

The Slovak film *The Border* and the Problem of the Construction of Collective Identities

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Ernest Renan defines a nation as an entity based on acts of the free will of individuals forming a collective identity: “A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form.”¹

The case of a village, Slemence, placed in the former Subcarpatian area—and today divided between Slovakia and Ukraine—forces us to rethink the famous Renan’s questioning of the modern nation in a completely new way. The split occurred after Soviet troops entered Subcarpatian Ukraine in November 1944 and a Communist Party congress in Uzhhorod voted for it to become a part of the USSR. After the subsequent annexation of this territory by the Red Army on the 29th of June, 1945, the closure of the border became permanent.

The Border is a Slovak documentary film directed by Jaroslav Vojtek and released in 2007. It is conceived as a group portrait of the residents of Slemence and raises several questions about constructing collective identities in areas divided by state borders.

The absurdity of the Slemence case is emphasized by many factors. The inhabitants, suddenly divided between two *Slavic* states, are mostly of Hungarian nationality. Further, the closely guarded border did not divide two geopolitical blocs, but the Soviet Union and its satellite state. Last but not least, the border remains in place today. Although in 2005 it was opened for the use of cyclists and pedestrians, in 2008, it became the border of the Schengen zone and is now once again analyzed at least as closely as it was in 1949. The introduction of visa requirements for Ukrainians—and the Ukraine’s reciprocal response—once again makes crossing the border a lengthy process, involving a journey to the nearest district town that often takes several hours.

¹ Ernest Renan, *What is a Nation?* (1882). Available at: http://www.cooper.edu/humanities/core/hss3/e_renan.html.

Despite the fact that another film had already been released about the border in the village of Slemence,² Vojtek's film won several international awards and was chosen for the International Film Festival in Rotterdam, where documentary films are rarely shown. The reason given by the program selection team for the inclusion of *The Border* was the postulation of the fascinating metaphor of the (virtually) ongoing Berlin Wall.

In the Slovak context, this meant yet another success in contemporary national documentary filmmaking. Films by Jaro Vojtek, however, cannot be seen just as parts of a generational movement. It is true that Vojtek belongs to the same generation as several other successful directors of documentary films in Slovakia (for example, Peter Kerekes, Marko Škop, and Juraj Lehotský). One of the most important differences between his films and the films of the aforementioned directors is that he repeatedly chooses the method of time collection documentary making. In the case of *The Border*, he shot fifty to sixty hours of material during the years 2001-2007. The same method was used in his previous film *Here We Are* (2005). Both films contain the motif of a certain "homelessness" of people who are denied the right to choose the country in which they want to live. While in *Here We Are*, a Slovak family living in Kazakhstan moves to the country of their ancestors and faces the fact they are treated here just like the other immigrants, *The Border* uses a limited, but still sufficiently diverse, sample of stories examining various aspects of life "on the border."

Some families are divided; children visiting their grandparents at the wrong time found themselves separated from their parents for many decades (as is the case with one of the film's protagonists). "Barbed wire—mercilessly stretched between houses—has divided cemetery and land, as well as families for several decades. There were even cases when parents were left on one side and their children on the other," is written in the press kit of the film.³

Differences in standards of living, and especially the political repression that the inhabitants of Malé Slemence—the Ukrainian side of the village—were exposed to, created on the other side of the border the idea of the "gateway to hell." Muddy roads are present even at the beginning of the twenty-first century, which led one of the protagonists during her visit to utter the discouraging statement that the other side resembles "the end of the world." Although the border did not originally divide two geopolitical zones, in the minds of people, it still represents the division between "Eastern" and "Western" Europe.

² *Last Bus Stop* (Hungary / Finland, d. Zsuzsa Böszörményi, Kai Salminen, 2007).

³ See also <http://www.hranica.sk/htm/eng/story.html>.

An interesting aspect of the film is its highlighting of the strategies of resistance and the ability of the villages to stay in touch despite the restrictions. Often, this ability is related to the use of Hungarian, which the border guards do not understand. Probably the most beautiful example is the delivery of news about weddings, deaths, and other important events in the village by singing.

The images of communication of the villagers “over the fence” are also complemented by some specifically filmic means of expression. These means also help to question the existence of the border between the two parts of the settlement. Movement from one side to the other is accompanied by titles in the upper left-hand corner of the image, informing which part of the village we are situated in. Both villages have, however, an almost identical name, which confuses the audience and highlights the absurdity of such a division. There are smooth transitions from one side of the village to the other during successive episodes. In this way, the film metaphorically blurs the existence of the border itself, which otherwise is constantly present in the lives of the protagonists.

The Border is based on the paradoxical presence of the border as a dramatic barrier and the resourcefulness of the people who cross it. It also examines the influence of the “macro-history” of great political events on the “micro-history” of small communities. And, from a linguistic point of view, it postulates the meaning of language as a specific shelter that can unite even the members of divided communities. Nevertheless, the border is in this case located in a village whose population is, in relation to the majority populations of neighboring countries, a minority. Its sustainability is guaranteed as there is a persistent lack of interest in both countries about issues that limit the population of the village.

Balancing between various aspects of life “on the border,” Vojtek’s film becomes a metaphor about humankind, which is constantly divided by multiple borders and often confronted with brutality as well as with artificiality associated with their establishment.