzuje vývoj audiovizuálního sektoru v členských státech.

EAO vydává Statistickou ročenku, měsíčník IRIS se speciálními suplementy (v tištěné i elektronické podobě), účastní se různých konferencí a workshopů. Na webových stránkách EAO jsou veřejnosti dostupné tyto informační databáze: LUMIERE (obsahuje údaje o sledovanosti filmů distribuovaných v evropských kinech), IRIS MERLIN (informace o legislativě upravující audiovizuální sektor v Evropě), databáze poskytovatelů AVMS. Informace o provozování televizního vysílání v členských státech obsahuje databáze MAVISE. Všechny tyto informace jsou poskytovány v angličtině, francouzštině a němčině.

Nejvyšším orgánem EAO je Výkonná rada, v jejímž předsednictví se každý rok střídají jednotlivé členské země.



**Národní
filmový
archiv**



Národní
filmový
archiv

Sbírka orální historie v Národním filmovém archivu

NFA pečuje o nejrůznější typy dokumentů se vztahem k historii českého filmovnictví včetně zvukových a zvukově-obrazových nahrávek.

Vlastníte-li takové typy materiálů (rozhovory, záznamy událostí či jiné druhy audiozáznamů, eventuálně audiovizuálních záznamů rozhovorů, vztahující se k tématu české kinematografie, a to z jakéhokoliv období), a máte zájem o jejich bezpečné uchování, nabízíme vám bezplatné uložení v depozitářích NFA.

NFA splňuje všechny podmínky, které zaručují nejvyšší možnou kvalitu archivace.

Jakékoliv obohacení naší sbírky z vašich zdrojů je cenným příspěvkem k rozšíření povědomí o minulosti českého filmu a současně i naší kulturní historie.

Kontakt: kurátorka sbírky Marie Barešová
Marie.Baresova@nfa.cz



Filmový přehled, databáze Národního filmového archivu

Objemná filmografická databáze *Filmový přehled* Národního filmového archivu přináší rozsáhlá, ověřená a doposud dohledatelná data a filmografické údaje od počátků české kinematografie. Aktualizuje a nahrazuje tak informace, které byly dříve vydány v katalogích *Český hraný film I–VI* a *Český animovaný film I*. Uživatel tak nalezne především údaje o českých **hraných** (všechny od roku 1898), **dokumentárních** (prozatím výběrově 1898–1991, všechny od 1992) i **animovaných** (všechny 1922–1945 a od 1992, prozatím výběrově 1946–1991), studentských, dlouhých i krátkých filmech, jež byly uvedeny v kinech. Databáze je pravidelně aktualizována a stále doplňována.

Údaje o filmech: filmografická (všichni tvůrci, členové výrobního štábu, herecké obsazení a další), produkční (výrobci, všechny názvy, žánry, první a poslední natáčecí den, datum cenzury, schválení literárního a technického scénáře, první kopie a celého filmu, ateliéry, lokace a další), distribuční (předpremiéry, distribuční, slavnostní, festivalové premiéry, popřípadě obnovené premiéry, distribuční slogany nebo premiérová kina) a technická (distribuční nosič, poměr stran, barva, zvuk, mluveno, jazyková verze, podtitulky, mezititulky, úvodní/závěrečné titulky, animační technika, minutáž, původní metráž) data, anotace, obsahy, zajímavosti, fotografie i plakáty.

Údaje o osobnostech a společnostech: filmografie, profese, zjištěná data i místa narození a úmrtí, alternativní jména, životopisy, fotografie.

Údaje o ocenění a dotacích: česká ocenění, festivaly a přehlídky, zahraniční ocenění udělená českým filmům. Plánováno je též zveřejnění filmových dotací za léta 1992–2022.

<https://www.filmovyprehled.cz/cs/databaze>

Rešerše ve sbírce Národního filmového archivu

Odborné i laické veřejnosti nabízíme možnost **vypracování tematických rešersí** ve sbírce Národního filmového archivu. S žádostmi o ně se prosím obračejte na e-mailovou adresu **reserse@nfa.cz**.

Podrobnější informace viz

<https://nfa.cz/cz/sbirky/reserse/>.

Přehled jednotlivých částí sbírky Národního filmového archivu viz

<https://nfa.cz/cz/sbirky/sbirky-a-fondy/>.



**Národní
filmový
archiv**

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