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## PORNOGRAPHY, PRIMITIVES, AND POSTSOCIALIST SLOVAKIA

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### Introduction

The commodified sexual body is a particularly interesting site for the examination of changes associated with postsocialist transition. In asking about the significance of bodies, Katherine Verdery tells us of an answer offered to her by Jean and John Comaroff in a personal communication:

They [the Comaroffs] suggest that changes in the global economy have made the body (as raw labor power) the only salable commodity that everyone has, and that advances in the process of its commodification (the sale of organs and sexual services, the marketing of smiles, etc.) place it at the forefront of capitalist development. (Verderey 1999: 135, n. 13)

Not only has commodification of the sexual body been at the forefront of capitalist development, but it also offers a way of thinking about postsocialist transition, as suggested by Sascha Goluboff (2002) in saying that prostitution is a key metaphor for postsocialist transformation. In this article, I want to suggest that gay pornography produced in Slovakia might offer some insight into the postsocialist transformations of images of Slovak primitiveness. Such pornographic images can be read as a queering of traditional and more recent figurations of Slovaks as primitives and of Slovakia itself as a primitive place, offering instead a more postmodern image of flexibility and lack of fixity.

Relationships between sexuality and nationalism have been the subject of much recent discussion and can be traced back to the influence of George Mosse's groundbreaking work, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Middle-Class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe* (1985). Mosse traces the ways in which middle-class ideas of

morality and purity developed into sexual norms which were appropriated by nationalist politics. In particular, he traces the association between these sexual norms and the rise of Nazism in Germany. Mosse demonstrates how the effeminacy of the homosexual was seen as contrasting with a nationalist ideology of manliness and thereby posed a threat to that manliness and its role in the nationalizing project. Mosse (1985: 11) discusses "the masturbator's presumed passion for secrecy" and points out the ways in which

the love of secrecy and the practice of vice not only made men and women outsiders in respectable society but was a danger to the security of the state. At a time when conspiracy theories of history were popular, the masturbator was viewed as a readymade conspirator against the state. (Mosse 1985: 11)

This argument can easily be extended to other periods when conspiracy theories were popular, for instance, during the Cold War when the "(American) national political identification of homosexuality with domestic subversion" figured gay sexuality as "an alien presence, an unnatural because un-American practice" (Edelman 1996: 158). A similar situation prevailed in the Soviet Union and its satellites at the same time, as Laurie Essig points out:

In Stalinist Russia, the pervert was never a patriot. Queers were fascists, fascists were queers. Good citizens – always straight – must control, punish, and eventually eliminate treasonous desires. (Essig 1999: 5)

The fear of penetration from outside, and of undermining from within, is focused on figurations of the body of the homosexual, the national concern being to maintain state/bodily continence in the face of a threatened laxity of state/body boundaries. The fear in nationalist ideologies is of being "buggered."

This national concern with continence and the maintenance of hard borders may cause difficulties for projects, such as postsocialist transition, which imply the necessity of an openness to change, a willingness to be flexible. Slovakia's nationalism after the end of the communist party regime in 1989 certainly seemed to partake of this hard-bordered and often belligerent attitude in its antagonism towards domestic ethnic minorities and towards some of its near neighbors. Changes of government since 1998 have tempered that image and paved the way for Slovakia to become a member of the European Union in 2004.

In this article, I will examine first of all the ways in which a small-time professional pornographer in Slovakia produces his material, giving an ethnographic account of his production process. In particular, I look at the ways in which he constructs particular ideas of Slovakness and primitiveness in what are primarily export materials. I will follow that with a discussion of the ways in which different figurations of Slovak primitiveness have evolved since the nineteenth century. Starting with the romantic peasant of the nationalist movement, I trace the way in which the idea of primitiveness changes from being one of the peasant as untouched repository of tradition to the more recent manifestation of Slovaks as nationalist thugs. I then consider the ways in which this image has been queered in recent times and compare this to the image of the Slovak primitive as produced by the pornographer.

### **Making Pornography**

Pet'ko was a small-time professional pornographer capitalizing on the interest of distributors from Western European countries and North America in pornography originating in Eastern European countries. Apart from pornography, he also made advertisements for Slovak television stations. He had trained as a professional cameraman and saw pornography as a perfectly viable way of making a living, one that was far more lucrative than the advertising business.

Pet'ko told me he made contact with his models through Internet chat rooms, but straight chat rooms, not gay ones. Online, he said, he tells the boys that he is interested in photographing them naked and makes an arrangement to meet them. If he thinks they are suitable, he often goes ahead with videoing them more or less on the spot. An empty field or a patch of forest was all that was needed to provide an undisturbed location for his videoing, though if the weather was bad, he would use an indoor location, either his own flat in Bratislava or a hotel in a local town.

When I asked him about his models, Pet'ko repeatedly used the adjective *primitívny* (primitive) to describe the type of men he preferred. He tends to video the type of boys he personally likes and these boys, he said, have *primitívny* qualities. They are a bit rough and imperfect, maybe even a bit stupid. He does not want them to have the good looks of fashion models or the perfect bodies of gym-trained athletes. What he liked, he said, were those who look quite ordinary, those who might have a large nose, or bushy eyebrows, or some other feature that made them *primitívny*. In this sense, *primitívny* described men who were ordinary, usual, or common: a kind of "guy-next-door" look. It also describes men who contrast with the "cultivated" look of men in mainly American and Western European videos, whose muscled and toned bodies are more evidently the product of the gym and the beauty parlor, and often the product of deliberate cultivation by porn company directors who invest heavily in developing the bodies of their models. The most important thing for Pet'ko was that they have a good penis. It did not have to be particularly big, but it should not have any deformity or kink. A small penis, he said, can be made to seem larger but you can do nothing with a deformed one.

Pet'ko told me that he only uses straight boys and never gays. He said this was because straight boys are much better at getting and maintaining an erection than gays who are always worried about how they look on camera. He also had a preference for boys

from outside Bratislava. The amount of money he offered for videoing might not seem a lot to someone living and working in the capital, but to someone from outside Bratislava, it often represented half or more than half of what they might earn in a month, he said. Country boys, he added, were less likely to pay attention to, or quibble with, the details of the contract they signed than the better-educated and street-smart city boys from Bratislava. In this sense, *primitívny* described men who were naive, simple, even stupid, gross or unintelligent.

Pet'ko himself emphasized the stupidity of these men. Most of them, he said, are doing it only for the money: to pay a mobile phone bill, or buy a new pair of jeans or trainers. They have no idea of making a career out of porn modeling. Everything was only short-term with them, he said. They had no sense of a goal or wanting to achieve something, no sense of investing in their own future. On the other hand, he claimed that he himself was working hard towards the future, reinvesting his money in his operation. He had recently bought new digital video cameras which allowed him to use the images as stills, and he was investing in new computer software and hardware which would allow him to do more of the work himself and cut down his use of expensive facilities houses. In their stupidity, these men could not see the opportunities that were open to them, opportunities that Pet'ko was happy to take advantage of.

Even in this short account of Pet'ko's operation, it is possible to see something of Pet'ko's invention of himself. It would be possible to view Pet'ko simply as an opportunist, almost a scavenger. He does not waste money advertising for models and going through interviews or casting sessions. He makes contact at no cost to himself through Internet chat rooms, and almost always videos the men he meets regardless of looks or any other criteria for suitability. The *primitívny* quality on which he laid so much emphasis might well be seen as making a virtue out of a necessity. Though the money he offers is not insubstantial, most of the time it is not enough to attract good-looking or

well-built young men, especially those from the city who might well know the scale of values in the local sex-business economy. In decrying the *primitívny* country men for their lack of interest in investing in the future, Pet'ko glosses over his own lack of interest in investing in them. He offers only short-term once-off contracts (though he does retain certain rights to act on their behalf), and has no interest in extending himself to the promotion of a "stable" of porn models in the way that larger porn companies do. Even his reinvestment in his own operation might be seen less as investment than as cutting costs. The digital video cameras that allowed him to obtain high quality stills from video images are a way of avoiding the cost of having to take still photographs on location with the extra time and money that involves. The new computer equipment meant that he could do more work from home, reducing his reliance on costly facilities houses. Using outdoor locations also cuts down on the expense of rental for studios or other indoor locations, as well as reducing the need for expensive lighting equipment and the additional cost of time in setting up lighting for individual shots.

Whilst one might look at Pet'ko's operation as opportunistic, it can also be seen as a flexible response to an uncertain situation. His lack of investment in a "stable" of models meant that he would not be encumbered with on-going commitments if business took a turn for the worst. Likewise, his investment in his own equipment and facilities meant that he was a self-sufficient video producer, capable of doing almost all the production and postproduction work by himself, thereby allowing him to offer potential clients a one-stop shop for all video needs. He also demonstrated his ability to turn even the most *primitívny* of models into something one might want to watch, an ability which reflected both his professionalism and his knowledge of the market. Through his directions, his use of magazine porn, and his editing, he turned reluctant, unsexy young men into porn performers. Most important of all, Pet'ko was well aware that image is vital. The accounts he gave of himself and his work

during our interviews gave the impression of a professional operator in charge of a slick operation which can almost magically transform *primitívny* Slovak men into porn models.

I asked Peťko if I could view some of his material with him, and, on the day I went to visit him at his flat in the Petržalka suburb of Bratislava, I was accompanied by our mutual friend Robo. When Peťko arrived to meet us at the bus stop, he was not in a good humor. He was waving a piece of paper which turned out to be an e-mail from a porn distribution company in San Francisco to which he had sent his latest video offering, *Masturbating Boys*. It seemed that they were not interested in what he was offering but, since Peťko's English was not very good, he wanted me to translate the e-mail for him. The distributors in San Francisco said they liked the material but were unsure what he was offering. They did not distribute anyone else's material, only their own. They were only interested in material in which models had sex with each other and not the kind of solo masturbation scenes in Peťko's video. Perhaps most frustrating for Peťko, they referred to the poor quality of the video he had sent them. Annoyed at the imputation of unprofessional and low-quality material, he called the Americans *kokoty* (pricks) and shouted: "Don't they know that this is only sample material? Do they think I'm stupid enough to send them good quality material?"

We made our way to his apartment which was typical of the *panelák* pre-fabricated blocks in Petržalka: a single room with a kitchen and bathroom, tastefully if sparsely decorated. While Robo and I sat down on the couch, Peťko brought some mineral water and glasses, and a large bar of chocolate which remained unopened. Returning to a calmer, camper tone of voice, he announced that first we would have the entertainment and then I would help him write a response to the San Francisco e-mail. The first video he put on was the same as the one he had sent to San Francisco. In the middle of the screen, the name of his company flashed every couple of seconds. He said that this was a way of

ensuring that no one pirated his sample videos since it was almost impossible to remove the flashing title. He ejected the cassette and put on another, the same material as the first but this time markedly better quality and without the flashing title. I asked if it would be possible to see the material as he videoed it, without any postproduction editing or dubbing. He said he could show me that, but thought that surely I wanted to see the finished product. I said I did, but that I also wanted to be able to see the difference between what he shot on location and what he finally produced. So he changed the cassette again. This time we got a version which had been copied directly from the original tapes and had been left uncut and with original location sound.

We had been watching this tape for only a few minutes when Robo announced that he did not find it at all sexy. We were watching a young man masturbating beside a bush near the top of a hill beyond which a television mast was barely visible in the distance. Apart from the sound of the wind buffeting the microphone, there were only occasional words of direction from Peťko behind the camera. Peťko told Robo this was not supposed to look sexy, adding that it was "James' idea" to watch the uncut version. Robo said it was not just that, but that he did not find guys masturbating very sexy, that he preferred something with a bit more action. Out of deference to Robo, we fast-forwarded a little, Peťko telling us that this guy went on a bit long before taking his pants down because he could not get an erection. Peťko said he did not like his models to take their clothes off entirely and that he liked the viewer to be able to see some articles of clothing in each shot. This, he claimed, made it look a bit more realistic and natural, not like they were only models. He added that this also helped to hide things you did not want shown, like a bruise or cuts, or an ugly scar or tattoo.

Another scene was in a room that Peťko told us was downstairs from his own apartment. The downstairs apartment was up for rent and Peťko had a set of keys for it, as he wanted to buy the apartment. The owners, however,

were adamant they only wanted to rent it out, and Pet'ko thought this was incredibly stupid, especially since he was willing to pay more than the market price and it had already been up for rent for some time without attracting any offers. The scene showed a young-looking blonde-haired guy in a short-sleeved blue silk shirt. We watched for a while as he massaged the crotch of his pants which he slowly opened and pulled down to reveal white underpants. He continued massaging his crotch then pulled them down too to reveal a still limp penis. Coincidental with his own directions on the video, Pet'ko told us that this guy had been unable to get an erection and that he finally had to give him some porn magazines in order to provide him with some stimulation. The magazines were clearly visible in some of the shots, and Pet'ko pointed out that these shots were edited out of the final version so no one would see the boy looking at the porn.

Several of the scenes were located in forests. One of these scenes was set in a forest near Trnava and in it a young man approached a car which had a rug thrown over the bonnet, lifted up his T-shirt and began to play with his nipples. Pet'ko let out a long sigh, saying that this guy was just fantastic. Evidently Roma, Pet'ko said this might appeal to a German audience who would think the young man was Turkish. On the video, there was little of the direction from behind camera which was usual in the other scenes, and Pet'ko told us the young man did all of it without any direction from him. As the young man pulled down his shorts, Pet'ko was loudly smacking his lips. He fast-forwarded through the scene promising us a climax like none we had ever seen before. Sure enough, the young man's ejaculation came out in long streams rather than short spurts. Still licking his lips, Pet'ko rewound the tape and played the ejaculation again. We watched as the young man pulled up his shorts and looked around, as if there might be someone watching, and then strolled off out of sight into the forest. Robo commented that this was much more realistic than some of the other scenes where the young men looked into the camera, claiming

that looking into the camera spoiled the fantasy. Pet'ko answered that he was talking rubbish and that any man would like it when a nice boy looked at him.

The next scene had Pet'ko bouncing up and down with excitement. Set in another forest, it showed a young man with a shaved head wearing jeans and a black T-shirt. He was lying on the ground trying to massage an average-looking penis into an erection. Robo said straight out that it looked like the young man was having trouble getting it hard, and Pet'ko admitted that the boy was a bit shy and had taken a while to get an erection. The next shot showed the boy looking down to his right where we could plainly see an open porn magazine. Pet'ko said he always carried a few magazines with him in the car for just such an eventuality, reminding us that any shots showing the magazines would be edited out of the final version. We watched as the young man battered away at a half-hard penis and finally managed an unspectacular ejaculation with a lot of grunting. Pet'ko said this boy was fantastic, but Robo, laughing, said there was nothing in it to impress him.

Pet'ko let out a mock-horror gasp at the next scene which, apparently, had been shot by another cameraman who, Pet'ko claimed, had no idea what he was doing because he was straight. The scene had been shot in the downstairs apartment and showed a rather ordinary young man with a shaved head who, when he took off his T-shirt, revealed a bit of a paunch. Still gasping in horror, Pet'ko stammered out that this model was only twenty and already he had a belly like a fifty-year-old. Apart from the ugly model, Pet'ko pointed out a number of bad camera angles which, he said, meant that the entire piece could not be used and was a waste of good money. The following scene, videoed by the same cameraman, also induced horror in Pet'ko and he finally decided we had looked at enough videos.

Pet'ko asked me if I would kindly act as secretary while he dictated what he wanted to write to the American distributors. As I sat at the computer, Pet'ko put on a CD of music he

had created for himself on the computer using a new piece of software. The music had been dubbed over the visuals on the final version of his *Masturbating Boys* video. In the end, the message sent to the American distributors pointed out that the material they had been sent was intended only as a sample and that it was low quality to avoid any possibility of piracy as he had had experiences with unscrupulous distributors before. If they were not interested in the solo masturbation videos, he could make one with couples or group scenes using whichever young men from the *Masturbating Boys* video they wanted. They could then distribute this video under their own label, or he could act as an agent on behalf of the boys if the American firm wanted to use them to make a video of their own.

Throughout this account, it is clear that Pet'ko knows what image he wants to achieve and, even where his raw materials (the video images from his locations) are imperfect, he knows how to achieve the desired product. His models' difficulties in achieving and maintaining an erection are glossed over with the assistance of magazine pornography which makes no appearance in the final video. The images used in the final video, then, accord with Pet'ko's vision of young men able to achieve and maintain erections unproblematically. Likewise, their actions during the performances are not spontaneous but the result of direction from Pet'ko himself. Pet'ko's directions have the effect of making the men reproduce typical actions and poses from porn videos and probably not dissimilar from what they were looking at in the magazines that Pet'ko supplied them with. These directions were later elided by dubbing music over the edited images, which, along with judicious editing out of any sign of the magazines, gives the impression of spontaneity. The fact that models keep some clothes on during the videoing allows him to disguise the unwanted images of scars, tattoos or bruises, giving all the bodies an appearance of a perfection they do not have. Without the use of purpose-built sets, location lighting, or even make-up, what Pet'ko achieves through

the production and postproduction process is no different from what is achieved by any filmmaker. The effect, in the final edited video, is one of ordinary-looking young men masturbating unproblematically in ordinary-looking locations such as forests and bedrooms.

Yet what Pet'ko had achieved was also exotic. By eliding difficulties and showing ordinary locations peopled by ordinary young men, Pet'ko is creating an especially exotic image of Slovakia and of Slovak men, the kind of exotic image which is typical fare in the gay porn market. Pet'ko was not trying to create anything particularly innovative or unusual: he is largely reproducing the kind of images that are common in the gay porn market, though adding a certain amount of additional sales potential by emphasizing the Slovak nature of the video. This is added to by the fact that his original letter to the San Francisco company was headed with the word

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in such a way that no reader could be uncertain either about the country of origin of the material or the idea that the material was, in some way, a representation of Slovakia. In this, however, Pet'ko is trying to capitalize on the fact that, through the 1990s, a great deal of interest had been generated in porn originating in Eastern European countries, and the fact that there was a ready market for this material in America and Western Europe, a market where the name Slovakia was not unknown.

#### Queering

I want to suggest here that Pet'ko is doing something queer, or, rather, that he is queering something. I am using the word queer here as it is used in queer theory:

If queer culture has reclaimed "queer" as an adjective that contrasts with the relative respectability of "gay" and "lesbian," then queer theory could be seen as mobilizing "queer" as a verb that unsettles assumptions about sexed and sexual being and doing. In theory, queer is perpetually at odds with the normal, the norm, whether that is dominant

heterosexuality or gay/lesbian identity. It is definitively eccentric, abnormal (Spargo 1999: 39-40).

Emerging from a burgeoning of gay and lesbian cultural studies and from new types of activism in response to AIDS in the 1980s, queer theory's embrace of a pejorative term marked a radical change in the perception of power politics. Queer theory makes extensive use of elements of Derridean deconstruction, and of Foucauldian analysis of the discursive construction of sexuality. The discursive construction of sexuality has been taken up by queer theorists such as Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick and D. A. Miller who argue that identity (and sexual identity in particular) is not essentialist but is produced in a material reality which itself is mediated through discourse. Thus, identity is a simulation, and, for Butler for instance, gender is performative.

Queer theory, then, participates in a troubling of accepted values and of apparently natural distinctions. Queer theory queers the issues with which it engages, undermining apparently stable categories and insisting on the simulated and performative aspects of identity. The appropriation of the pejorative term "queer" is part of this queering, an appropriation that acts both to remind the reader of homophobic prejudice and to suggest a form of criticism that uses a pejorative signifier of transgressive desire and sexual instability as a metaphor to describe a category that goes beyond categories (Sim 1998: 345).

In disrupting accepted ideas about categories, queering raises questions about the proper relations between things, about the very distinctions between proper and improper, propriety and impropriety, appropriate and inappropriate. In doing this, it disrupts the proprietorial relations between things, troubling notions of ownership and possession. Queering is about appropriation, or reappropriation, or even misappropriation. Mixing these two senses of the proper and the proprietorial, queering can be seen as inappropriation, as a form of interference, of

parasitism. It can be seen as conducting raids on the strongholds of everyday life by undermining them, tunneling inside them, turning them inside out. It creates new and troublesome juxtapositions between things, demonstrating possibilities and flexibilities, just as it weakens the bases of what is solid, fixed, and rigid. Queering is bending the rules rather than breaking or remaking them, bringing out the flexibility that is masked by the appearance of rigidity. Indeed, playing with appearances is central to queering. Being something, or having an identity, is made troublesome by the possibilities created by giving the appearance of something, of passing as something, or parodying, citing, or reiterating something. Queering is "fucking with" something.

Queer theory might seem a long way from the realities of life in postsocialist Slovakia and yet queer was a word I heard often. The word most commonly used to refer to the men who go to public places (such as parks, forests, public toilets) looking for sex was *buzeranti*. *Buzerant* (pl. *buzeranti*) may be translated into English as 'queer', 'faggot', 'homo', or 'bugger'. It carries the same pejorative sense in Slovak as these nouns carry in English, though in Slovak, use of the word *buzerant* also extends to contexts where, in English, we might be more likely to use, for instance, 'troublemaker'. Used in reference to each other by men who frequent public sex sites, *buzerant* loses most of its pejorative sense and becomes somewhat more affectionate. Pet'ko used these sites as locations for his videos and I conducted interviews with him at these sites on a few occasions. We would wander around with Pet'ko giving out in his mildly camp manner because there were not enough *buzeranti* there (by which he meant queers), but he also frequently warned me against bringing my wallet, or any money or jewellery when visiting such sites as they were frequented by *buzeranti* (by which he meant troublemakers). These latter *buzeranti* were often young men posing as sexually available who might be more inclined to rob you or beat you up than to have sex with you.



The use of *buzeranti* in these twin senses reflects the meanings of the verb *buzerovať* from which the noun *buzerant* is derived. Where *buzerovať* appears in Slovak-English dictionaries, it is usually translated as 'to ride'. This translation corresponds with the English passive use of the verb 'to ride' whereby one might be 'ridden' with guilt, or 'ridden' with anxiety, for instance. *Buzerovať* has a number of synonyms, in particular *obťažovať* and *sužovať*. *Obťažovať* may be translated as 'to accost', 'annoy', 'intrude', 'molest', 'tease', 'trouble' or 'worry'; *obťažovateľ* translates as 'molester', and *obťažujúci* as 'meddlesome'. *Sužovať* may be translated as 'to afflict', 'badger', 'harass', 'lacerate', 'obsess', 'rack', or 'vex'. These senses correspond closely to the troublesome nature of the English "queering."

### Slovaks as Primitives

So what is it that Peťko is queering in his videos? I want to suggest that what he is queering is the very notion of *primitívny* which he used so often in describing the kind of men he wanted to video. To understand this a little better, I want to examine briefly ideas about Slovak primitiveness that have been used at various times, both before and since the fall of the communist party regime in 1989.

Many Romantic nationalist movements of nineteenth-century Europe sang the praises of the idealized peasant, and the Slovak movement of the time was no different. The movement was led by Ľudovít Štúr (1815-1856) who was born into a country that was known only as the Upper Provinces of Hungary, as it already had been for hundreds of years. Increasing magyarization, accompanied by political and cultural oppression in the 1830s and 1840s, provided the impetus for Slovak cultural renewal, and, as a student, Štúr became involved in organizations promoting Slovak language and culture. He codified one of the dialects of Slovak and his new language was soon accepted as "the" Slovak language, and became the basis for a national movement against increasing Hungarian oppression. This

new language was used by many of the poets in the group around Štúr to write poetry expressive of the simplicity of an idealized Slovak peasant life.

Štúr and his associates (Štúrovci or Štúrites) took the opportunity of the revolutionary year of 1848 to try and push forward their nationalist aims. With backing from Austria, they joined Slav fighters against Hungary, but met with little success. As a result of his involvement, Štúr was kept under surveillance for the rest of his life. According to Wallace (1976), Štúr "took to writing Slavdom and the World of the Future, which was really a testament of despair. For the Slovaks he saw no prospect within the Habsburg Empire and their only hope lay in an ultimate link with Russia" (68). Though he died at the age of forty-one in a hunting accident, Štúr had become the father of the Slovak language and forefather of the Slovak nation. He was buried at Modra just outside what is now Bratislava.

The Štúrite romantic image presents the Slovak peasant as primitive in the sense of being "virgin," unsullied by centuries of domination and oppression. In important ways, this pristine state of the peasant has been maintained over centuries by living in remote mountain villages, remote from the penetration of the non-Slav Hungarians. Thus, the Tatra Mountains become something of a national romantic symbol, emphasizing this remoteness and persistence. The romantic image of the peasant is also a figuring of Slovakia and of the Slovak nation which, like the peasant, has remained unsullied by domination, maintaining its essential integrity and now ready for awakening. The Slovak nation, then, was embodied in these imagined romanticized peasants and their peasant lifestyle. However, despite the development of a national language and the beginnings of a national movement, Hungarian domination continued until the establishment of the first Czechoslovak Republic in 1918.

While the establishment of Czechoslovakia represented some independence for Slovakia, Slovaks began to feel increasingly dominated by Czechs. Czechs and Slovaks had been



brought together in a common cause against Austro-Hungary, yet the fraternal relations were never entirely balanced. Czechs considered Slovaks not simply as "brothers" but as "little brothers," an attitude that reflected the Czech sense of superiority and which developed into an antagonistic relation which continued up to and even after the break-up of Czechoslovakia in 1993. Ladislav Holy quotes from Karel Kálal, writing in 1905, on this "brotherhood":

The Czech is the elder and the Slovak the younger brother. The younger brother is usually inclined to believe that the elder aims in his advice only at his own advantage. He rejects your helping hand, he kicks you...And what about you, elder brother? Your duty is to look after the younger brother even more carefully, to make sure that when alone he will not lose his way or drown. (Kálal cited in Holy 1996: 104)

Holy's concern is with the development of the idea of the Czech nation and he details the ways in which Czechs developed their image of themselves and their nation largely through a sense of difference from Slovaks. Thus,

The image of the healthy Slovak lad in his folk costume correlates not only with an image of an exotic Other but also with an image of youth and connotes a more general image of the young Slovak as against the old Czech nation. (Holy 1996: 104)

This image of the "healthy Slovak lad" is derived from the Štúrite nationalist romantic peasant image but, here, Slovaks are imagined by Czechs as "people without history" (see Wolf 1982) in a primitivization or infantilization of the "little brothers." The image of the Slovak peasant lad comes to embody an unalterable essence which defies Czech efforts at civilizing it. Slovak inexperience and the inclination toward authoritarianism, embodied in this image of the Slovak lad, were then used to justify the application of Czech paternalism, and resistance to that paternalism could be

construed not just as ungrateful but also as typical. As Holy puts it:

"Slovak" frequently evokes the image of the well-built lad in folk costume – wide white trousers, a wide leather belt with strong brass buckles, and a short linen shirt which leaves his bare stomach exposed – brandishing an ornamental long-handled axe and singing a mournful folk-song. This image is the creation of a whole range of artists, filmmakers, and journalists, many of them Slovaks, aimed at demonstrating their appreciation of ordinary Slovak folk. However, among Czechs it perpetuates the belief that if it were not for their own civilizing efforts, the Slovaks would still be walking around with their bellybuttons exposed. In this imagery, the Slovak is an exotic Other living in a traditional and picturesque mountain village, and Slovakia is an exotic and unspoiled wild country epitomised by the rocky mountains of the High Tatra, slivovitz, and ethnic dishes made of sheep cheese. (Holy 1996: 103)

The antagonism of Slovaks towards this brand of Czech paternalism continued throughout the first Czechoslovak Republic. Right-wing nationalist parties in Slovakia, such as the HSĽS party of Catholic priest Andrej Hlinka, capitalized on the perceptions of mistreatment by the Czechs at the same time as they drew their voting strength from the rural areas of Slovakia.

However, Czech fears of the Slovak inclination towards authoritarianism seemed to be confirmed by the declaration of Slovak independence in March 1939 which led to the imposition of the Nazi Protectorate of Bohemia-Moravia in the Czech lands. The wartime fascist regime in Slovakia seemed to emphasize the thuggish nature of the peasant image, at once traitorous and welcoming of authoritarianism. Even under the communist party regimes from 1948, the antagonism between Czechs and Slovaks continued with

constant Slovak pressure for proper federalization which, despite several efforts, was never achieved. The propagation of the "New Socialist Man" under the communist party regimes emphasized the easternness of the Štúrite peasant ideal, though giving quite a different twist to the actuality of Slovak peasant life. Under communism, Slovakia was resolutely eastern-facing, participating in the authoritarianism to which Slovaks were prone according to the earlier Czech models. Interestingly, both Alexander Dubček, who led the efforts to change communism from within, and Gustáv Husák, who replaced Dubček and oversaw the period of "normalization" which lasted up until the end of 1989, were both Slovaks.

The end of the communist party regime in 1989 and the subsequent elections polarized the arguments between Czechs and Slovaks. The antagonistic relations between Vladimír Mečiar, leader of the largest Slovak political party, and Václav Klaus, leader of the largest Czech party, increased the likelihood of a split. Mečiar's lack of compromise in his dealings with Klaus may have seemed the only way forward for Slovak nationalism, but it was also an indication of things to come. Perhaps not surprisingly, Mečiar's position as father of the Slovak Republic after 1993 gave him a new arrogance, and his authoritarianism grew over the following years. Having refused to bend in his dealings with Klaus, Mečiar was not about to bend in dealing with anyone else either. National continence could only be maintained by a refusal to bend, a refusal to have the newly independent nation bow to demands either from ethnic minorities (particularly Hungarians and Roma) within Slovakia, or from others outside Slovakia (particularly the European Union). Thus, having successfully opened negotiations with the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Mečiar's anti-democratic actions and increasing authoritarianism resulted in both organizations suspending negotiations with Slovakia, and Slovakia became a "pariah" state.

Pridham notes that, in international relations, "the term 'pariah states' is more or less interchangeable with 'rogue states'" (Pridham 2001: 69). A key part of Pridham's definition of pariah states is the issue of national image. He notes, for instance, that "Rightly or wrongly, Slovakia was perceived abroad as being more at fault [in the split-up of Czechoslovakia], as the home-wrecker in the velvet divorce" (85). In this figuration, the body politic and the politician's body become interchangeable. Mečiar was proud of his background as a boxer, and this pugilism, added to by his anti-democratic tactics, engendered an image of him, as a Slovak, as being a bully, an image that was easily devolved onto Slovakia itself which then becomes a "home-wrecker," a rogue or pariah state. Mečiar's appearance and behavior during election campaigns compounded this image:

In the election campaign Mečiar, like a mountain of flesh, held the anabolic-filled American body building world champion in his arms, opened incomplete motorway sections accompanied by film stars like a super-bull, and chopped wood on television like a woodcutter until he broke the axe's handle. (Zajac 1999: 300)

This image of the bull-necked bully has clear resonances with Kálal's depiction of the Slovak "younger brother" quoted above and Zajac extends it to the competing images of "old nation" and "young state" which resonates clearly with earlier Czech figurations of Slovaks:

The rhetorical figure of the "young state" became an institutional excuse for every problem of state offices from the bad performance of a clerk at a post office counter to governmental instructions that diplomats should improve the Slovak Republic's reputation by serving sausages at receptions. In this context, to be young means "adolescent," "pubertal" and "immature." Someone who can

not control himself. Someone who throws his arms about, behaves like a bull in a china shop. Who has spots of awakened sexuality on his face. Someone who easily gets stressed and even more easily offends. It is not a young, blushing "blossoming girl," but a clumsy fighter, who overestimates his strength and learns a hard lesson, a "lout," who gets drunk for the first time in a pub, mixes his drinks and the next morning has the first hangover of his life...

But this biological metaphor does not work in today's highly structured world of labels. At home it leads to the inability to deal with basic institutional problems, abroad it led to negative promotion, oscillating between the position of a pupil asking for praise from his teacher and a tearaway who throws stones through the classroom windows and complains that no-one likes him. (Zajac 1999: 290-1)

The bully image gained currency not just within the government but on the streets as well. The sense that the country was deteriorating under the Mečiar regimes was added to by increasing violent crime and "gangsterism" on the streets. Slovak "gangsters" go by a variety of names and nicknames, one of which is *hlavohrud*. This translates directly into English as 'head-chest' though we might render it better as 'no-neck' or 'bullneck.' It describes the almost uniform appearance of the bodies of these men as a shaven head attached to a thick-set muscular body in such a way that they appear not to have any neck at all, just a head stuck on a chest.

The bullish image of Slovakia did not go unchallenged. In his article, Zajac notes the way in which the boxer image promoted by Mečiar was contrasted in the 1998 election campaign with the marathon runner image of the opposition leader, Mikuláš Dzurinda, emphasizing the differences between autocrats and democrats, between symbols of roughness and endurance. Zajac also wryly points out what both leaders have in common:

"success in sports, high performance in a field that is more understandable for people than politics" (301). In the election campaign of September 2002, when there appeared to be a real chance that Mečiar would return to power, attempts continued to try to undermine the bullish image of Slovakia.

### Queer Primitives

The Slovenská Demokratická a Kresťanská Únia (or SDKÚ: the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union), the party of out-going prime minister Mikuláš Dzurinda, took *Modrá je dobrá* (Blue is good) as its slogan for the 2002 election campaign, though no one seemed to be quite sure what the slogan meant. The SDKÚ started its official campaign a month before polling day in the town of Modra (Blue) just outside Bratislava where they released five thousand blue balloons, ran competitions and provided entertainment, and ended the day by painting the house in which Ľudovít Štúr had died blue. As a piece of political theater, painting Štúr's house blue caused no small amount of outrage, and bewildered many onlookers and commentators who asked if such a national monument was a suitable requisite for political campaigning. For most, it was an entirely inappropriate thing to do, almost a desecration of national property: an inappropriation of Štúr. Yet, in symbolic terms, it can be seen as an attempt to shift away from Štúr's nationalism towards entry into the European Union and NATO.

In the wake of the revolution of 1848, Štúr had believed that the only hope for Slovak nationalism lay in Russia to the east and in a unified Slav opposition to Austria-Hungary. (The Slovak word *východ* translates as 'east', 'sunrise' and 'exit'.) In 2002, many now felt that this view to the east had been thoroughly discredited by successive communist party regimes from 1948 to 1989, and by the authoritarianism of the Mečiar regimes. Looked at in this way, what the SDKÚ were attempting in repainting Štúr's house blue was nothing less than a symbolic reorientation of Štúr and Slovakia from east to west, from red to blue, from the red flag of communism to

the blue flag of the European Union. Turning Štúr blue was also an attempt to reorient the Štúrite romantic imagining of the Slovak peasant, turning it from a drunken, home-wrecking Slav to a sober, cooperative European. It was an effort to show how inappropriate the ideals of nineteenth-century romantic nationalism were to the early twenty-first century situation of Slovakia within Europe, corresponding with European notions of nationalism as anachronistic.

Similar efforts at undermining the bullying peasant image can be seen in the writings of Slovak novelist Peter Pišťanek. The central male characters in his novels are depictions of uncouth *hlavohrud* types which Pišťanek satirizes:

Probably the most popular of the writers to emerge after the Changes was Peter Pišťanek, the target of whose satire is constantly one variant or other of Štúrite easternizing. The grotesque, the slapstick parody gangster novel, *Rivers of Babylon* (1991), tells of the postcommunist rise to riches of a muscular, uneducated, greedy bully of a country boy. Although this country boy is of Magyar background and Balkan name, Rácz, he embodies the Upper Hungarian peasant sweetly besung by Štúr and loudly bemoaned as a stinking sot by (anti-Štúrite) Launer... The eponymous Slovak peasant of the title of *Mladý Dôňč* (Young Dôňč, 1993) constitutes an even more grotesque satirical embodiment of the Štúr ideal than Rácz. (Pynsent 1999: 18)

Pišťanek's satirizing of the contemporary manifestation of the Štúrite peasant also begs the question of what it means to be a man in contemporary Slovak society, and this question is taken up by the so-called "Genitalist" school of writers which sprang up in Pišťanek's wake:

Two things characterize the Genitalists, an ironization of male genitalia and an explicit concern in

their fiction with modern Theory, especially French varieties... Furthermore, the Genitalist may not mention genitals at all. Female genitalia constituted a "daring" topos of the 1980s and early 1990s. The Genitalists' concern with male genitalia manifests the impact of feminism (they ironize maleness, and, indeed, male insecurity faced with feminism); they probably also ironize the "phallicity" of Slovakness. (Pynsent 1999: 22)

The ironization of phallicity can be considered as another extension of efforts to deal with manifestations of the Slovak peasant, in particular, to undermine and subvert such manifestations, and we can see a further extension of this in what I suggest Pet'ko is doing with his *primitívny* young men in his videos.

Perhaps the most significant part of Pet'ko's images of *primitívny* Slovak men has to do with the sense that he produces them as an advertisement. This is not just an advertisement about Slovakia, but an advertisement to fantasize about these young men's sex. In the images that are presented to the viewer, these young Slovak men are depicted not as sexually continent but as incontinent: ordinary-looking young men are presented as masturbating in forests, on the sides of hills, in rooms, on the bonnet of cars. In fact, it seems as if they are masturbating everywhere and anywhere. In addition, these young men are ordinary-looking enough to give the impression that it is all Slovak men who are like this. Despite claiming that some of the men were downright ugly, Pet'ko included them all in the final video on the assumption that someone might find them attractive and therefore purchase the material. These men are not particularly handsome, or well-built, and most of them have very average penises, thus adding to the fantasy that this is not studio-based, that these are not "cultivated" models, that, in fact, they are just Slovaks. Yet it remains a fantasy, one that is created primarily in Pet'ko's postproduction

processes, and this play between fantasy and the reality has queer aspects.

Pet'ko's particular enjoyment of the skinhead he had videoed, and his contrasting horror of the skinhead videoed by another cameraman, seems to me to indicate the ways in which Pet'ko reveled in the possibility of undermining, of fucking with, the image of the *hlavohrud*. There is nothing particularly new in queering the skinhead image. Murray Healey's work (1996) gives an interesting account of the ways in which the skinhead image has been appropriated by gays. Following the theories of performativity developed by Butler, and the ways in which drag has been exemplified as a form of performativity, the appropriation by gays of the skinhead image is seen as an example of queer theory in practice. The fact that gay men "pass" as skinheads undermines the notion that all straight men are straight. That is, if a skinhead who appears to be straight is in fact gay, then, chances are, there are other skinheads and straight men who are not straight either. (These ideas have not gone unchallenged even among queer theorists: the relations between "passing" and racial oppression in particular are hotly debated. See Lloyd (1999) for one discussion of this.)

Leo Bersani demonstrates that a similar fear of "passing" is behind the American debate on gays in the military and the compromise policy that was reached:

perhaps the most serious danger in gay Marines being open about their gayness is that they might begin, like some of their gay civilian brothers, to play at being Marines. Not that they would make fun of the Marines. On the contrary: they may find ways of being so Marine-like that they will no longer be "real" Marines... What passes for the real thing self-destructs from within its theatricalized replication. The imaginary negates the real to which it purportedly adheres. In imagining what he presumably already is (both gay and a Marine), the gay Marine may learn the invaluable

lesson that identity is not serious (as if what he is imitating never existed before it was imitated). (Bersani 1995: 17-18)

Bersani develops this argument with reference to D. A. Miller (1992) who argues that there is a difference between the macho straight male body (as "the body that can fuck you, fuck you over") and the gym-body of gay male culture, and goes on to add:

Even the most macho gay image tends to modify cultural fantasy about the male body if only by suspending the main response that the armored (macho straight male) body seems developed to induce: if this is still the body that can fuck you, etc., it is no longer – quite the contrary – the body you don't fuck with. (Miller 1992: 31)

Pet'ko's production of *primitívny* young Slovak men does something similar. Pet'ko remakes the continent and impenetrable body of the *primitívny* peasant as a flexible and ambiguous body. Yet these are not presented as images of gay men: they might be gay men passing as straight, or straight men passing as gay. What matters is the ambiguity, the fact that they are not essentialized as one thing or another. The fact that he advertises his video as being from Slovakia emphasizes the representative nature of the material: it is intended to show what Slovakia is like. Yet his use of typical romantic, touristic locations is an inappropriation of these sites, an inappropriation that plays with the traditional romantic significance of rurality in images of Slovak peasants. The locations and even the men may appear stereotypical, but what they are doing and how it is presented are not only not stereotypical but also undermine the very meaning of the stereotypical images, rendering them useless.

Significantly, in his offer of services to the American distribution company, Pet'ko does not limit his or their options but offers the widest range of possibilities, demonstrating his openness to negotiation: he is willing to offer whatever they want to buy, and both his products and his young men share this

flexibility. On the other hand, Pet'ko's reaction to the e-mail he received from San Francisco showed that he was not willing to suffer the possibility of being treated as if he were in some way primitive as a producer. In particular, he found the accusation that his material was poor quality offensive, since he prided himself on the up-to-date technology he used in his productions. In his e-mail back to them, he seemed keen to emphasize the flexibility of his services but also to make the Americans aware that he was not about to be exploited or manipulated. If he was queering primitive images of Slovaks, presenting the body you don't fuck with as at least offering flexible possibilities, he was also keen to present himself, as a Slovak, as someone who was not to be fucked with at the same time as offering flexibility. He puts into circulation images of men without fixed identities, images that are flexible because ambiguous.

### Conclusion

In her work on the political uses of dead bodies, Katherine Verdery demonstrates the ways in which the traumatic dislocation of the end of communist party regimes required the reordering of meaningful worlds (Verderey 1999). This reordering is often accomplished through the manipulation of dead bodies, through the movements of statues embodying particular histories or through the movements of dead bodies, disinterred and reinterred. The circulations of dead bodies that she describes are attempts to fix a new order of things, primarily by establishing dead bodies in new national genealogical orders. Yet, in important ways, it is less the fixing of these bodies in a new order than their adaptability and ambiguity that is useful. The fact that they can be resignified in particular ways to suit particular needs makes their ambiguity apparent. And this has resonances with areas of contemporary critical thinking in relation to postsocialism and identity. Elsewhere, Verdery discusses the "fuzzy" nature of property which undermines commonly-held notions of property (1999a) and a similar concern about the "fuzziness" of citizenship and of borders can be seen in Fowler (2002) and Batt (2002). Dunn (1999) shows the ways

in which notions of communist inflexibility are undermined by workers' flexible practices in a Polish factory. Such flexibility is not unique to postsocialist transition: it has resonances with the kind of flexibility Martin (1994) sees in contemporary American society, and the kind of flexibility that is associated with contemporary postmodern theories of identity. Zygmunt Bauman, for instance, sees the lack of fixed identity as a strategy in postmodern life:

And so the snag is no longer how to discover, invent, construct, assemble (even buy) an identity, but how to prevent it from sticking. Well-constructed and durable identity turns from an asset into a liability. The hub of postmodern life strategy is not identity building, but the avoidance of fixation. (Bauman quoted in Miles 2001: 96)

Likewise, Colwell (1996), discussing the work of Deleuze and Butler sees the maintenance of fluidity as a way of subverting the categories of subject positions and the essentializing forms of the politics of the self.

Pet'ko uses images of young Slovak men that give the appearance of romantic peasants of the Štúrite type, even locating them in the same kind of rural environment praised by the Štúrovci. Yet the images he produces are far from being stereotypical of the kind of essentialized Slovak peasant that became Other to the Czech self. Indeed, what he produces are images of de-essentialized young men. Pet'ko, in demonstrating the ambiguity of his models and the flexibility of his production operation, queers older ideas of Slovak primitiveness, and resists new attempts to primitivize or to impose primitiveness.

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