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A High Contrast Portrait

*Representations of the Czech-German Borderland
in Recent Czech Film and TV Productions¹⁾*

Introduction

The Nordic noir genre in cinema is the consequence of an equivalent literary genre rooted in the Scandinavian literature of the 1970s. In recent decades the crime novel has changed a lot. Focus has moved from crime itself to the setting of that crime. The solemn story of a murder was no longer attractive enough, so the writers started to pursue more and more original surroundings, including very-detailed portraits of social, cultural, historical, and political conditions.²⁾ As Eva Erdmann writes: “Even in fiction, film and the modern fairy tale, a daily murder ritual becomes boring in the long run if there are no other elements of suspense. These are created when the foreseeable riddle of the whodunnit is replaced by mysterious surroundings that the investigative troops explore; knowledge of the local environment becomes the fundamental competence necessary to investigative work.”³⁾ That rule is applied in contemporary crime film and TV productions all over the world that use the language and style of Nordic noir. According to Slavoj Žižek, a particular provincial reality, as a consequence of the processes of globalization, has become the compulsory setting for the modern detective fiction.⁴⁾

The Nordic noir wave in cinema “combines the subdued lighting and pronounced use of shadows typical of its American forebear with recognizably Nordic phenomena, climate

1) This paper was supported by funding from the project SVV-2017-260 462, Charles University, and is also a part of the project supported by the Charles University Grant Agency, GA UK No. 732216. I would like to thank Martin Hájek, Jan Hanzlík, and Tomáš Čížek for their inspiring comments, examples, and text suggestions. I am also grateful to Jakub Kozinski for his support throughout the writing process.

2) Eva Erdmann, ‘Nationality international: detective fiction in the late twentieth century’, in Krajenbrik Marieke and Kate M. Quinn (eds.), *Investigating identities: questions of identity in contemporary crime fiction* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), p. 12.

3) Ibid, pp.18–19.

4) Slavoj Žižek, ‘Henning Mankell, the Artist of the Parallax View’, <<http://www.lacan.com/zizekmankell.htm>> [accessed 10 September 2018].

and seasonal conditions, light and language(s).⁵⁾ Despite the site-specific features of the Scandinavian climate and weather conditions, this makes it a highly adaptable genre that can easily be set in any local environment.⁶⁾ Consider the spread of both film adaptations of Scandinavian noir novels as well as original TV and film creations, such as *Wallander* (2008–2016); *The Killing* — both the original Danish *Forbrydelsen* (2007–2012) version, and later, the American one (2011–2014); and last but not least, the Danish-Swedish co-production *Bron/Broen* (*The Bridge*, 2011–2018). Set first around the Øresund Bridge, it was later localized to different national transboundary regions; for instance, the American-Mexican border in *The Bridge* (2013–2014), and the English Channel in *The Tunnel* (2013–2018). All of this was created from the “highly mobile subgenre” of Nordic noir.⁷⁾

In Czech cinema, over the last three years, we have been able to observe the emergence of productions attempting to follow the global trend by setting their stories in more ambiguous and exotic environments. First, there is one type of a setting for the productions: the Czech borderland region (formerly known as the Sudetenland). Second, the milieu has (un)purposefully become the center of the narrative. The borderland is not just “a less common film setting”. Due to its complex past and difficult present, it is also a significant place, both spatially and metaphorically, for contemporary Czech society. This results in a situation where Czech film and TV productions that use the Scandinavian noir stylization also become voices in the ongoing debate over the region and its true representation(s).

As Bourdieu wrote:

One can understand the particular form of struggle over classifications that is constituted by struggle over the definition of “regional” or “ethnic” identity only if one transcends the opposition that science, in order to break away from the preconceptions of spontaneous sociology, must first establish between representation and reality, and only if one includes in reality the representation of reality, or, more precisely, the struggle over representations in the sense of mental images, but also of social demonstrations whose aim it is to manipulate mental images.⁸⁾

Following this interpretation, in order to depict the issue in its fullest display, the study of borderland representations must include the study of different (mental) images that intersect or collide with one another. Consequently, the aim of this paper is to analyze representations of the borderland along with the meanings they create. The main focus is put on identifying what is being represented in the image mediated through Czech film and television productions that use the Scandinavian noir framing. To investigate this phenomenon, I have decided to focus on the productions that, according to the genre’s rules,

5) Pei-Sze Chow, ‘Traversing the Øresund: The Transnational Urban Region in Bron/Broen’, in Johan Andersson and Lawrence Webb (eds.), *Global Cinematic Cities: New Landscapes of Film and Media* (London; New York: Wallflower Press; Columbia University Press, 2016), p. 36.

6) Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen, ‘Nordic noir in the UK: the allure of accessible difference’, *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, 8:1 (2016), p. 2.

7) *Ibid.*, p. 3.

8) Pierre Bourdieu, ‘Identity and representation. Elements for a critical reflection on the idea of region’, in *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 24.

could be classified as modern noir stories (all are set in the northern Czech-German borderland). Two of those productions are the television series *Pustina* (2016) and *Rapl* (2016), and one is the full-length movie *Schmitke* (2014).

The folklore of borderland

A borderland is a special place, with its own mythology, its own timing, and its own sense of borders. It is both a place and a symbol of power.⁹⁾ A borderland is also a place of different tensions. In today's Europe, where there are almost no internal borders, borderlands play a special role. On one hand, there are no observation towers, security gates, wire fences, etc., while on the other, the same center-periphery relation and feeling that "the world really ends here" is still there, as is the border, imaginative or material, some hundred meters to the north in the mountains.

The Czech-German borderland has undergone many political, social and ethnic transformations over the last hundred years. First, the most remarkable event that changed the landscape of the region was the forced migrations and ethnic expulsions following the Second World War. More than 2.5 million German Czechoslovaks living in the region were forced to move to Germany, and Czechs from various parts of Central and Eastern Europe (the Czech inlands, Eastern Slovakia, Volhynia, Transylvania, Carpathian Ruthenia) settled in their place.¹⁰⁾ The expulsion of Sudeten Germans is still a topic that divides Czech society. In research conducted in 2016 by the Public Opinion Research Centre, 37 % of the Czech population considered the expulsion justified. Almost the same number of people — 38 % — stated that the expulsion was not justified, and 25 % of the population had no opinion on the issue or were not interested in the topic.¹¹⁾ This points to the ongoing presence of the borderland's past in the Czech public debate (the moral aspects of the expulsion of Germans are also sometimes used or abused by politicians). The second important change is the 1989 fall of communism, which made nearby Germany an accessible, common destination, allowing transnational relations to be reestablished. The geopolitical shift in 1989 gave the region new possibilities and opened the borders with Germany. Moreover, the country's 2007/2008 inclusion in the Schengen area has consequently created a transboundary borderland region with no physical borders or border controls.

All three crucial moments influenced and shaped the condition of the region — from a German-speaking, economically strong part of the first Czechoslovak Republic; to a communist state region with closed borders that was focused on heavy industry; and fi-

9) Donnan Hastings and Thomas M. Wilson, 'Introduction: Borders, Nations and States', in *Borders. Frontier of Identity, Nation and State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 1.

10) Barbora Spalová, 'Remembering the German Past in the Czech Lands: A Key Moment between Communicative and Cultural Memory', *History and Anthropology*, vol. 28 (1) (2017), p. 84.

11) Sociologický ústav (Akademie věd ČR). Centrum pro výzkum veřejného mínění. Naše společnost 2016 — November 2016 [online]. Ver. 1.0. Praha: Český sociálněvědní datový archiv, 2017 [accessed 1 September 2018].

nally, to the place that suffered the most in the political, economic, and social transformation following the Velvet Revolution.¹²⁾

Nowadays, the borderland is an intersection of most of the current problems in Czech society: structural unemployment and poverty, socially excluded localities with Roma minorities,¹³⁾ drug production and consumption,¹⁴⁾ gambling,¹⁵⁾ specific electoral behaviour (corresponding with the borders of the former Sudetenland),¹⁶⁾ and extremely high over-indebtedness,¹⁷⁾ just to mention the most significant. The recent film and television productions set in the borderland seem not only to use this background for their stories, but actively play with it, making the static landscape a dynamic actor.

It is worth mentioning that between the years 1945 and 1989, the regional history or cultural regional affiliation had been officially removed and made forgotten. The main objective of the communist government was industrialization of the space and secularization of the society.¹⁸⁾ This created a new generation of the Czech people, completely unaware of the post-war events and the role of Germans in the history of Bohemia.¹⁹⁾ The situation changed after the Velvet Revolution when the symbolic boundaries between contemporary Czech reality and the Sudeten past disappeared. First, there was a discourse created in the center (defined through a center/margin relation, where “marginal ... is best defined in terms of the limitations of a subject’s access to power,”²⁰⁾ and center means possessing discursive tools to exercise power) by young people interested in the region; e.g., Antikomplex, an organization that, among others, published a lot of books covering the memories of those who had to leave and those who stayed after the war. Consequently, a public debate over the borderland, its silent post-war time, and its current shape has been opened. The expulsions have been included in the mainstream discourse on Czech society. A publication that is worth special attention is the book *Zmizelé Sudety*, which presents the changes in the landscape of the borderland. The book is a combination of photos putting “now” and “then” into contrast for comparison.²¹⁾ This is probably one of the most significant works when it comes to visual analysis of the borderland landscape af-

12) Eagle Glassheim, ‘Ethnic Cleansing, Communism, and Environmental Devastation in Czechoslovakia’s Borderlands, 1945–1989’, *The Journal of Modern History*, vol. 78, no. 1 (March 2006), pp. 65–92.

13) Karel Čada, ‘Social Exclusion of the Roma and the Czech Society’, in Michael Stewart (ed.) *The Gypsy Menace: Populism and the New Anti-Gypsy Politics* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2012), pp. 67–81.

14) Pavla Lejčková, Viktor Mravčík and Josef Radimecký, *Srovnání užívání drog a jeho dopadů v krajích České republiky v roce 2002: Situační analýza v širším demografickém a socioekonomickém kontextu* (Praha: Úřad vlády ČR, 2004).

15) Barbora Drbohlavová, Martin Špolc, Zuzanna Tion Leštinová, Kateřina Grohmannová and Viktor Mravčík, ‘Socioekonomické souvislosti hazardního hraní’, *Adiktologie*, vol. 15 (4) (2015), pp. 377–86.

16) Martin Šimon, ‘Measuring Phantom Borders: The Case of Czech/czechoslovakian Electoral Geography’, *Erdkunde*, vol. 69 (2) (2015), pp. 139–50.

17) Mapa exekucí, <<http://mapaexekuci.cz/>> [accessed 1 September 2018].

18) Paul Bauer, ‘Territoire et mémoire en Bohême : la gestion post-socialiste du passé allemand le long de la frontière germano-tchèque’, *Annales de géographie*, no 686, (4) (2012), pp. 367–386. <https://www.cairn-int.info/article-E_AG_686_0367--territory-and-memory-in-bohemia.htm#no24> [accessed 10 May 2018].

19) Matěj Spurný, ‘Czech and German memories of forced migration’, *Hungarian Historical Review* vol. 1, no. 3–4 (2012), pp. 353–367.

20) Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *Post-colonial studies. The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 121.

21) Antikomplex and associated authors, *Zmizelé Sudety* (Domažlice: Antikomplex / Český les, 2015).

ter 1989, although it deals only the temporal dimension. As it focuses on the changes in the material landscape and its elements throughout time, working with, as already mentioned, the metonymy “now” and “then”, with a very strong accent put on the fact that “then” usually means something better, both materially and aesthetically.

Slowly, following the economic, social, and political transformation of 1989, the region’s inhabitants have become more and more involved in the process of creating their own version of the region’s history. Paul Bauer points to the evolution of relations between society and space in the Czech-German borderland, highlighting that space is a key dimension in forming the past-oriented ties. A relation to the past is crucial in a region inhabited mostly by people without a regional family affiliation beyond three generations:

While the physical environment of social life can be seen as assisting studies in understanding how societies orient themselves in relation to their past, it is important to show that it is precisely through space that social ties with temporality are formed. While the physical environment of social life can be seen as assisting studies in understanding how societies orient themselves in relation to their past, it is important to show that it is precisely through space that social ties with temporality are formed. The structuring of the memories of a group takes place through the relations of that group to a specific space of reference, whether formulated as such in institutional frameworks (as “cultural memory”), or lived in the repetitiveness of daily life (as “communicative memory”). This assertion is one of the conditions for understanding how society establishes its relationship to its past, and the evolution of relations between society and space in the Czech border regions during the second half of the twentieth century.²²⁾

The described phenomenon — the common interest of the borderland inhabitants in the regional past²³⁾ is a bottom-up emancipating phenomenon, where finally the region itself can tell its own story. In the decolonization process, groups who had previously had no ability to speak, found a voice with which to tell their own stories and narratives. A similar pattern might be found in the Czech-German borderland. Petra Hanáková, in her analysis of Czech-German relations in Czech post-communist cinema,²⁴⁾ states that classical post-colonial terms might be problematic when applied to the study of the Sudetes as she finds those notions blurred, indefinite, and ethically problematic in this particular context. Having partially agreed with this statement, I would like to refer in my analysis to the frame of post-colonial center-periphery relation and the concept of the Other, as I find it crucial for the studied phenomenon.

22) Paul Bauer, ‘Territoire et mémoire en Bohême: la gestion post-socialiste du passé allemand le long de la frontière germano-tchèque’, *Annales de géographie*, no 686, (4) (2012), pp. 367–386. <https://www.cairn-int.info/article-E_AG_686_0367--territory-and-memory-in-bohemia.htm#no24> [accessed 10 May 2018].

23) Barbora Spalová, ‘Remembering the German Past in the Czech Lands: A Key Moment between Communicative and Cultural Memory’, *History and Anthropology*, vol. 28 (1) (2017), p. 84.

24) Petra Hanáková, ‘I’m at home here: Sudeten Germans in Czech postcommunist cinema’, in Ewa Mazierska, Eva Naripea and Lars Kristensen (eds.), *Postcolonial Approaches to Eastern European Cinema: Portraying Neighbours on Screen* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), pp. 91–114.

Assuming, as far as the Czech-German borderland is concerned, one might identify two different discourses — the former, created in the center, and the latter, created bottom-up in the place itself (the periphery) — then Czech noir productions are part of the first discourse. And as stated above, they chose the place (the Czech-German borderland) not only to be a static setting but, what is more, to be an active part of the story.

Theory and methodology behind the study

For the purpose of the study, I have decided to focus on Czech television and film productions: the television series *Pustina* (2016) and *Rapl* (2017) as well as the full-length movie *Schmitke* (2015). It must be mentioned here that there are other productions which have followed the Nordic noir genre; for example, the TV series *Vzteklina* (2018). Nonetheless, the analyzed sample was limited to productions portraying the northwestern part Bohemia. As stated above, those productions meet the genre requirements and could be classified as following the global noir trend in television and crime film productions: They are set in the Czech-German borderland, a peripheral place on the map of the Czech Republic; they play with light and weather conditions that imitate a Scandinavian climate; and create an atmosphere of *otherness* typical of the noir genre since “racism, marginalization and othering, are certainly dominant themes in much Scandinavian crime fiction, as well as, paradoxically, relevant perspectives on the ‘foreign’ appropriation, domestication and reception of Nordic noir.”²⁵⁾

In the study, I follow the created representations of the Czech borderland territories, based on Gillian Rose’s understanding of discourse as “a particular knowledge about the world which shapes how the world is understood and how things are done in it.”²⁶⁾ Art, as with any other human activity, also produces various discourses. Film and TV productions are part of this process. In order to deconstruct the discourse over the Czech borderland territories present on the screen, I apply the perspective of social semiotics that focuses on socially meaningful processes: “A social semiotic analysis aims to enable us to question the ways in which the tele-cinematic text presents ‘social reality.’”²⁷⁾ The aim of the study is to map those visual socially meaningful elements of the film and television series and, consequently, analyze them as a part of a discourse (knowledge) on the former Sudeten borderland region in the Czech Republic.

Visual social semiotics treats visual resources as having been invented to perform some special semiotic work. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) use Halliday’s distinction of three kinds of semiotic work (the ideational metafunction, the interpersonal metafunction, and the textual metafunction) and propose their own distinction applied to images: “representational”, “interactive”, and “compositional”. The representational meaning stands

25) Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen, ‘Nordic noir in the UK: the allure of accessible difference’, *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, 8:1 (2016), p. 4.

26) Gillian Rose, ‘discourse I: text, intertextuality, context’, in *Visual Methodologies* (SAGE Publications, 2002), p. 136.

27) Rick Iedema, ‘Analysing film and television: a social semiotic account of Hospital: an Unhealthy Business’, in Theo van Leeuwen and Carey Jewitt (eds.), *Handbook of Visual Analysis* (SAGE Publications, 2004), p. 187.

for the representation of some sort of social world, the interactive meaning also shows a kind of interaction that is depicted by the picture (e.g. relations of power), and the compositional meaning follows the layout of an image, its composition, etc.

In the analysis, I focus on the representational meaning, especially in the context of space-based semiotics; in other words, the way things are in semiotic space — if and how are they connected through different visual tools such as colour or shape. Kress and van Leeuwen also propose visual syntactic patterns based on the function of relating visual participants to each other in meaningful ways.²⁸⁾ In the study I use a conceptual pattern; that is, how participants are represented “as being something, or meaning something, or belonging to some category, or having certain characteristics or components”.²⁹⁾

The images used in the study as a subject and proof for the analysis come from the official press materials distributed by the producers for promotional reasons. Therefore, my assumption is that those are the main representations through which filmmakers want their productions to be perceived. I find them crucial in the process of producing (visual) representations of the studied Czech borderland territories.

The representation

Schmitke is a movie mainly shot in the Ore Mountains (*Krušné hory*). The movie tells a story of a German engineer who constructs wind farms, some of which are on the Czech side of the Saxon-Bohemian border. As the film press kit states: “[T]he movie is set in modern Germany and Czech Republic, but mainly in some small town, on the border between two countries, somewhere in the forest on the mountain ridge. The film is a mix, with a light comedy flavour, of a crime drama and a documentary portraying today’s Sudetes that draws on the ‘magical realism’ of the place. Beside the main protagonist — Jul Schmitke (Petr Kurth) —, there are also the mountains. They seem to be a protagonist, as well, and similarly to Schmitke they were also almost completely destroyed and empty, but they put themselves together and life is again back to the Ore Mountains.”³⁰⁾ In this short movie description, the special role of the film setting is defined. It is not only a weird scenery or a picturesque landscape, but the mountains themselves receive a role in the movie. They become as important as the main protagonist. They reflect his problems — how to overcome a devastating life experience. The director sets the story in the Ore Mountains, using the borderland to better portray the plot. Nonetheless, the setting uses a lot of clichés; i.e. the most typically and frequently met visual representations of the Czech-German borderland — misty mountains; omnipresent poverty; tired, unhappy inhabitants; ghosts of the German past (the forest spirit with a German name Marzebilla, portrayed with fast and close or long and distant shots of a mountain forest).

The television crime series *Pustina* is similarly set in the northwestern borderland of Bohemia. As it is advertised in its press kit: “It is a place, where one might lose every-

28) Carey Jewitt and Rumiko Oyama, ‘Visual meaning: a social semiotic approach’, in Theo van Leeuwen and Carey Jewitt (eds.), *Handbook of Visual Analysis* (SAGE Publications, 2004), pp. 134–156.

29) *Ibid.*, p. 141.

30) *Schmitke* — press materials, 2015.

thing.”³¹⁾ The slogan refers directly to the borderland region where the story is set and suggests the way in which it should be interpreted and understood: a periphery, a strange place, difficult to understand, and dangerous. This places the borderland within center-periphery relations, where periphery stands for something unknown, unfamiliar, difficult to predict, and mysterious. The series covers the story of a teenage girl who has gone missing and her family that is looking for her. The local politics, economic interests, and social structure of the borderland are all involved in the story, which is primarily focused on its criminal component. Although the series was expected³²⁾ to be something new to Czech crime television, it actually uses well-known visual representations of this film genre and plays with them, using ingredients “typical” of the borderland: poverty, unemployment, drugs, organized crime, prostitution, and corruption.³³⁾



Fig. 1: *Pure Sudety* — a photo from the exhibition and album published by well-known Czech photographer Jaroslav Kučera. The cover photo of the album also depicts a woman showing off her body in a prostitution-like pose. Zdroj: <http://www.jaroslavkucera.com/>

The other television series *Rapl*, produced by Czech Television (Česká televize), is set somewhere in the northwest, although the place is not specified. The series follows the established pattern: an outsider (somebody from the center — Prague) comes to the borderland peripheral area and starts to discover the place through the lens of a criminal investigation. The story is told in a way that the viewer sees the setting through the glasses of the main, center-oriented protagonist (a police investigator). *Rapl* consists of 13 episodes with different crimes to be solved, mostly connected to common, stereotypical problems of the Czech-German borderland, such as smuggling, prostitution, trafficking, etc.

The table below (table 1) sums up the main elements of the analyzed productions, proving that, despite the format (film and television series) and budget differences, they all use similar language to mediate representations of the Czech-German borderland.

Nonetheless, the aim of the analysis is not to stop, at this point, revealing the common features of Czech borderland movies and television series applying noir stylization. The

31) *Pustina* — press materials, 2016.

32) Petr Semecký, ‘Očekávaná Pustina má novou ukázkou a míří do zahraničí’, <<http://eurodenik.cz/kultura/ocekavana-pustina-ma-novou-ukazku-a-miri-do-zahranici>> [accessed 13 January 2018].

33) Compare the exhibition and album, published by the Czech photographer Jaroslav Kučera, *Sudety*, <<https://www.czechpressphoto.cz/detail-programu/94-61/jaroslav-kucera-sudety-prodlouzeno-do-22-1-2017/#foto-6>> [accessed 10 January 2018].

Table 1. Common features of Czech borderland movies and television series applying noir stylization

	Schmitke	Pustina	Rapl
Colonizer's perspective	yes	yes	yes
Nature-culture opposition	yes	yes	yes
Borderland's past	no	no	no
Negative image of local community	yes	yes	yes
Relations between gender and power	yes	yes	yes
Transboundary of region	no	no	no
Czech-German relations	yes	no	no
Question of belonging	yes	no	no

purpose of this study is to go further and answer the question: What is the meaning behind the representation(s)? Since it is typical for the noir genre to choose an exotic setting, what does it mean to choose the Czech-German borderland in the Czech context? The answers to those questions will be provided through the visual semiotic analysis of some of the common elements presented in the table above.

Settlers and newcomers

In *Schmitke* and *Rapl*, the viewer sees the borderland from the perspective of the newcomers and the production maintains this perspective throughout. This is an outside perspective — a view of the periphery from the center. There is no place for the local perspective or the inner perspective. In *Schmitke*, the center-periphery relation is strong, reinforced by the fact that this is a German perspective of a territory that used to be under German cultural influence and inhabited by a German-speaking population. The view from the outside, from somebody who comes to the land, is a colonizing perspective. But settlers are also colonizers in this context; nobody is indigenous apart from the forest ghost and the old lady, Aunt Inge. Her German fluency and name allow her to be identified as one with true Sudeten origins. But for her, there is no other direct link to the borderland's past. The same pattern might be observed in *Pustina*, where the German past is salient. The problem of destroying the village, which might bring back memories of the same practices during communist times, is welcomed by most villagers through silent agreement. The series portrays an indifferent local community, without roots in their place of living. In *Rapl*, we discover the place together with the main protagonist, a Prague detective who comes to the borderland town to help local police with their investigations. Again, the perspective is from the outside.

Culture and nature

The context of the postindustrial landscape in northwest Bohemia is an important part of the portrayed borderland. The very image of the industrial borderland is usually connect-

ed to two images: environmental devastation and heavy industry. Heavy industry, for which the region was once famous as well as the cause of much of the destruction, is now smaller and has changed its profile since the economic transformations in the aftermath of 1989.³⁴⁾ The postindustrial state symbolizes this loss of power and a once prosperous and wealthy industrial zone. However, it still plays an important role in the region and is one of the region's employers and financial supporters. The analyzed productions (*Rapl*, *Schmitke*, *Pustina*) find this landscape attractive and refer to it.

In *Schmitke* there are wind farms in the very heart of the Ore Mountains which could be interpreted as a “new” and “green” industry in opposition somehow to the “old” and “environmental unfriendly” mining industry, typical of the borderland. The long, distant shots of the wind turbines, surrounded by forest and meadows, are used as intershots to provide the story with a proper context and contrast. In *Pustina* there is a mining industry that influences not only the shape of landscape, but also the life trajectories of inhabitants. The shots from the mine are also used as intershots and are part of the opening credits as well. Whereas the real indigenous protagonist becomes the nature, the rest — inhabitants, industry — are all colonizers coming to exploit the land. The conflicting nature-human culture is strong in *Schmitke* and *Pustina*; in *Rapl*, however, the nature is more a setting that is not as entwined in the main plot, instead acting as a referential point in the stories told.



Fig. 2: The mining scenery of the Sudetes. Gloom and grey dominate the borderland landscape. A still image from the television series *Pustina* (2016, Ivan Zachariáš, Alice Nellis)



Fig. 3: Wind farms — a new feature in the industrial landscape of the Sudeten borderland. A still image from the film *Schmitke* (Štěpán Altrichter, 2014)

34) Eagle Glassheim, ‘Ethnic Cleansing, Communism, and Environmental Devastation in Czechoslovakia’s Borderlands, 1945–1989’, *The Journal of Modern History* vol. 78, no. 1 (March 2006), pp. 65–92.

Displacement and belonging

It seems like the sun never shines on the borderland in the three analyzed productions: *Schmitke*, *Pustina*, and *Rapl*. The stylization of the camera suggests that the borderland is always grey and cold blue. There are no other shades or tones. Each and every shot portrays a gloomy November day. Whereas in Nordic noir movies the idea seems to suit the forecast conditions in Scandinavia, here, in the middle of Central Europe, even in the mountain countryside, it looks like a kind of pastiche and a purposeful usage of the technique, well-known in literature as pathetic fallacy — when nature reflects human emotions, very often through weather conditions³⁵). In effect, the borderland, presumably, looks much worse than in reality and the impression of displacement is highlighted. This turns the scenery into a perfect Nordic noir setting. It is a purposefully arranged mechanism that makes the productions follow the genre rules. But what might appear like stylization in order to provide viewers with a story about some strange, peripheral place, which, on the one hand, looks familiar thanks to visual intertextuality but, on the other, cannot be exactly placed on the map, also raises the very important question of regional belonging. The tools used to portray the place reflect and highlight a problem of regional identity and affiliation in the borderland that is very often raised in the center-generated discourses regarding the region. Although the question of uprooted inhabitants is still present in the debate over the former Sudeten borderland, the reality is more complex and, as described above, slowly changing since different social groups undertake bottom-up activities to establish their relation to the place they live in.

Power and gender

“Borders are not just good places to study symbolic boundaries; they are places of specific cultural relations which are based on particular temporal and spatial processes, which have been and continue to be significant to their attached and associated nations and states.”³⁶) In this context, the borderland reality resembles a small lens through which one can easily observe bigger macro process and relations. The analyzed productions reflect, with almost some of the social, economic, political, and cultural problems of present-day Czech Republic and the transnational region of the borderland.

There are already-established ways of portraying the power relations on the local level. The characters are as they are expected to be: villains disguised as rich investors/businessmen and ordinary inhabitants as lifelong losers who failed and never left. Corruption, drug usage, and prostitution are typical ways for making ends meet in the borderland reality. Living here is regarded as a lack of success. There are almost no characters who would happily choose their life to be spent in the region. What is more, it looks like this was not a choice of the protagonists themselves. The gloomy weather combined with the sad and lethargic people meeting every evening in the same local pub (a badly-furnished one from the late 1980s), provide the viewer with a strong feeling of fate and powerlessness over the place.

35) Edward Quinn, *A Dictionary of Literary and Thematic Terms* (New York: Facts On File, 2006), p. 316.

36) Donnan Hastings and Thomas M. Wilson, ‘Introduction: Borders, Nations and States’, in *Borders. Frontier of Identity, Nation and State*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 16.



Fig.4: The local pub with various visual representations of the exposed and naked female body. A still image from the film *Schmitke* (Štěpán Altrichter, 2014)



Fig. 5 and 6: A prostitute — common female character in the borderland scenery. Left: a still image from the television series *Pustina* (2016, Ivan Zachariáš, Alice Nellis); Right: a still image from the television series *Rapl* (2016, Jan Páchl)

Women and gender relations also seem out of balance as the women of the borderland are mostly unhappy, fighting alone against the various forces of power over the borderland, and either play the good woman or fall into crime, prostitution, or are somehow disturbed. One of the main screenshots promoting *Pustina* is of a prostitute (see below), resembling the way women are portrayed in Jaroslav Kučera's album mentioned above. In *Schmitke*, the already discussed pub is full of various images of submissive and sexualized women's bodies — posters, calendars, paintings. This corresponds to the fact that there is no strong and positive female character in the movie. In *Rapl* men are those who come to the borderland to help resolve local problems, women are aside. The way borderland women are represented in the productions resembles the common pattern of portraying women in media and film generally: "Popular media such as film, television, newspapers, and magazines continue to frame (in every sense of the word) women within a narrow repertoire of types that bear little or no relation to how real women live their real lives."³⁷⁾ The severe borderland reality is for men and about men. They try to own the place through

37) Carolyn M. Byerly and Karen Ross, *Women and Media* (Blackwell Publishing, 2006), p. 18.

various tools of symbolic power, and there is almost no space (both literally and metaphorically) left to women. Assuming the problems of belonging in the Czech borderland territories, there is a kind of struggle over it on different levels, and gender relations are one of them. It seems like men want to be first, the colonizers who come to land and possess it, establish their own rules, and then allow others to stay in their land. Regarding this struggle, the borderland landscape might be called a landscape of violence.³⁸⁾

Czechs and Germans

After all the socio-economic transformations of 1989, the borderland locals discovered in the mid-1990s that they had been uprooted, the “moral connotations” of which, as Spalová writes, are therefore “immoral, without roots or depth, therefore superficial; without responsibility and thus also without a future.”³⁹⁾ None of the three productions deal with the region’s past and origins openly. In *Schmitke*, the only person speaking German is the old aunt, Inge, probably of German-origin. In *Rapl*, almost nobody can communicate with the German police when it comes to transboundary anti-crime cooperation; the youngest policeman is always sent to talk and speak with the German colleagues. *Pustina* does not refer to the borderland past at all. This follows a pattern, common in the Czech Republic, that it is better not to interfere with some difficult aspects of the still unresolved Czech-German past, which, in fact, makes the setting exotic and different (the main features of a Nordic noir landscape). *Schmitke* plays with references to the German past of the Ore Mountains, but still it cannot be interpreted as an open discussion about the borderland diversity and its rich heritage. Neither the region’s history nor its cultural and ethnic background are visibly debated in the analyzed productions. Moreover, possible counter-discourses are also omitted. Instead, the Czech mainstream attitude towards the complex borderland history is adopted, and there is no direct reference to the issue.

Discussion

The use of high contrast photography does not allow for different tones to become visible and noticed. The same effect is at work in recent film and television productions set in the borderland. Since the place itself is fascinating to study and explore, it is also a great setting for new stories to be told. Nonetheless, the producers repeat some narrative elements from foreign productions of this kind. One of the features of the Nordic noir genre is that, apart from concepts typical of crime stories, it also depicts topics like gender equality, provincial culture or problems, the welfare state (Sweden), racism, and marginalization.⁴⁰⁾ In

38) See Katharina Schramm, ‘Introduction: Landscapes of Violence: Memory and Sacred Space’, *History and Memory*, vol. 23, no. 1 (2011), pp. 5–22.

39) Barbora Spalová, ‘Troubled Spiritualities and Contested Christianities: What Should Be Uprooted to Become Rooted in Czech Borderlands?’, in Barbora Spalová, and Jakub Grygar (eds.), *Anthropology at Borders: Power, Culture, Memories* (Prague: MKC Prague, FHS UK, 2006), pp. 47–58.

40) Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen, ‘Nordic noir in the UK: the allure of accessible difference’, *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, 8:1 (2016), pp. 2–4.

the case of Czech movies adopting the noir format, the analyzed productions, as proved above, do not question the already established borderland social order and, in this way, contribute to the center-generated representation of the location. Czech productions are essentialist in the sense that they (re)produce some kind of nationalist discourse over the center-periphery relations in the country.

Like Nordic noir productions, the topic of nature and environment also appeared to dominate those analyzed here. Nature is the only indigenous inhabitant of the borderland. It is also a reference point for the told stories. But the beautiful and wild nature is also something dangerous. Its wild and unpredictable character is portrayed as a kind of threat; some uncomprehensive power that once in a while appears. Nature represents here the Other, as othering is also one of the Nordic noir topics.⁴¹⁾ The Other is constructed through the representations of the Czech-German borderland and the discourse of the Other is a “major tool in a colonizing process”.⁴²⁾ Thus, the question arises: Why do we need the Other in the Czech-German borderland? Every culture has its own Other as the classic opposition between us and them is the main binary taxonomy that allows for defining and reinforcing collective identity of a group.⁴³⁾ According to Eva Erdmann, this genre of crime fiction returns to the search for identity, which is linked to the fact that the new crime stories are mostly about representing some territory and its conditions. The Other, in the analyzed productions, is represented through the way in which the ambiguous and complex borderland past is raised, described previously in this paper. No one is the real inhabitant of the place. None of the protagonists come from the borderland. They are all newcomers. The place itself — the Czech-German borderland — is the Other, the only genuine borderland inhabitant. The borderland, apart from its rich, multicultural past, is still a place with no defined identity.

Conclusion

The Czech-German borderland locus seems to work as a perfect place to create the “noir” effect — exotification, peripheral area, high concentration of social and economic problems, and the question of identity and belonging. What is more, the former Sudeten borderland, with its displacement and indigenism problem (understood here as any official local narrative), is (ab)used as a wasteland for rent. Through this effect, it is easier to tell stories about Czech society (its problems, traumas, hidden ghosts of the past) that cannot be told in the center — stories that must be relegated (suppressed) to the peripheries in order to be told. The knowledge that is produced through the recent television and film productions is not knowledge about the periphery, but knowledge about the center (mainstream society) represented through the periphery.

41) James Duncan, ‘Sites of representation. Place, time and the discourse of the Other’, in James Duncan and David Ley (eds.), *Place / Culture / Representation* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 39–56.

42) Ibid, p. 44.

43) Ibid, p. 44.

A landscape (a space with a human activity — both material and non-material) needs a viewer, somebody who looks at it; without it, a landscape is just potential.⁴⁴⁾ In Czech noir productions, we look at the Czech-German borderland through the lens of a center-generated representation of the place. As viewers, we legitimize the picture of a peripheral area with most of the contemporary Czech socio-economic problems, where nobody would like to stay and live. On the other hand, as viewers, we are also confronted with the representation of the Other — a hidden meaning in the landscape of North Bohemia. The construct of the Other poses a question about the Czech identity and its components, since “only when we seriously explore the representations which we find self-evidently false can we begin to question representations which we find self-evidently true. Only then will our own sites of representation become visible to us.”⁴⁵⁾ Czech productions adopting the noir format might be one of the ways of revealing “our own sites of representation” within the Czech identity.

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44) Karolina Ćwiek-Rogalska, *Zapamiętane w krajobrazie. Krajobraz czesko-niemieckiego pogranicza w czasach przemian* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe SCHOLAR, 2017), pp. 29–32.

45) James Duncan, ‘Sites of representation. Place, time and the discourse of the Other’, in James Duncan and David Ley (eds.), *Place / Culture / Representation* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 55.

SUMMARY

A High Contrast Portrait***Representations of the Czech-German Borderland in Recent Czech Film and TV Productions*****Ludmiła Władyniak**

Using visual social semiotics tools, the paper studies representations of the Czech-German borderland in the film *Schmitke* (2014) and two television series *Pustina* (2016) and *Rapl* (2016). In recent years, Czech cinema has followed the path of world cinema in producing films and television series that could be classified as (Nordic) noir. Since 2015, a handful of productions following this globally recognized genre have been made. The northwestern borderland of the Czech Republic, also known as the Sudetes, has become the setting for these productions. The high contrast postindustrial landscape, abandoned places, and wild mountains seem to catch the attention of filmmakers searching for a less obvious and more ambiguous background. The aim of the study is to analyze meanings behind the representations and to point out elements that are distinct to Czech productions following the global noir trend.

key words: Czech, film, television series, noir, borderland, representation, visual semiotics