

## Historical Bratislava in literary fiction and film adaptation

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### Abstract

The aim of the paper is to characterize the city of Bratislava after the First World War as a literary space in the short story *The Worst Crime in Wilson City* (Najhorší zločin vo Wilsonove) and its film adaptation *Wilson City* (Wilsonov). For millions of Czechs and Slovaks, the US President W. Wilson was a legendary figure. The multi-ethnic city wanted to gratify him and suggested to name itself after him. This short episode of our history was found interesting for a Slovak writer Michal Hvorecký, who set a mysterious (horror) short story in Wilson City (Bratislava). The topos of the city became the basic organizational, or, structural element on which the story is built. In the film adaptation of the Czech director Tomáš Mašín there was a generic shift and the film became a detective comedy, or parody of historical events that happened (or could have happened). The paper focuses on the motif of the city and compares this urban space in the literary and film form. It tries to answer the question whether the city – space is only a backdrop of the story or it becomes its (role)player.

**Keywords:** motif, literature, film, adaptation.

The aim of this paper is to analyze the depiction of the city of Bratislava, the capital city of Slovakia, after the end of the First World War in the selected novel and film. The city was for several months named *Wilson City* after the US President Woodrow Wilson who was a legendary figure in Czechoslovakia after World War I. People even called him “the defender of democracy” or “the apostle of freedom”. For millions of Czechs and Slovaks he symbolized “American help” in gaining independence and America's responsibility for the fates of small, oppressed nations. His photographs were found in offices, schools or other public places alongside the portraits of President Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk. Many public places were named after President Wilson, including the railway station in Prague, many streets, squares or hospitals – and one city in Central Europe.

In December 1918, the German city of Pressburg was turned into an independent city under a new name – Wilson City. It was just a comic episode, which serious history does not record in detail, originally a manifestation of a naive effort to defend the city for Czechoslovakia. There was a targeted promotion of the city through postcards, maps, and stamps. The idea of Wilson City had been maintained for months despite the surrounding countries' attempts to overtake it. On October 24 the *Pressburger Zeitung* wrote that Pozsony was renamed to Wilsonstadt and it is to become the capital of Slovakia, meeting the demands of American Slovaks. The report was published as an illustration of the great role attributed to today's Bratislava in the envisaged division of Hungary. It was to become a residential and, at the same time, a Czech university city. However, Pozsony was also claimed by Austrian Germans, which created a big chaos when its new name was under discussion. There was a large selection of city names to choose from: *Prešpurok*, *Prešporok*, *Prešpork*, or *Wilsonov*, *Wilsonovo mesto*, *Wilsonstadt*, also *Bratislava*, respectively *Bratislav* (Dvořák, 2012). It is necessary to note that in the period after WW I the city was ethnically diverse (German, Hungarian, Jewish, Czech, with a Slovak minority).

### **Town (city) as a literary space**

The historical development of the town/city image in Slovak literature has only partially been studied in Slovak literary studies. The town setting began to be used in Slovak literature only in Realism in the 1870s. As a motif, it was used as a response to the new era, new situation in society and culture. Urbanization was a result of the contemporaneous modernization, being a new phenomenon that people connected with changes in lifestyle. While in the period of Slovak Realism the literary depiction distinguished between the town (mainly Slovak environment) and the city (Budapest, Prague, Vienna, etc.), in the period of modernism also Bratislava was depicted as a city. The small town was presented as ours (Slovak) and the city as something foreign, that is unknown (especially topographically, spatially), other (in terms of customs and morality), or linguistically different. A wider value scale applied in the literary image of the city points to the fact that although at the beginning the individual urban motives (scenes, situations) were stabilized and conventionalized, the stereotypes were not permanent, unchangeable in nature but dynamically changing, depending on a chosen author's strategy, or, more precisely, the application of aesthetic or non-artistic requirements or ideological criteria (Slavic – non-Slavic category). The literary image of the city refers to contemporary mental images closely related to identity. In the case of Slovak literature, it was often a national identity, so the question of ethnicity becomes a key issue in the attitude towards the depicted environment (Hučková, 2011). The space of the city is seen as unclear and considerably differentiated in terms of searching for ethnic signs. Ethnicity

intervened not only in individual identities but also in group attitudes and caused more or less inter-ethnic conflicts (Luther, 2001).

According to J. Lotman (1990, p. 261–263) the most important topological symptom is the border. The whole spatial continuum of the text, which reflects the world of the object, forms a kind of topos. This topos is always present in some way, because space is always filled to humans in some way. According to Lotman, it is not important that in some cases the filling tends to approach the writer's (or reader's) real environment, but that behind a certain background in which the characters move a system of spatial relations, that is, a structure of topos, arises and this structure acts as a language expressing the non-spatial relationships of the text.

In Hodrová's theory, the city appears in literature in three different ways. First (and most often), we observe the city as an environment in which the storyline takes place, suggesting that in a literary text it is never a neutral background; it always acts as a generalizing symbol of certain interpersonal relationships and structures and is associated with certain ideas. Furthermore, one can observe the city in the role of the object (in travel guides, partly in novels), and last but not least, urban space becomes a character, it can act as a kind of subject in personifying metaphors; while personification of the city in poetry is quite common, in prose this phenomenon could be considered symptomatic (Hodrová, 2004). Every place on earth, as well as in the world of literary fiction, is endowed with a specific atmosphere. *Genius loci* speaks primarily to the inhabitants of the space, who more or less identify with it. A good example of such space is the city. All cities have their stories. The labyrinths of city streets, human dwellings, but above all the intricately interwoven strands of the city's interpersonal relationships create an environment for unprecedented narrative development. Most of these stories are about specific cities, creating specific *genius loci* of individual urban units (Janeček, 2009).

When analyzing the topos of the city, not only in the fictional world, it is assumed that the notion of the text, which primarily belongs to the field of linguistics and is understood as a synonym of a literary work, now passes into other disciplines. We see the city as a text in motion, a system never culminating, unfinished and happening, as an open dynamic system. This is logical, as it results from the immediate contact between the literary text and the outside world. The text is made up of countless intertextual fibers, and therefore its decryption is a dynamic and unfinished process. In terms of textuality, the city is seen as a text in motion, a system eternally undermined, unfinished and happening, as an open dynamic system (Hodrová, 2006). According to this theory, we can distinguish between the text of the city and the city (urban) text. The text of the city means a "lived" city, the real space of the city which represents a certain

sum of other texts, such as the system of streets, allusions to other cities and also literary texts written about the city. A city (urban) text is a literary text in which the city is somehow present – as an object, a background of a story or a space of existence. There is a mutual rewriting relationship between the two texts, where the structure of the text of the city is written into the structure of the city (urban) text and vice versa (ibid.). This relationship is interconnected by a network. The network of the city as a text is something very dynamic, even alive, vibrating, expanding and contracting, developing or tangling. It is a network and a wave, a system of relationships – channels and current flowing through these channels. The city thus penetrates into literary texts in the form of text – networks of real and potential networks, explicit and implicit, and the field is generated by these networks. The field of the city is present in literary texts as a network of real named places but also anonymous or even fictitious places. The city enters literary texts through networks of past and literary cities. The city (urban) text carries the features of the city, its myth, e.g. repetition, heterogeneity, variability, intertextuality, fragmentation. The city is present both explicitly and implicitly in the text. It becomes the “accomplice” of murders (Hodrová, 2004).

### **Bratislava as a motif or a character**

This paper works with the hypothesis that the city is a key motif in modernist literature. Many literary works reflect the ways in which cities cause confusion, exhilaration, alienation, anonymity or thrill. The author of the selected literary work, Michal Hvorecký, emphasized the realistic depiction of reality, he wanted a real depiction of the place, a description of the facts (scene and setting) and the topography of the individual parts of the city.

The image of Bratislava does not appear very often in Slovak literature, for example in comparison with Budapest which is portrayed ambivalently – on the one hand negatively, with ideological beliefs about the negative or destructive impact of the city. Pest, and later Budapest, was often portrayed as a city of moral decline and moral destruction, even as a factor negatively determining the life of Slovaks. On the other hand, it was also depicted as a venue for great politics and a place of decision-making. It was depicted through the fate of Slovaks – Slovak immigrants, settlers confronted by a new environment, as the city exerting a negative impact on Slovak characters, usually portrayed as innocent and defenceless, and, in the ideology of the period, even exposed to poverty and embodying danger of national revival, or forgetting mother tongue and using Hungarian language. A different situation is, for example, in the depiction of Prague – the Slavic metropolis of the fraternal Czech nation. The city is often depicted based on sympathy, which is nationally and patriotically motivated. The most

fragmentary is the literary picture of Vienna, but the topography of Vienna is quite rare in the texts (Hučková, 2011).

In the 1920s, Bratislava (Wilson City) was a heterogeneous city in terms of social stratification of its population, language and ethnicity. Hvorecký emphasized the realistic depiction of the setting, wanting a real depiction of Bratislava in the 1920s, a description of the facts (scene and setting) and the topography of the individual parts of the city. In the story, one encounters contemporaneous image of the city, presented as a kind of mosaic of dramatic observation of facts and real people with a vivid picture of its “physiology”. The text is documentary in many places, giving their accurate topographic picture accompanied by archive maps, photographs, images, and, of course, a dramatic plot. The story is captured lively; the reader is immersed into a photographic sequence of the character's actions and narrator's observations. The work provides an objective report on the state of the city, its inhabitants and life. The documentary character of the city is connected with the fictional character of the stories, giving the author an opportunity to move smoothly from the factual level to the narrative one.

When analyzing and interpreting literary texts portraying non-Slavic cities, one may note that if the work is set in a foreign environment, the authors usually use a foreign language to express the “foreign” (capturing local specificity) (Hučková, 2011, p. 518). As far as the short story *The Worst Crime in Wilson City* (2001) and its film adaptation *Wilson City* (2015) are concerned, it is interesting to follow the axis “domestic” – “foreign” within the framework of the language. The linguist Mira Nábělková (2007) claims that the use of a language code always opens up some new space, updates certain associations, connotations that the author may leave behind, or, rather deliberately, in the structure of the work. At the same time, focusing on the linguistic heterogeneity of some literary works turns this attention backwards to the forms and functions of multilingualism in previous periods and to compare them with its current functioning. In this short story, we do not perceive the foreignness of the environment, or the ethnic difference of characters based on language, for the author presents the city as a dynamic complex in which different nationalities, social classes, and religions coexist evenly, simultaneously, and all have the same denominator – the residents of Prešporok, Pressburg, respectively Wilson City. We could label it as a “melting pot”, a place of mixed heterogeneous society that becomes homogeneous, with its different elements or features somehow intertwined and, consequently, mixed into one harmonious whole. In the film, the “foreign” is more pronounced – the character elements of individual characters are hyperbolized, parodied, or strongly stereotyped.

In the short story, Hvorecký understands the city as a part of the story, as a “living organism”. The characters move through particular streets, pass particular

buildings, the narrator watches them in a particular neighbourhood, turns them into mysterious spaces, streets of a crumbling city. As a part of storytelling, streets, houses and religious buildings are connected, in a manner typical for Gothic novels. The space in the short story as well as, though to a lesser extent, in the film, is not only the backdrop, but becomes the subject and the player of the story. Space acts as a text. There is a relationship between the character and the space of the short story. Space influences the flow of action and the actions of the characters – in the film it is expressively captured through the dynamics of music and darkness/light. The protagonists of the story, together with the space-city, enter into a dynamic relationship with each other. The space of the city in the book seems to be ritualizing, linearity changes into a cyclic movement. The author often clings to the city's architecture, to various buildings, city landmarks, having the city thus portrayed in the presence of storyline. Hvorecký oscillates between an abstract city, dreamy, not coming from this world, and a specific urban space, thus obviously based on real environment. The topos of the town is the basic organizational or structural element on which the story is built. For example, a dynamic structure is created by a quick walk or running of the protagonist around the city and this description of the journey is commented by the narrator. The narrator and characters immerse themselves in the atmosphere created by the postwar Wilson City. It is a space that hides secret, mystery, a restless, dangerous space, fulfilling the characteristics of the "urban space phenomenon".

The film *Wilson City* was created with an intention of its producers to use the motives of the story *The Worst Crime in Wilson City* by Hvorecký. The story was based on the absurdity that Prešporok or Pressburg (today's Bratislava), wants to become not only an independent city state, but the 49<sup>th</sup> state of the USA. In the film we see the city as a protagonist. It lives its own life (smoke from chimneys, bells ringing, people in the market, in the streets). The city affects the flow of the plot and action of the characters (light – positive passage of the story, dark – negative). The main characters enter into a dynamic relationship with the city. In the film, the movement of characters in the city space is often ridiculed, parodied, the action of the protagonist is thwarted, or the secret is undetected, the case unresolved. Thus the plot escapes and falls "deeper". The viewer can see a number of allusive contexts, parodic or mystifying shifts. In the film, the emphasis is on depicting a kind of existential "brutality" of the city; dynamism is built on bizarre, grotesque and mystifying play, where reality suddenly changes into fantasy and parody. It is a mixture of profane with mythical, serious with humorous, tragic with comic. Grotesque images that sarcastically or ironically refer to the inadequacy of some values or stereotypes make the film unique. The poetics of its adaptation has common features with the film grotesque, which was predominantly an urban genre. The actors in the grotesque move along the streets, in close proximity to

vehicles, move in the crowd and create images of random encounters of beings and things.

The author of the short story tried to create in the alternative version of the history of the city (Wilson City), which would have the attributes of a metropolis with a secret, a kind of “magic city”. He could take inspiration from various world capitals, such as London and Paris, which are found in various stories. Prague could have also been an inspiration during the reign of Charles IV and Rudolph II. The power of the center, the memory and the spiritual energy which boils and settles in the city are significant in Prague (Hodrová, 2006, p. 50). The city, which flourished during the reign of Charles IV, is interesting for its personalities, scientists, artists, but also cheaters and charlatans. Alchemy and astrology are very popular. The mysterious atmosphere of the so-called Rudolphine Prague depicts various mystical elements, a mysterious ghetto with a romantic ancient cemetery and blood-splattered old synagogue due to religious fanaticism, the mystery of a rabbi who performed miracles (Krejčí, 1981, p. 97–100). So what is the city with a secret? Hodrová (2006) believes that if there is any secret of the city (the soul of the city, the genius loci, the myth of the city), it does not hide somewhere in the city, but is present in the perception of the city itself. Just as in Rudolphine Prague, in this short story the center of interest is in the Jewish ghetto of the city. In Prague, the ghetto is the center of Prague magic where the ghost of the giant clay statue of Golem was born and Prague Jewish legends or urban legends were created. In Wilson City, the Jewish ghetto is the scene of mysterious murders committed by a necromant.<sup>1</sup> The author describes this currently unknown part of Bratislava<sup>2</sup> based on historical documents from the 1920s. Hvorecký presents Wilson City as a mysterious city, tested by the fate of war. The city acts as a backdrop here, with each of its districts having its own justification for the dynamics of the plot. The narrator leads the protagonist around the distinctive city landmarks and mysterious streets, giving the fictitious story a real basis in the historical documents and maps. Wilson City by Hvorecký then can be seen as a topography of the city, supplemented with maps and pictures, as a story of murders in the Jewish ghetto, it can be seen as an investigation by a New York FBI agent Food, since the author accurately depicts specific detective practices from this period supplemented with an interest in occultism and the practice in investigation. The necromant is characterized here as a spiritual principle that embodies not only the atmosphere of the city, but, above all, the strangeness and mystery of the Jewish ghetto.

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<sup>1</sup> Necromancy is a kind of black magic, divination involving the dead or death.

<sup>2</sup> Later, the Jewish population almost completely disappeared as a result of the destructive power of Nazism, and socialism removed the Jewish quarter from this multicultural metropolis (Dvořák 2012).

There is a significant generic shift in the film, pushing the level of mysteriousness into the field of the grotesque and parody. Therefore, the investigation of mysterious murders in the Jewish ghetto is also held in bizarre and often absurd circumstances. The topographic element and the depiction of Bratislava from the 1920s is absent from the film. Likewise, the occultism and detective practices of Agent Food are parodied and intended to entertain the viewer. Unlike the story, the film depicts the coexistence of people in Wilson City of different ethnic groups and religions. While the short story does not perceive the Jewish ghetto as something “foreign”, the city is portrayed as a homogeneous mass, in the film this “foreignness” is hyperbolized and displayed in contact between individual minorities or ethnic groups, even people of different skin color. The screenplay was also enhanced by the character of Detective Food's assistant (slave), who has an African-American origin and people react with disrespect. Ironically, at the time of the plot, that is, after the First World War, slavery no longer existed in the US. The other ethnic groups are depicted as stereotypically as possible: a Jew as an Orthodox, a Hungarian with strong moustache (but also a woman – naive and uneducated). The film knows no taboo, offends all and everyone – politics, celebrities, communists, marriage, love. This makes the story much more dynamic and confusing, even the content of the character replicas is saturated.

### **Conclusion**

This paper aims to characterize the motifs of historical Bratislava in a selected literary work and its film adaptation. A common feature of the story and the film is the city and the Jewish ghetto, in which mysterious murders have taken place. The primary objective of our research was the topos of the Wilson City, its dynamic and static nature. The city was presented as an important organizational element of the literary work as well as the film. In the short story and in the film, the fictional story takes place in a real urban space, in the book it is even a strictly descriptive factual space of the 1920s. The characters in the short story and in the film immerse themselves in the atmosphere created by the postwar Wilson City. It is a space that hides a secret, a mystery - in the film it is a restless and dangerous space. The topos of Wilson City is not only the backdrop, but becomes the subject, the actor of the story. There is a correlation between the characters and the space that influences them when they enter into a dynamic relationship with the city. The story refers to a number of cultural-historical problems and issues that were directly related to a particular historical-political situation in a given period, and on this basis the author either creates an alternative reality (the short story) or parodies the situation (the film).



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