

Dossier | Fear in Slovenian Film: Vinko Möderndorfer's Predmestje

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Fear in Slovenian Film: Vinko Möderndorfer's Predmestje

By Tomaz Krpic

In the autumn of 2006, Slovenia faced a new political reality. After a violent incident occurred between two men of Slovenian nationality, one of whom was actually part of a gypsy community, the citizens and the mayor of the municipality where the incident took place put such pressure on the government that it eventually decided to move the entire gypsy family to another location. Explaining its drastic move, the government declared that their safety was being threatened. So, instead of protecting the family's constitutional right to enjoy their own property, the government tried to find them a new place in order to control the situation—all in vain, since people across Slovenia violently protested each and every time the state officials declared they had found a proper place for the gypsy family.

The Slovenes like to say they have nothing against gypsies, homosexuals, and people of other nationalities or practicing other religions. This is only partially true. There were no excesses of this magnitude in the past, and surveys have shown that fear and intolerance towards others increased after the "great" shift from Socialism to a democratic political and capitalist economic system. Still, one need not read results of opinion polls to realise that the cultural climate in Slovenian society has gradually changed over the past fifteen years. All you have to do is look around. The influential Slovenian filmmaker Vinko Möderndorfer was insightful and critical enough to forecast the possible transformation of Slovenian society into a culture of fear a couple of years before, with his film *Predmestje* (Suburbs, 2004).

The "Rigid" Mind

Frank Furedi links the modern phenomenon that is the culture of fear to the emergence of everyday risk, to lack of self-control and a quest for personal safety on a daily basis, although this fear is not necessarily the product of a real danger. (1) According to Barry Glassner, the USA are living in a paradoxical situation: "The more things improve, the more pessimistic we become." (2) In general there are two elements that propel the culture of fear: first, a wide income gap between lower and upper social strata and second, the sensationalist press. A type of cognitive structure, which nurtures people's fear and prejudices against others, can also come into play; it is called the "rigid" mind. Eviatar Zerubavel formed the concept as one of three elements in his typology of cognitive minds: rigid, fuzzy and flexible. He defines the rigid mind as an "unyielding, obsessive commitment to the mutual exclusivity of mental entities." (3) A rigid-minded individual is characterised by a black and white perception of reality—things are good or bad; beautiful or ugly; true or

false. Members of a rigid-minded cognitive community are obsessed with raising cognitive boundaries between communities to preserve their own identity. The rigid mind may appear in benign form, though unfortunately we too often witness its malign form, when its protagonists intentionally aim to destroy any foreign element perceived as a source of cognitive pollution in their cultural environment.

Predmestje is a film about the Slovenian culture of fear and the way people may react when they feel endangered by other nationalities. Vinko Möderndorfer, born in 1958, is a well-known Slovenian writer, poet, stage manager, and radio, television and film director. As an artist, he successfully transfers to the screen some of his own experiences and his dark vision of the future development of Slovenian society. During the past fifteen years, Slovenian society has gradually shifted towards a modern culture of fear and rigid mind. (4) The financial gap between social strata has been deepened, poverty has increased, the younger generation takes refuge in private life, insecurity amongst older population is on the rise, and so are islamophobia, homophobia, etc. The Slovenian nation, once in a minority position, is now faced with a different situation. In the past, it successfully developed a cultural strategy to protect its national identity. Now that it has gained political independence, the strategy proves to be far less appropriate, if not downright noxious, in establishing a relationship based on equality and the acceptance of others.

The “Fuzzy” Mind

The second element in Zerubavel’s typology of cognitive minds is the “fuzzy” mind. Möderndorfer’s movie *Predmestje*, one of the most beautiful and strong examples of critical art recently produced in Slovenia, uses the strategy of the fuzzy mind to illustrate how unfair, destructive and maleficent the rigid mind can be with its intolerance towards others. The most important characteristic of the fuzzy mind is its cognitive changeability, which occurs not through a process of “jumping” from one state to another but through slow and gradual changes. (5) People with fuzzy minds either avoid or play with cognitive boundaries. Art is a field where artists and art consumers alike wipe out the boundaries between cognitive categories, where the fuzzy mind can participate in a critique of the culture of fear, for “even those of us who revere society’s moral limits nonetheless tolerate and perhaps even enjoy robbery and murder when they take place in a book or on the screen.” (6) Art consumption can give an individual a chance to face difficult cultural and social circumstances, which in the real world would bring about anxiety or fear. However, it does not necessarily lead to a catharsis or a critical confrontation with one’s own prejudice, although this outcome is not impossible.

Predmestje tells the story of four middle-aged, lower middle-class men—Slavko, Lojze, Marjan and Fredi—who spend their spare time at the bowling alley of their small suburban town. Every one of them has a serious personal problem that prevents him from engaging in a loving and warm relationship. Slavko is homosexual—something he is not ready to acknowledge. Lojze is an inveterate drunkard, whose sexual life is severely handicapped by

his habit and thus he is entirely reduced to fantasizing. Marjan has suffered from depression ever since his wife committed suicide; he is awfully lonely and misses the warmth of another person. Fredi is a fetishist and a schizophrenic voyeur who takes his sexual dreams for reality. Their incapacity to show tolerance towards others culminates in their xenophobic, homophobic and mixophobic private culture of fear and violence. Once in a while, they pick up a dog out on the street, using it as a live target for their rifle practice.

At the beginning of the film, we see a couple, Jasmina and Nebojsa, obviously of a different nationality than Slavko, Lojze, Marjan and Fred, moving in. Their love is young and passionate, and a conflict erupts immediately. The foursome start a rather innocent surveillance of the youngsters, installing a small camera in a birdcage and hanging it in a tree in front of Jasmina and Nebojsa's flat. However, the videotape turns out to be a disaster, since the camera did not catch anything "useful," and thus they remain unsatisfied. The situation gets serious when Nebojsa tells them he knows all about their little trick. They take him to a warehouse and give him the same treatment they would a dog, except killing him. As a consequence, Nebojsa and Jasmina move out.

Instead of being inventive and looking for some new fuzzy-mind cultural solution, Slavko, Lojze, Marjan and Fred seek shelter in the sphere of the rigid mind because its strategy helps them preserve their own moral order. They do not want to create a new moral order, a process that would require a far more flexible and adjustable strategy. On the other hand, Jasmina and Nebojsa live literally in a fuzzy world of emotion and love. As such they represent a danger to Slavko, Lojze, Marjan and Fred, even though they are not really a danger to them. In fact, Jasmina and Nebojsa personify what they are unconsciously longing for, but since the four men are totally incapable of recognizing it, not to mention fulfilling their own desires, they would rather stick to a rigid strategy. They choose sadistic pleasure over the warmth of another human being.

The "Flexible" Mind

Nationalism, chauvinism and mixophobia can be, to some degree, transformed into a more humane moral order through critical art. Möderndorfer's movie is an excellent example of such a transformation. The culture of fear and the critical engagement of artists struggling against social prejudice express two radical positions, which can collapse into a single one—the "flexible" mind. "Flexible people notice structures yet feel comfortable destroying them from time to time. . . With them, we can be creative as well as secure." (7) For many Slovenian people, Möderndorfer's film is unbearable and also politically provocative, especially for those who still believe that political and economical transformation in the beginning of the 1990s brought to Slovenian citizens everything but paradise on earth. There is certainly nothing beautiful in Möderndorfer's movie, except the deep affection and devotion between Nebojsa and Jasmina. Möderndorfer evidently "buttresses up" the same argument used by the Dadaists when they disregarded art as something beautiful, making art that can become "a mean for showing the moral ugliness of society." (8)

Nevertheless, Möderndorfer's film *Predmestje* is not only about showing the moral ugliness of Slovenian society. It is also about a new moral order, although it is certainly not explicit. Yet, storytelling, says Gamson (9), promotes empathy across different social strata and allows for collective personalisation and the political articulation of different problems. Art, be it literature or film, has the capacity to destabilise an individual's understanding of reality. (10) According to one reviewer, Möderndorfer's film is at its most efficient when it shows violence to force viewers to admit their own intolerance towards others. (11)

Stable moral order is perhaps not wrong per se. The problem comes from a misunderstanding of how stable moral order should be achieved. In *Predmestje* we witness unfounded social pressure and the relinquishment of individual agency and cultural inventiveness resulting from personal and social phobias. Möderndorfer's movie, aside from the fuzzy-mind strategy, shows a desire for stable moral order, which is different from the one Slavko, Lojz, Marjan and Fredi are striving for. Möderndorfer's vision of moral order includes the individual's right to be different from the majority, to seek the warmth of another's body, to find in someone else's arms emotional shelter from the burdens of everyday life, to discover solidarity in others, regardless of their language, religion or the colour of their skin. In this social order, relationships are not permanently fixed, but constructed over and over again through new human relationships.

Moreover, Möderndorfer's film exemplifies the concept of a cultural public sphere where the political, the public and the personal are articulated through affective (aesthetic and emotional) modes of communication. (12) It depicts how in multicultural societies the notion of nationality, which often speaks in favour of regional idiosyncrasies, is not always congruent with the culture of civil society and a liberal democratic state, which are based on universalistic symbols and values. (13) Although there are many in Slovenia who find Möderndorfer's movie offensive and unrealistic, recent events have shown that Möderndorfer has indeed been insightful all along.

NOTES

1. Frank Furedi, *Culture of Fear: Risk-taking and the Morality of Low Expectation* (London and Washington: Cassell, 1997).
2. Barry Glassner, *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans Are Afraid of the Wrong Things* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).
3. Eviatar Zerubavel, *The Fine Line: Making Distinction in Everyday Life* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 34.
4. Sabina Autor and Roman Kuhar eds., *Porocilo skupine za spremljanje nestrpnosti* (Ljubljana: Mirovni institut, 2001); Vlasta Jalusic, "Xenophobia or Self-protection? On the Establishment of the New Slovene Civic/Citizenship Identity," in Mojca Pajnik ed., *Xenophobia and Post-socialism* (Ljubljana: Peace Institute, 2002), 45-72.
5. Zerubavel, 81-114.
6. *Ibid.*, 96.

7. Ibid., 120-2.
8. Arthur C. Danto, "Kalliphobia in Contemporary Art," *Art Journal* (2004): 24-35.
9. William A. Gamson, "How Storytelling Can Be Empowering," in Karen A. Cerulo ed., *Culture in Mind* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 187-98.
10. Ed S.-H. Tan, "Film-induced Affect as a Witness Emotion," *Poetics* (1994): 7-32; Minet de Wied, Dolf Zillmann and Virginia Ordman, "The Role of Empathic Distress in the Enjoyment of Cinematic Tragedy," *Poetics* (1994): 91-106.
11. Beatrice Jaguaribe, "Realist Aesthetic in the Media and the Urban Experience," *Space and Culture* (2005): 66-82.
12. Jim McGuigan, "The Cultural Public Sphere," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* (2005): 427-43.
13. Kenneth Thompson, "Durkheimian Cultural Sociology and Cultural Studies," *Thesis Eleven* (2004): 16-24.