

**Smoked Signals and Janosik. Braided Lives of Heroic Outlaws in Cinema.  
On the Notions of Origin and Identity. *Smoke Signals* (1998) and *Jánošík*  
(1921)**

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**Abstract:**

*The paper discusses the idea of origin, and the cinematic representation as a means of expression for specific cultural identity. Deriving its theoretical background from the understanding of cultural memory by Assman (1995, via Warburg, 1924 - 1929), and the concept of cultural identity as hybrid (Hall, 1998) the paper argues that the films *Jánošík* (1921), and *Smoke Signals* (1998) are examples of sovereign cinematic representations of respective cultural identities (Slovak, and Native American), and both construct cultural identity as hybrid, standing in between, or embracing multiple discourses. Through the depiction of their characters, and opening scenes the article examines the complexity of the film representations as they compromise or subvert existing stereotypes.*

At the time of its origin cinema, a new art medium, challenged traditional forms of expression. In visual representation it brought dynamism, and fluidity into otherwise static images. In storytelling it brought alive the form that otherwise would have remained only imaginary. It manipulated the emotional response of the audience by adding music, light, and arrangement of a scene. It dispersed the idea of a solitary artist and replaced it with the idea of collaborative art, creating an interdisciplinary platform for the development of new artistic professions. It changed the art marketing and started one of the most successful industries – at least in the United States. But more importantly, it gave rise to a unique and powerful reflection on culture and society, whether in the form of a documentary film or a full-feature film. Thus film, perhaps more than any other medium, has the power to preserve and document social, historical and

cultural moments with the immediacy and emotionality of its pictorial, and often symbolic representations.

A German art historian Aby Warburg (1866 - 1929), one of the first scholars, who moved the discussion on collective cultural knowledge out of biological, and racially based discourse, recognized “the fundamental importance of the visual within the more general studies of culture” (Assman, 1995, p. 125, Rappolt, Mark, 2021). His famous the *Bilderatlas* employs methodology rather innovative for the time. The panels of the “Mnemosyne Atlas” arrange photographic reproductions of artworks together with newspaper clippings, photographs, images of stamps, diagrams and sketches, or even astrological charts. The idea of montage aligns with the editing techniques used in cinema, where the juxtaposition of shots creates meaning and elicits emotional responses from the audience. Just as Warburg sought to create new narratives and understandings through the arrangement of images, cinema uses montage to construct narratives, evoke memories, and provoke thought.

Warburg believed in the power of images to evoke and connect collective memories across time and space. In his article *Collective Memory and Cultural Identity* Assman (1995, p. 126) elaborates on Warburg’s and Halbwach’s observations and argues that cultural memory is a means through which humans maintain their nature consistently through generations. The result in his view is “objectivised culture” in which reusable texts, images, or rituals specific for each society in each epoch create “close connection” between elements of culture and individual groups and their identity (ibid.). They are “structures of knowledge”, and their formation is similar to memory, and they are able to form “concretions of identity” and provide the group with the “consciousness of unity and specificity” (ibid. 128). Consequently, the “group derives formative and normative impulses” from the sense of continuity and is able to reproduce its identity (ibid.). Similarly, Malíčková (2017, p. 7) argues that memory constitutes an important quality significant for the knowledge of the world. She adds that art also embodies such quality. Experience and memory, which film offers in the form of images, allow its recipients to relive the world again. Malíčková (ibid.) claims that such a situation opens up the possibility to reconstruct the past, no matter how implicitly or unintentionally, the past emerges. I would like to agree and specify Assman’s argument (1995, p. 130) — also film, as a “concretion of identity”, may generate the “awareness of unity and particularity” for a culturally specific audience.

Cultural memory has been recognized as an important part of identity formation, whether it concerns a group or a nation. To answer the question who I am and where I belong in the system of social, historical and cultural forces, however, is not a straightforward process,

and it is often filled with gaps. To relate to a certain group can be a very complex journey, especially if the group has not received equal power and social access in the hierarchies of dominance within a territory they occupy. Therefore, to achieve the “awareness of unity and particularity” (ibid., p. 132) for a culturally and socially marginalized group can often be an inconsistent process because the colonization, assimilation, or acculturation may be under way. Assman’s claim about objective forms of culture having the structure of memory can be complicated and extended by situations when rare examples of objectivized culture exist, and cultural memory suffers from amnesia.

“The supply knowledge in the cultural memory is characterized by the sharp distinction between those who belong and those who do not, i.e., what appertains to oneself and what is foreign,” Assman claims (ibid., p. 130) when discussing the “concretions of identity” and the sense of belonging to a particular cultural group. He does not go into detail in his article in a discussion about the cultures where the sense of unity and belonging could be complicated by the history of colonization. But he reminds us that “no memory can preserve the past” (ibid.) and the remnants of the past are reconstructed within a contemporary frame of reference. Analogically Stuart Hall in his article on cultural identity and cinematic representation (1998) accentuates the sense of consistency for colonized cultures can be reached only when the point of current reference is embraced. “Actuality” in his view is the significant point of reference in the formation of cultural identity. Such a perspective understands identity as a process. “It is not a fixed essence... it is not once-and-for-all. It is not a fixed origin” — it is not essence, it is about “positioning” (ibid., p. 70, 71). In a discussion on emerging national cinemas, he asks important questions: “Who is this [...] subject in cinema? From where does it speak?” (ibid., p. 82). New emerging cultural subjects complicate the concept of cultural identity for particular cultural groups. Hall asserts the concept of cultural identity is not an “accomplished historical fact” (ibid., p. 80), on the contrary, he claims “identity is never complete, always in the process, always constituted within, not outside, representation” (ibid.). In other words, when a new art production emerges and takes over some familiar examples from the context of its historical and cultural memory – where does it speak from? How is the representation and the subject represented positioned? Is the process of representation a mere look back to represent what already exists coded in the cultural memory or is the subject of representation positioned between the past and the present, actually positioning itself in between? Asking such questions foregrounds the aspects of cultural identity formation that characterize it as a complex entity, never homogeneous, always in flux and standing in between often different or incompatible discourses.

The two films under my scrutiny *Jánošík* (1921), *Smoke Signals* (1998) occupy a special position in the formation of cultural memory. Although they are distanced by more than a half of the century by their origin, they mark the beginning of the cinematographic representation for specific cultural groups that share the history of oppression<sup>1</sup>. *Jánošík* (1921) the first film produced by Slovak cinematography by the Siakel' brothers, emerged when the cinematic medium was still young, and also in the momentum when Slovaks and Czechs founded the state that after long years without independent country gave them the freedom to ascertain and develop their cultural identity. Film *Smoke Signals* (1998) arrives in developed American cinematography, diversified in genres, quality film production, among examples of influential popular culture. The fact that *Smoke Signals* are understood as “transformative event in the history of indigenous media” (Shorter, Lewis, 2012, p. xi) speaks volumes about the conflicting flow of American history. The film challenges “hegemonic and stereotypical images of American Indians” (Mihelich, 2001, p. 129) that American cinematography produced, however, as an example of sovereign representation comes only in the second half of the twentieth century. One [the film *Jánošík*] can be looked at as a project of artistic endeavor produced by an emerging nation at the origin of the cinema, the other [*Smoke Signals*] marks the history because it provides “complex and sympathetic perspective on American Indians” (Stromberg, 2001, p. 34), and at the same time “subverts mainstream viewers’ generic expectations” (Gilroy, 2001, p. 25). Both occupy a legendary position in the history of respective cinematography, because on one hand they look back and restore the fragments of cultural memory, on the other hand they are “positioned” against the past, and at the same time they occupy a certain contemporary place — position — not only within a specific medium, genre, but they are also relational in the process of identity construction. The territorial, spatial, and cultural distance between two films can be crossed over when the attention is drawn to the ambiguity with which the films represent respective cultural identity. Assman explains that even though the cultural memory is fixed in “immovable figures of memory and stores of knowledge.... every contemporary context relates to these differently” (1995, p. 130). I argue that by undercutting the received notions of identity, often based on myths, legends, and/ or misrepresentations, both films present cultural identity of their protagonists as hybrid - occupying positions in between or anchored in multiple cultural discourses.

### ***Jánošík* – retelling the past – production of identity**

*Jánošík* is the first Slovak full feature film, the “first commercial Slovak film on record made with Slovak directors and financial interests” (Hudac, 2020, p. 198). The contemporary film

scholarship in Slovakia paid tribute to the film at its centenary anniversary, and organized the conference dedicated to the film, its production, and its meaning for the present-day cinema. The publication accompanying the conference<sup>2</sup> compiled opinions of respected Slovak film scholars, accentuating its significance, and elaborated on film's thematic concerns. The critical response of Slovak scholars reveals the importance of a design. There is no coincidence that the filmmakers of the first Slovak film worked on this specific theme (Lasica, 2021, p. 39). Hana Hlôšková (2021, p. 53) in her article on demythologizing the Slovak national identity also holds such a position and points out that the audiovisual version of the Jánošík myth contributed later to numerous retellings of stories about Jánošík. As it was documented by the ethnologic research in the fifties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the audiovisual representation of [Jánošík's tradition] had contributed importantly to the construction of the outlaw hero semantics in the Slovak oral tradition. With its non-linear history this film is both the first and yet, not the first. The first, lost, and found again<sup>3</sup>. Reiteration serves here as a key to the understanding of the point of origin, but also the flow of cultural and historical memory. It works similarly to Warburg's visionary (yet unfinished) project focused on unearthing the cultural past, in which the past embodied in cultural artifacts, and the present context come to mutual juxtaposition -- the myth, legend, film, oral retellings. Such a process can be understood as a test to which cultural memory [if that is the case] is subjected. It speaks about positioning the received notions of cultural identity in the context of contemporaneity – as Stuart Hall (1998, p. 70) has it: "...identities are the names we give to different ways we are positioned by and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past".

### **On the verge of two worlds**

As the first film of Slovak cinematography, *Jánošík* (1921) breaks down the dominant narratives to which Slovaks as unrecognized nation had been subjected to. At the same time, it opens up the legend of Jánošík to further retellings, and in the contemporary context to a more critical analysis. Connected to a strong literary tradition on the representation of outlaws materialized in Romantic writing<sup>4</sup>, the selection of such a narrative and its adaptation for the screen implicates a "position" as Stuart Hall would have it. Already by the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> C multiple examples of the Slovak folk tradition existed that had represented Janosik as an outlaw hero. The narrative of the outlaw hero was also "elevated to high literature" as a symbol of rebellion against feudal tyranny (Votruba 2006). "The past continues to speak to us... it is always constructive through memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth", says Stuart Hall (1998, p. 72). The real Jánošík, however, never wanted to be a hero. Originally a Slovak from Liptov

region lived his short life in the Habsburg monarchy. “He was born in a secluded house in Terchová, was a soldier for five years, a shepherd for a few months, and he robbed the rich from spring to fall last year. A short life. He dies as a twenty-five-year-old charismatic bandit, a former soldier who was not able to find his place in the world, a good boy with bad friends, a regular guest who paid for drinks in the whole pub and gave stolen jewelry to village girls. He does not know that his life is going to be interpreted and his martyr death is going to guarantee him immortality” (Borušovičová, 2021, p. 75). Based on a book by Gustáv Marshall-Petrovský about Juraj Jánošík *Jánošík, kapitán horských chlapkov – jeho búrlivý život a desná smrť* (1894), and the 1910 stage play, *Jánošík*, by Czech playwright Jiří Mahen the film cumulates several symbolic readings of Jánošík’s myth: the romantic idea of freedom, humanism, and justice together with implicitly presented ethnic element and the story of national resistance to the oppression of dominant power structures. However, as Hudac points out “ethnic media presented an entrance into a shared identity, one that could transcend the regional and linguistic boundaries inherent in the Slovak lands” (2020, p. 22). In other words, no matter how diversified linguistically (dialects), religiously, or regionally the newly founded Slovak republic was, the medium of film provided the audience with the “immutability of composition, which leads to self-generation of identity, newer images constantly reference their predecessors” (ibid.) The first Slovak film, however, undercuts such “self-generation”. On the contrary, the character of Jánošík, as presented by Theodor Pištěk, provides for an image of an outlaw hero that is skewed, and rather idiosyncratic when compared with those images generated later, and this situation will be discussed later. But in order to do it, it is necessary to speak more about the medium itself.

In addition to a strong ethnic element, it is also important to look further and identify in what respects the first attempt of Slovak filmmaking actually employs the medium itself. In the given historical and cultural circumstances, the Siakel’ brothers created the extraordinary film. On one hand it can be interpreted as a “personified nation freed from under Hungarian oppression” as Malíček (2021, p. 87) asserts. At the same time, it is a film that can easily be appreciated by the audience – a good example of a genre film – “action and adventure movie” (ibid., p. 88). It can be said the film works for both – the audience looking for the identification of a national hero, but also for a broader, mainstream audience. The limits of a genre film allow the ethnic element to be developed, and incorporated, however, they prevent the protagonist from being stuck within the verisimilitude of a national hero. Jánošík presented in the film by Theodor Pištěk is not exactly the “cultural formation” (Assman, 1995) generated by images circulating in folklore, or presentations coming from the Slovak high culture. The construction

of the film protagonist and the narrative frame in the film, from a contemporary perspective, discloses the construction of identity by as transformed by the appropriation. Existing history, legends, literary works, myth and a contemporary situation come into a new dynamic. No matter how visually and culturally divergent the film representation of the hero is from existing cultural formations the genre allows the audience to be immersed in the narrative thematizing the fight for justice, freedom, cultural identity and at the same time to accept Jánošík's idiosyncratic representation.

The representative example supporting such reading of identity in *Jánošík* can be found in the opening scene. The film starts with the scene in rural lands of Slovakia with the shepherd surrounded by sheep and visited by three people – flaneurs who wander around in this bucolic landscape. The shepherd immediately recognizes the similarity of one of the visitors with Jánošík who used to live there. The audience agrees to this stylized proposition because other elements important for the recognition of the cultural frame are preserved (juxtaposition of the rural and urban, shepherd and sheep iconic for the Slovak rural lands, the mountainous landscape, and the easily recognizable shepherd's house). In a discussion about the significance of Jánošík for the contemporary history of Slovak film culture Oniščenko (2022, p. 32) accentuates the film's hybridity in weaving together the myth and body of literature circulating around Jánošík, and the modernity of the medium. In his view the shepherd is the linking point between the world of legend, history and the past, and the contemporary situation. Oniščenko (ibid.) claims that in the moment of shepherd's recognition the worlds overlap, but at the same time ultimately differ. In other words, by saying: "To tell the truth, really! Like Jánošík who used to live here..." the shepherd appropriates the fluid mind. This difference is important. As I am going to point out later in other contexts, it is the interstitial moment where seemingly incompatible worlds or experiences meet.

The fluidity of thought that the shepherd appropriates is necessary for the reading and understanding of Jánošík's legend. Jánošík became the hero against his own will and the status of a heroic outlaw as the symbol of resistance to cultural and territorial dominance acquired only later. When we look at the film *Jánošík*, emerging among the past (prehistoric) and then future retellings of the myth, the character of the shepherd from the opening scene embodies the duality, the difference of being a "youthful character with no age, but at the same time a character who witnessed of the past" (ibid.). Such a quality of the mind, I claim, is necessary for the arrival of modernity – for a new understanding of identity. The film *Jánošík* (1921) initiated the beginning of sovereign representation for Slovak cultural identity. In this film the "resistance" present in the oral tradition or high culture before or even after is "replaced with

the production of identity” (Hall, 1998, p. 68). The production of identity, however, is a complex process as Hall (ibid., p. 78) informs, and overshadows simple binary oppositions. It happens on the level of visual representation rather than the narrative in the film, but the construction of the protagonist in this film, is not excluding ‘us’ from ‘them’, or the ‘past’ from the ‘present’, on the contrary Jánosiík in the film — a “Slovak played by the Czech” (Malíček, 2021, p. 88) — stands in between multiple discourses, “along the sliding scale” (Hall, 1998, p. 78).

The importance of emergence of a new medium in specific cultural and historical contexts has been analyzed by Winfried Fluck (1999), for example. His idea about the “dehierarchization of art” that comes with the arrival of film explains the popularity of film in the USA, and also why film as a new medium is successful in reaching wider audiences. Although there was a weak film infrastructure in Slovakia when the film *Jánosiík* was released people gathered in crowds from surrounding places, towns, and cities to see it<sup>5</sup> Fluck in his argument points out that film, as a new cultural form, became accessible to wide spectrum audiences coming from multiple ethnic backgrounds specifically because it works with images, and sound and transcends national and ethnic traditions.

The film by the Siakel’ brothers presents the story of Juraj Jánosiík that encapsulates his transformation from a man of clergy to a highway man. The story is set in the early 1700s, when many farmers in the Habsburg monarchy were obligated to work in a nobleman’s field for two days of a week. Following the opening scene, which I discussed earlier, after the fade-out the film offers a retrospective story that starts with Juraj, a young seminary student, as he returns to his home village to find both of his parents dead. His mother died, and his father was not allowed to attend her funeral since he was not released from the obligations to work on the Count’s field. He was punished for disobeying the obligation, and practically beaten to death. Jánosiík in anger assaults the Count and runs away. He meets a band of highwaymen, and one of them starts persuading Juraj to join them. In that scene, the camera focuses solely on Jánosiík, and the audience can see the details of his appearance. A striking detail that everyone more or less familiar with later visual representations of Jánosiík notices is his hairstyle. He looks more like a British dandy than most of the pictorial representations circulating in popular or high culture later where braided hair is visible as a significant marker of Jánosiík’s cultural identity<sup>6</sup>.

### **Do we need braided hair here?**

Film as a medium is characterized by its reference to observable reality (Onišenko, 2022, p. 32). One could object that the pictorial representation of Jánosiík without braided hair erodes



the realist verisimilitude. However, as Assman (1995, p. 130 ) would have it, such representation “transforms” the formation of cultural memory. I am interested in this transformation. Jánošík, as a legend, has appeared in Slovak, Czech, and Polish culture (Votruba, 2006). As a legend, he is surrounded by numerous retellings, attributes, he has acquired the value and fame he did not ask for. However, the first film representation of Jánošík in Slovak culture, goes beyond the limits of realist representation. I argue that because the film, as a new art medium, links inexorably image with emotions, Jánošík is unmistakably recognized even though his appearance does not provide for a one-to-one correspondence. Moreover, he is a character in an adventure film and its value dichotomy is clearly delineated. Jánošík is the synecdoche of average people fighting for their recognition, he is a rebel who, at least, temporarily, is able to restore the order of justice, he is an icon of freedom – with or without braided hair.

### **Braided lives.**

Hair, however, is still considered the “most powerful symbol of individual and group identity,” Anthony Synnott (1987, p. 381) argues in his sociological perspective on hair. As also Williamson (1979) and Jacobs and Merolla (2017) claim hair, specifically for American Indians, is the cultural expression, and a form to retain traditional identity, however, as many aspects of traditional culture – languages, clothing, cuisine, and value systems vary throughout indigenous communities across the United States, so does the way Natives wear their hair.

One of the most critically reflected scenes from the film *Smoke Signals* (1998) is the part often referenced as ‘How to be a real Indian’. As Gilroy informs us the scene not only “exemplifies the major thematic concerns and formal approaches that the film explores” (2001, p. 24). It uses humor and social commentary and what is most important it exhibits “the powerful relationship between filmic representation and American Indian identity” (ibid.). The two protagonists of the film Victor and Thomas travel outside the reservation to retrieve the remains of Victor’s father who had left his family and the reservation a long time ago. As they both navigate through new realities during their journey, the viewers can see their divergent attitudes towards Native American culture. Thomas represents the traditional tribal storyteller in the movie and while riding a bus outside of the reservation, he starts telling one of his stories. This time it is the story about Victor’s father and a fry bread contest. Victor is hit by a sudden remembrance; however, he tries to resist it, and verbally attacks Thomas: “Why can’t you have a normal conversation. You’re always trying to sound like some damn medicineman or something”.

As I mentioned earlier the scene illuminates on the relationship between the filmic representation and American Indian identity. While the film *Jánošík*, analyzed in the previous part, begins to establish certain genre conventions, and employs the legend of *Jánošík* for the purposes of the storytelling, the film *Smoke Signals* arrives in a developed film industry with the whole tradition of stereotypical representations of American Indians from the topos of forest in 19th C American literature that had acquired symbolic meaning of a dangerous place – often because it was populated by Indians, in J. F. Cooper’s novels, for example to various examples of stereotyping in American film<sup>7</sup>. Although films such as *The Searchers* (1956) or *Dances with Wolves*, 1990 attempt to portray American Indians as more complex characters, and are critical towards American government, they do not escape romanticizing view and are focused solely on white characters’ transformation, and they exclude the Native American perspective.

When Victor continues to elaborate on the concept of sovereign, authentic Indian, his perspective is shaped not by cultural tradition handed over from generation to generation and crystallized as a collective experience (Assman 1995) it has been shaped and transformed by the representations circulating in media. As Mikelich argues “stereotypes, [including the stoic warrior] are reinforced in classic westerns and contemporary film of the American West and ... are reductive” (2001, p. 130). Moreover, such representations had not often been autonomous expressions of group representatives, but rather hegemonic images perpetuating the hierarchies of dominance, and power, the Native American had little or no control over their content. The importance of the film *Smoke Signals* lies in the fact that it had been created (the script), directed, and produced by the members of Native American tribes (Stromberg, 2001, p. 34). However, the single fact of creation is not enough to disclose the complex dynamics the film exemplifies. The employment of humor and irony dismantles the stereotypes held not only by the members of the major society, but also by the members of the marginalized group about themselves (Michelich, 2001, Hearne, 2005).

Through the character of Victor Sherman Alexie, the script writer, ridicules the most common stereotypes circulating in popular culture, such as stoic warrior, or Noble Savage (Stromberg, 2001). When Victor instructs Thomas: “You gotta look like a warrior. You gotta look like you just came back from killing buffalo,” Thomas listens to him with a ‘stoic’ face. When Thomas with the same stoic face snaps back: “But our tribe never hunted buffalo! We were fishermen,” the audience cracks in laughter. Humor allows for the space of detachment, and targets both the mainstream audience, and indigenous people. The audience realizes that many perceptions they hold about American Indians/ themselves are not accurate, they are either overgeneralizations, or just simply they corresponded with a fraction of reality. As each

Indian tribe spoke a distinct language, the focus of their major activities differed. The same can be said about their hair.

The character of Victor visually corresponds with popular representations of Native Americans circulating in various media. He is tall, well-built, with long free hair. “You gotta know how to use your hair” says Victor, “you gotta free it” -- his hair swooshing in the air. But in spite of being a “real Indian” from the outside, Victor has a little sense of authentic indigenous identity. His sense of belonging to a particular cultural group is weak, he is dissociated from his own father, and consequently from his own culture. Sherman Alexie’s script does not seem to be complicated on the surface. Humor and irony allow both mainstream and Native American audience to relate to the characters and follow the story. However, the employed oppositional practices open the characters to a more complex, and deep reading. The viewers can interpret Thomas as more authentic even though he does not conform to stereotypical representations, he wears braided hair, and a suit. In this spliced dichotomy Alexie reveals the gap between appearance and reality. In spite of his idiosyncrasy, Thomas is embedded in the cultural formations of American Indians, he perpetuates the storytelling as a means of survival, and development and growth. In one of the final scenes, when Thomas and Victor return from the trip, and bring Victor’s father’s ashes back to the reservation, Thomas comes home, and he retells his grandma the most important part of the journey, the moment when Victor reconciliates with his dead father, and acknowledges him as inseparable part of his life, and thus identity. “... a creation of Indigenous reality in a media saturated world” allows Thomas to reclaim “the power to control Native stories in both private and public ways.” (Hearne, 2012, p. xx) Implicitly the scene reveals the importance of a healthy family environment in the growth of culturally informed identity. Thomas who had lost his parents, in spite of the unfortunate circumstances, receives love, and support from his grandmother, and it is obvious that his connection with Indigenous culture comes from her. At the same time Victor learns a hard way about the importance of forgiveness and belonging, and the viewers may recognize that the addiction to alcohol Victor’s father suffers from is an index of social inequality, and marginalization American Indians as a group had been confronted with.

The opening scene of *Smoke Signals* can be read on many levels and is significant for building up the major theme of the film – finding the voice for the sovereign Native American identity. As Hearne (2005, p. 21) points out, the major innovation of the film is that Native people appear on both sides of the camera. She explains that the “opening credits are freighted with this significant shift in visibility and identification” (ibid., 2012, p. 22) -- in the history of American film industry Native actors were not acknowledged. The two things work in the mise-

en-scène. The landscape and the weathered trailer home. The trailer home is the seat of the radio station broadcasting on reservation a visual reminder of the media world that had generated and disseminated the representations of American Indians. Jonn Trudell, an important American Indian activist appears in the shot as DJ Randy Peone in the K-rez Radio studio trailer. Joana Hearne says his “mellow, humorous performance as a radio host suggests the film’s self-conscious presentation as a new Indigenous voice in popular culture” (ibid.). Located at the crossroads the physical presence of the trailer home reminds the viewer of the intersections between the past and the present of Indigenous culture. The landscape where the trailer home a.k.a. radio station is located in the diegetical time of the film is the reservation land. It is symbolically foregrounded for a more critical reading as the iconic representation of the land taken away from Native Americans by the colonizers. The image and sound work together and the viewers can listen to John Trudell’s ironic voice as he says: “It’s fourth of July – it’s good day to be Indigenous”. His comment summarizes the whole recent history of Indigenous nations. Not only the biggest patriotic holiday, the 4<sup>th</sup> of July or the day of independence marks the history of the origin of the United States at the same time it is the sad anniversary for Native Americans since it frames the historical circumstances that lead to the genocide of their nations. It remains as a constant reminder of the colonization history, and the fight for sovereign recognition. As it has been discussed previously in the analysis of the film *Jánošík* – the two worlds overlap here – the origin of the United States, and the disintegration of Native American culture. The point of interstice works as the distinguishing moment because the significance of the historical situation for the nations involved differs. The fourth of July is the celebration of the historical beginning for Americans who are in that situation a new emerging nation and look back with pride. The fourth of July cannot be truly celebrated by American Indians because in their historical development it is a rupture that breaks down the continuity of their cultural identity. Yet, the statement that DJ of the local radio station makes: “it’s good to be indigenous” is a statement that opens the possibility of a renewal through conscious production of identity. The two protagonists present two different processes in which the sense of belonging, and actual experience of cultural identity can be embraced. When Victor addresses Thomas mockingly: “What are you a damn medicineman?” he reveals Thomas’ culturally bound identity for the audience and for himself later on. He is and he is not. Thomass becomes a healer for Victor’s wounds and frustration, and the journey they undertake together restores for Victor the fractured sense of belonging, and home. Although Thomas’s appearance, and interests not always copy the received notions of Native Americans, being tied to the tradition of storytelling he becomes the ‘healer’ for himself, and the others.

Telling and retelling stories may be a powerful way of reclaiming one's cultural identity, and the sense of belonging. In the art of storytelling, film has a unique position, since by combining image and sound it generates emotions and can speak through various backgrounds. It also addresses the viewer in spite of the complexity and contradictions presented. Miroslav Petříček (2009, p. 34) in his book *Myšlení obrazem* claims that film as a visual medium enables a direct encounter with complexity. "Complexity can only be perceived by complexity and through the complexity of images we somehow understand the complexity of the world" (ibid.). As I have discussed above such complexity "exceeds [the] binary structure of representation" (Hall, 1998, p. 73). Both films analyzed and discussed above provide viewers with a complex experience where characters often stand between and embrace multiple discourses. Heterogeneity is a necessary quality of the diaspora experience in Hall's view; however, it is also an important quality for the recognition of the contemporary world. As Joanna Hearne points out "these films [Native produced films] looking relations complicate attempts to separate tradition from innovation, authenticity from representation and the notion of a singular identity from fictions of Indian blood" (2005, p. 191). In the film *Jánošík*, the aspects of visual representation bear witness to the same hybrid situation. Instead of petrifying the mythologized image the protagonist fluctuates between authenticity and representation. The viewers are involved in the process of confrontation to what extent the images correspond, resonate or undermine and subvert their contemporary perception of their world, specifically the sense of cultural memory, and cultural identification. In *Smoke Signals* characters eventually embrace the new reality from which the Native American culture was almost disinherited. Yet, by appropriating recognizable film practices such as humor, and combining them with oral storytelling, the character of Thomas remains closely tied to his cultural heritage, and is given the possibility to heal himself, and the others. Hall asserts: "identity... lives through... difference, by hybridity" (1998, p. 80). Working with fragments of cultural memory coming from specific cultural backgrounds and juxtaposing them with contemporized version of a particular cultural identity both films through contradictions reveal the concept of cultural identity as composited – instead of the homogenous content based on the uniting cultural memory – it is renewed, revisited, and restructured continuously to come out as hybrid.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Both Slovak, and American Indian culture share a history of colonization. The sovereign country of both Slovaks and Czechs was founded in 1918 when WWI ended, and the Habsburg monarchy collapsed. Before that Slovaks had distinguished themselves as an ethnic group within the Habsburg monarchy through language, customs, oral tradition, folk traditions, and costumes. Their cultural identity was, however, suppressed by the dominant structures of power that were Hungarian or German.

It was only in 19th C that Slovak language was codified, and some cultural institutions supporting the education in Slovak language including the three Slovak grammar schools were open. With the annihilation of tribal culture, and deaths of millions of American Indians the possibilities for the continuity of cultural identity or its ability to reconstruct were limited. With a long history of its demonization, assimilation, and oppression, cultural identity of Native Americans has undergone substantial changes. Being in contact with the culture of its colonizers, and facing stereotypization, obliteration, or marginalization the transmission of Native American cultural memory in the “culturally institutionalised heritage of a society” (Assman, 1995, p. 130) took a long time. Therefore, what Assman calls the “crystallisation of communicated meaning” (ibid.) and identifies it as an important process in the spreading of cultural memory is a process that for cultural groups such as Native Americans has been delayed and taken place under radically different conditions compared to privileged groups. The groups whose search for identity was complicated by their colonial past share a common situation as for the question of the established cultural memory and cultural identity.

<sup>2</sup> *Jánošík and 100 years of Slovak Film Culture*, Slovak Film Institute, 2021

<sup>3</sup> See more information in the article by Renata Šmatláková on the history of the film *Jánošík* in publication: *Jánošík and 100 years of Slovak Film Culture*, Slovak Film Institute, 2021

<sup>4</sup> Whether it is *Jánošík*, Robin Hood, Billy the Kid, Mathias Kneissel or Vaclav Babinsky (bandit) — their lives (biographies), and the narratives they inspired were contemporized and materialized in Romantic writing. For the discussion on *Jánošík* and the presentations of his identity in oral tradition, and high literature see Votruba, M. “Hang Him High: The Elevation of *Jánošík* to an Ethnic Icon.” In *Slavic Review* 65, no. 1 (2006): 24–44.

<sup>5</sup> Renáta Šmatláková (2021, p. 27) in her article puts together the available information and quotes Ján Siakel’ the film producer, and director from the interview for Slovak theatre journal *Javisko*: “When the film *Jánošík* was screened in the Beley cinema in Vrútky for the first time in fall 1921, they showed the film for three days and each day in three different times — so many people wanted to see it.” In Jaroslav Siakel’, *Ako to bolo s Jánošíkom (V.)*. In: *Javisko* 1988, č. 7, s. 383.

<sup>6</sup> The iconic representations of *Jánošík* in Slovak visual art include pieces by Janko Alexy, Miloš Bazovský, Martin Benka, Ľudovít Fulla, Fraňo Štefunko, Koloman Sokol, for example; most often he is presented with braided hair even though the hair style is not such a distinguishing mark of cultural identity for the Slovaks as it is in other cultures.

<sup>7</sup> For example: *Birth of the Nation*, 1915, *Stagecoach*, 1939, *Fort Apache*, 1948, *The Searchers*, 1956: many of them starring John Wayne as a major white American star in western films. American Indians portrayed as savages those films often present Indians as simply an “obstacle” in the development of progress and spread of ‘civilisation’ (Stromberg, 2001, p. 33)

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