

***The Construction of Culture in Scottish and Czech  
Contemporary Cinema: A comparison of the films *The  
Winter Guest* and *O rodičích a dětech****

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## Abstract

This thesis aims to examine the construction of culture in two cinematic works: the Scottish film *The Winter Guest* and the Czech film *O rodičích a dětech (Of Parents and Children)*. It examines the research question of how the two cultures present themselves in their narratives. The analysis focuses on images of space, identity of the characters and the structure of the events in these two films. At first, the two films are analysed separately, then comparatively. The methodological approach of this thesis combines narratology, semiotics and cognitive science.

The chapter interpreting space in the Scottish film finds that the environment is perceived as immense and insecure. In the Czech film, the environment creates an impression of being enclosed and safe. The following chapters focus on the identity of the characters. The Scottish film shows the female protagonists with a loose relation to their relatives and people living in their area. The Czech film features male protagonists with strong bonds to their male relatives but weak relationships to other people living in their surroundings. Gender issues are examined as well. The analysis of the structure of the events in the two films reveals an emphasis on interiority in the Scottish film, and a tendency to influence perception of the self through telling stories of a person's past in the Czech film. The analysis also identifies the conceptual metaphors which construct the narratives, mainly the metaphors seeing life as a journey and the metaphor seeing mental change as a change of a location. The thesis also discusses the significance of the choice of genre for the particular image of culture in these two films.

The main findings of the thesis are summarised in the comparative chapter. The thesis has discovered that images of space participate in creating a social reality for the characters and they shape the characters' perception of the world. Therefore, the environment together with the identity of the characters and with the events creates coherent images of the cultures in the films. The thesis has identified characteristic features of infinity, freedom, risk, activity, individualism and uprootedness in the Scottish film and characteristic features of enclosure, limits, safety, passivity, belonging and continuity in the Czech film. Apart from these contrasting features, it has been discovered that there are many similarities in the depiction of social roles and narrative conventions in the two films, which confirms their common cultural heritage.

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## Declaration

I declare that this thesis contains the results of my own work, that it has been composed by me and that it does not include work forming part of a thesis presented successfully for a degree in this or any other University.

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Hana Tomšů

## 1. Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to find the differences and the similarities in the construction of Czech and Scottish cultures in two contemporary films. The Scottish film is *The Winter Guest* (Alan Rickman 1997) and the Czech film is *O rodičích a dětech (Of Parents and Children)*, Vladimír Michálek 2008). Every culture has its own features which are not visible at first sight but they are crucial for shaping the presentations of life in its arts. Scottish and Czech culture have many common features, but other characteristics make them significantly different and in some aspects even contrasting. I believe that my sample analysis of the narratives produced by the two cultures, which I examine in these two films, will help better to understand their mutual relationship.

This thesis analyses the two films from a cultural point of view. The main research questions are: How do the two cultures present themselves through the narratives? What images of the two cultures do the narratives construct?

These two films were chosen for a good reason. They emerged approximately within a decade of each other and they share a very similar *fabula* structure. Therefore they provide not only good material for studying each of the films separately but they are also a good base for a comparison of the two constructions of cultures. The fascinating level of similarity suggests that the two cultures might have more in common than we think. The shared theme in the two films raises the question of how different cultures treat similar topics in their cinematography.

Umberto Eco (1976) suggests that we should see culture as a semiotic activity. In accordance with his definition and for the purpose of this work, culture is defined as a semiotic structure. If we can look at the world around us from the semiotic perspective, we realise that everything functions as a sign for the human mind as an interpreter. Culture is a sign structure which communicates meaning to people living inside it. The rituals and habits, the behaviour, the style of clothing, the food, the architecture, the heroes and values, these are all part of communication between various members of the culture. According to Eco, the semiotic point of view of culture means that “every aspect of culture becomes a semantic unit” (ibid., 27). Every object within a culture carries meaning for the members of the culture. To be able to approach a culture with semiotic tools we need to accept the hypothesis outlined by Umberto Eco saying that “semiotics studies all cultural processes as

*processes of communication*. Therefore each of these processes would seem to be permitted by an underlying *system of significations*” (ibid., 8). Hence in this thesis, by a culture I mean the processes of communication which are understood and shared by a group of people. Various subjects within a culture serve to communicate information to its members by its culture-specific instruments. For the film analysis in this thesis, Eco’s theory means that the films are considered as complex culturally specific signs.

Cinema plays with connotations of the signs used, and relies on the cultural codes understandable to the viewers (Bignell 2002). Everything in film works as a sign and all these signs are culturally determined. Graeme Turner gives an example of how an image of a ‘man’ has got strong connotations given the way it is presented:

“A filmed image of a man will have a denotative dimension – it will refer to the mental concept of ‘man’. But images are culturally charged; the camera angle employed, his position within the frame, the use of lighting, to highlight certain aspects, any effect achieved by colour, tinting, or processing, would all have the potential for social meaning” (Turner 1993, 46).

Cinematic narratives as well as any other narratives are significant parts of communication in every culture. In narratives, cultures create images of themselves which offer explanations, stabilise conventions or point out stereotypes (Monaco 2000). A cultural analysis of narratives helps us to understand these mechanisms (Bal 1990). Mieke Bal says that a cultural analysis of narratives needs to be considered not as the “taking apart of culture” but rather as interpreting “the way in which cultures take things, people and themselves ‘apart’” (2009, 227). Therefore when analysing the two films we do not analyse the cultures but we are trying to understand what the two cultures see themselves as. Furthermore, Mieke Bal points out the role of *focalization* in a cultural analysis of narratives. She suggests that the important question is “*not* primarily where the words come from and who speaks them, but what, in the game of make-believe, is being proposed for us to believe or see before us, hate, love, admire, argue against, shudder before, or stand in awe of” (ibid., 229). In agreement with Mieke Bal, we need to notice not only what the narratives say but also what they do not say and what they offer as self-evident facts. It is the ideology behind the *focalization* of the narratives what we need to look for.

What this means within Scottish and Czech cinema is another matter which needs to be clarified. Especially the definition of Scottish cinema seems to create a lot of confusion.

For Duncan Petrie and Jonathan Murray, a Scottish film is a film which is made by Scots and about Scots (Petrie 2000; Murray 2007). Murray further adds that to be considered Scottish, a film has to have Scottish funding. Despite that, he is aware of how problematic such a definition is. He finds a film directed by a Scottish director and funded from Scotland but set in England. Then, he gives an example of a film which is set in Scotland but its topic is the life of immigrants from their own perspective. Murray (2009) says that these films need to be considered British rather than Scottish. Petrie also points out that most of the current films created by Scots and set in Scotland are funded from outside the country. Sarah Street (2009) in agreement with Petrie emphasises that Scottish cinema is inseparable from the larger unit of British cinema.

Considering the characteristics of Scottish cinema, the question relevant for this work is whether *The Winter Guest* is “Scottish enough” to stand for an example of Scottish cultural expression. The film is set in Scotland and it features Scottish characters. The director was born in England as was one of the protagonists (Emma Thompson). The other protagonist is originally Scottish (Phyllida Law) as well as other actors in the main roles (Gary Hollywood, Sheila Reid, Sandra Voe, Sean Biggerstaff). The script was written by Alan Rickman (born in London) and a Scottish playwright Sharman Macdonald. The project was funded with the participation of The Scottish Film Production Fund. The film depicts life in Scotland and is made with a significant participation of native Scots. Therefore, as it portrays Scotland from “inside” it can be considered as a Scottish film. It can certainly be regarded as part of British cinema as well.

Contemporary Czech cinema is also characterised geographically. It includes films which are created in the Czech Republic by the creative force of its inhabitants. Furthermore the Czech language is an important characteristic for the cinema of a culture centrally situated in the midst of Europe’s interactions. Ines Koeltzsch (2009) points out that since the appearance of talking pictures, language has been considered as a crucial criterion for considering a film to be Czech. In his study about contemporary Czech cinema Jan Čulík includes not only films by Czech directors but also by Slovakian directors who work in the Czech Republic and make films in Czech and Slovak language. For Čulík (2012), the important characteristic of a contemporary Czech film is its premiere in the Czech Republic.

Tereza Hadravová mentions another criterion which is by some required from a Czech



film. This characteristic is the “Czechness” of a film which means the extent to which a film represents the “essence of the Czechs” accurately (Hadravová 2009). While Hadravová disputes the validity of this characteristic feature, Pavel Taussig (2008) uses it to criticise contemporary Czech cinema as not “Czech enough”. This criterion is impossible to define and it reflects a critic’s personal taste. That is why it cannot be useful for an academic work. But *O rodičích a dětech* is without a doubt a film which can stand as an example of Czech cinema. It was made in the Czech Republic, its authors and its actors with two exceptions are Czech. It depicts life in the Czech Republic and the script is in Czech, with two characters speaking Slovak.

Recently, discussions about cinema have often operated with the term of “national cinema”. Jonathan Murray argues that calling Scottish cinema “national” fails to notice the interaction of Scottish cinema with the cinemas of other parts of Britain. Furthermore, according to Murray, it fails “to explicate fully ways *other than the national* in which Scottish cinema might also be understood” (Murray 2001, 78). On the other hand, he adds that completely abandoning the notion of “national cinema” ignores its importance for the establishment of a Scottish identity and cultural diversity within the higher unit of Britain. He suggests that we should consider the term “national cinema” to be “blurred”. This would enable us to see the fluid boundaries of nationality.

“It might also point, however, to a partial-sightedness about where the cultural boundaries of national formations begin and end, an inability to pinpoint the extent to which diverse film texts and production structures might be described more or less usefully in terms of competing and fragmented national cultures of origin – or, indeed, in terms all together different from those of the nation” (ibid.).

In Czech discourse, the notion of “national cinema” is problematic, apart from other reasons because it has been often used as a measure of quality. A “Czech national film” is one which deals with an important national topic. “The release of such a film becomes a celebration for the whole nation”<sup>1</sup> (Taussig 2008)<sup>2</sup>.

For all the reasons mentioned above, this thesis avoids the term “nation” and “national

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<sup>1</sup> The original in Czech: “jehož uvedení by se stalo všenárodní poutí”.

cinema". At the same time, though, I remain aware of the cultural specificity of different film productions. Despite the problematic nature of the concept of "nationality", I cannot deny that films rise from different cultural backgrounds and create their own image on the screen. As Benedict Anderson (2006) defines it, nationalism is preceded by cultural systems out of which it comes into being. Therefore, Czech and Scottish culture are not simply interchangeable with the Czech and the Scottish nation<sup>3</sup>.

My thesis consists of three sections. The first two sections analyse the two films separately, the third section is comparative. The first section of the thesis is devoted to the Scottish film *The Winter Guest*. It contains three chapters. First of all, I analyse the depiction of space in the film. All the images of the environment are culturally charged and my aim is to find out how the film works with cultural connotations. The following chapter deals with the characters in the film, their identities and their social roles. The last chapter considers the structure of the narrative, the character of its events and the cultural knowledge featured in the background.

The second section of this thesis analyses the Czech film *O rodičích a dětech*. Its structure parallels the structure of the first section of the thesis. It is concerned with the images of space, the cultural identity of the characters and the structure of the narrative. Analysing the same features of each of the films enables me to compare them in the third section of this thesis. In the third section, I compare the two films and the constructions of their cultures. I have found some aspects which the films share, some others which are similar and last but not least, I have identified aspects of the two films which put the constructions of the two cultures into contrast.

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<sup>2</sup> Unless stated otherwise, all the passages quoted from the Czech sources have been translated by the author of the thesis.

<sup>3</sup> Cultures existed long before the idea of nations appeared. This is why the concepts of 'culture' and 'national culture' are not interchangeable. Furthermore, for example in Scotland, there are people living who may consider themselves English, Irish, Indian or of another nationality and still they participate in creating contemporary Scottish culture.

## **2. *The Winter Guest***

To mediate the life situation of the protagonist, *The Winter Guest* (1997) depicts the highly stylised scenery of the Scottish countryside. The story takes place on the east shore of Scotland, in a small town on the very day when the area is affected by an unusually strong frost. It tells the story of Frances and her aged mother Elspeth who suddenly appears at the doorstep of Frances' house. The protagonist is struggling to find a new stability after her husband's death and tries to cope with the unexpected visitor. Frances considers moving to Australia and changing her life completely. Elspeth is worried that she might end up alone and so she tries to persuade her daughter to stay. During the day which they spend together, the viewers witness their complicated relationship as Frances and her mother find it hard to communicate and to get closer to each other. Frances lives with her son Alex, a precocious teenager concerned with the well-being of his mother. On this special day he meets a girl who may return vitality to his life and his mother's house. This story is intercut with a story of two old friends from the town who are called Lily and Chloe. They spend their days together attending all the funerals in the area. And so on this day they travel by bus to a funeral despite the freezing weather. The last couple we encounter are two school mates, Sam and Tom, who play truant because their school bus is delayed, instead of going to school they go to explore the beach near the town. The stories are intercut one through another and together they create a complex narrative of the film.

At first sight, the main topic of the story appears to be inter and intra generational relationships, their benefits and difficulties. And certainly this is the case but there are many more layers of meaning contained within the film. It presents the topic of relationships with others but also of the complications of perception of one's self and one's identity. It raises questions of independent life, loneliness and a need for intimacy with a close person. It brings up the subject of a person's relation to the place where they live and where their memories are stored as well. As one of the reviews of the film says, "The film [...] appears at first glance to be about issues of aging. In reality, however, the net is cast far more broadly. The film is about ambiguity and grace, struggle, and personhood, as examined in several contexts, both intragenerational and intergenerational" (Longino and Beswick 1999, 47). Here, in this chapter, the motives constructing the layers of meaning in the film are examined with emphasis on space, interpersonal relationships and self-identity.

## 2.1 The Immensity of the Seashore: The Space

The exteriors in *The Winter Guest* show Scotland in an unexpected light. The depicted countryside is characteristic of one area of Scotland, particularly the peninsula between Edinburgh and St. Andrews. It is not a common choice of location for picturing Scotland and therefore it gives us a new perspective on what Scottish landscape and living in it looks like. “*The Winter Guest* is set in an isolated corner of the Kingdom of Fife, and as such represents an altogether different region of Scotland to those typically seen in *Tartanry*, *Kailyard* and *Clydesidism* [emphasis added]” (Martin-Jones 2009, 111).

The *Tartanry* and *Kailyard* are two commonly recognised discourses stereotypically picturing Scotland. Since 19<sup>th</sup> century these two myths determine the images of what life in Scotland is like. *Tartanry* is a discourse of Scotland as a romantic culture of brave heroes fighting for their national rights while *Kailyard* includes portraits of Scotland as a culture of humble religious peasants interested only in local gossip (Craig 1982). *Clydesidism* is added to those above in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a discourse of working-class narratives taking place around factories in Glasgow and Edinburgh (Petrie 2000; Martin-Jones 2009; Blaikie 2010). Within the discourse of *Clydesidism*, the environment depicted is a deprived area on an outskirts of a city, focusing on street life, factory and tenement housing. In terms of space, *Tartanry* creates the cultural geography of “heather, hills and glens, kilts and porridge, brawny men and cabers, the Highland clearances and Culloden”. On the other hand, *Kailyard* is the depiction of the country showing:

“parochially insular, poor, humble, puritanical folk; people concerned with their own cabbage patch [...] It is mawkish sentimentality which creates a cultural geography based upon haggis and haddocks, whisky and beer, crofts and wee but-n-bens, and community and family life” (Aitken 1991, 112).

The representation of Scotland created by *The Winter Guest* does not fall under any of these three tendencies in the Scottish arts in full. With a closer look though, some features of these discourses can be found. The *Tartanry* heritage is reflected in the picturing of the countryside as vast, empty and quiet. The dialogue of Sam and Tom hiding behind rocks on the beach refers to the tradition of *Kailyard* with its jovial peasants chatting about their every-day worries. Aside from these references to the Scottish tradition, Martin-Jones finds another feature of Scottishness in the film. He points out the story’s location as universal but still clearly Scottish – “Scottish anywhere”: “This is a place without clearly identifiable

geographical characteristics, but which is still recognisably “Scottish”, both in its isolated bleakness, and in the accents of its two youngest characters” (Martin-Jones 2009, 112). Apart from that, the rocky seashore, the sand dunes covered with dried grass together with the style of architecture in the town clearly set the story in Scotland.

According to Martin-Jones, what could be extracted from the analysis of space in *The Winter Guest* is not information about life in Scotland as a whole but information about life in the particular area of Scotland, the peninsula between Edinburgh and Saint Andrews. The area is close to the main Scottish cities but still relatively remote and calm. For this reason, a lot of professionals and young families move there from the cities. “It is the region’s quasi-isolation and the consequently privileged life it offers to its more prosperous inhabitants that *The Winter Guest* depicts” says Martin-Jones. Besides, Martin-Jones recognises the interior of Frances’ house as “the interior of the numerous houses which take part in the Annual Pittenweem Festival (founded in the early 1980s), during which around thirty local artists open their homes to exhibit their work to public.” Therefore even the house interior is not of a traditionally Scottish design, it reflects a current trend in a specific area of Scotland. Paradoxically, this representation of the Scottish culture may be more telling for the locals than what we are used to considering as Scottish precisely because it does not serve to the traditional stereotypes but rather reflects current changes in the specific area.

### **2.1.1 The Extraordinary Environment**

Depicted here, though, is just one face of the area and not a usual one. The fact that the story is set on the day when land and sea are frozen is an extraordinary situation. Noticing its abnormality does not need a cultural knowledge, it is pointed out by the characters a few times in the film. The creators apparently kept in mind an international audience and remind the viewer that the freeze is not an everyday phenomenon at the place. Furthermore, the colours of the exteriors are toned down to nearly black and white with shades of brown completed by the grey cloudy sky. The combination of the toned-down colours with the shapes of the countryside is rather minimalistic with the snowy fields at the beginning and the frozen sea at the end. The emphasis is on bird’s-eye view shots giving us a larger impression of the landscape and confirming our impression from the closer look. The use of this uncommon portrait of the area attracts our attention and makes us notice the exteriors as a significant part of presenting the story.

The space as described above participates in telling the story together with the characters and events. The setting plays an important role for the overall meaning of the film. The space reflects the subjectivity of the protagonists, it shapes the emotional atmosphere of the story and leads our attention to what the film wants us to notice. It also determines the rhythm of the story. By the characters' interaction with their surroundings the scenery cooperates in the development of the narrative.

For the deconstruction of the relationship of space and story, Stuart C. Aitken describes a model of juxtaposing ordinary and extraordinary *image-events*<sup>4</sup>. Aitken describes four options of person-environment transactions in cinema. First, if ordinary behaviour is set in an ordinary environment, the narrative is relatively eventless. The shift in the storyline is relatively small and the "audience's attention is drawn by its ability to relate to habitual, everyday circumstances" (Aitken 1991, 108). The second case is when the character's behaviour is significantly different than habitual and the environment stays similar. In such case, the audience is focused on the behaviour. In the case of ordinary behaviour in an extraordinary environment the audience "is drawn to an appreciation of a dynamic milieu and the nature of human conservatism". The last case is extraordinary behaviour set in an extraordinary environment (ibid.). This creates peak points of a narrative. By combining these four juxtapositions the rhythm of a film is constructed. It needs to be mentioned though, that what is considered as ordinary and extraordinary is a subject of cultural knowledge and interpretation of the audience. Also, the four modes of juxtapositions are not pure types with a strict definition. Rather, they are the opposite poles on the scale of ordinary-extraordinary behaviours and environments. Therefore, in a film, these modes may be identified to various extents.

Applying Aitken's theory to *The Winter Guest* clarifies the role of space in the unfolding of the story. The story takes place in Frances' hometown, which is an ordinary environment for the characters. They stay in their safe, everyday place, but the environment changes and becomes extraordinary because of the weather. The space changes and the characters have to cope with it. The change came suddenly and from the outside world and that is why the day feels so special. The behaviour of the characters

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<sup>4</sup> *Image-event* as Stuart C. Aitken understands it is "an *image* in *motion* over *time* through *space* with *sequence*" (1991, 108).

changes due to the weather. It is so cold that the sea has frozen and therefore the bus is delayed, the streets are nearly empty and people need each other to hold on when they slip on ice. The extraordinary environment stands behind many events happening in the story.

The weather as an external condition is especially responsible for the developing relationship of Alex and Nita. Nita throws a snowball to Alex to initiate a conversation, then Alex rides his bike, slips on ice and Nita comes to help him to fix the chain. Later Nita is the one who slips on ice when she chases the schoolboys and Alex is there to help her get up. Then they both walk on the frozen sea and Alex falls in the water with one of his feet. They are both cold and wet so they go to Alex's house to get warm. The house is seen as an extraordinary space for Nita, who has never been there before, and for Alex as well, as the house is full of the presence of his dead father.

In this case, the environment stands at the beginning of the story as its causation. On the other hand, the environment is also retrospectively influenced by the story. Alex and Nita bring life and warmth to Alex's house. Nita notices that the photos of Alex's dead father hang everywhere around and prevent Alex from getting closer to her. He feels like being watched by his father: "I see more of my dad than I ever did when he was alive". So Nita removes a few of the photos. Alex does not like this but he agrees in the end. Alex gives up on the broken heating and lights up a fire in the fireplace to get the house warmer. Therefore as a result of their activity the house changes from a cold place filled with Alex's dead father's photos into a warm home prepared for a new beginning of life. Another example of the story affecting the environment is the stylisation of the space according to Frances' emotions. The empty and hostile landscape and the almost monochromatic colours of the exterior are depicted from her point of view.

The environment in *The Winter Guest* is used to express a sorrowful space symbolising emptiness in one's life and a feeling of isolation. Furthermore, the environment represents a place where all this may be changed and comfort and new stability can be found. Both of these tendencies shape the depiction of exteriors as well as interiors. The most significant exteriors in the film are the flat snowy countryside, the seashore and the frozen sea. The meaning of the exteriors oscillates between two contrasting tendencies. The open space reflects the protagonist's actual feelings and represents despair and emptiness on one hand and freedom on the other. The same contradictions could be seen in the interiors. The house is one's home protecting its inhabitants against the outer world, but on the other

hand it stores all the painful memories of the dead husband. The memories of family life are part of the home and Frances at first feels she is not able to leave them unless she leaves the place.

The complex role of the interiors and exteriors in the film is important for the main motive of the story; a mother and her daughter going for a long walk together. When Elspeth enters her daughter's house, the door is not locked and anyone can enter. The outside and the house are easily permeable. As Gaston Bachelard points out, "this absence of a struggle is often the case of the winter houses in literature. The dialectics of the house and the universe are too simple, and snow, especially, reduces the exterior world to nothing rather too easily" (1969, 40). This characteristic applies to the house in *The Winter Guest* as well. It plays the same role as the exteriors in representing Frances' psychic state. It does not have a contradictory atmosphere and therefore does not need to be protected from an outer intrusion.

While Frances and Elspeth stay in the house, they struggle to communicate their real needs and offend each other while trying to defend their personal emotions. Frances wants to keep her independence while Elspeth wants to feel needed and this contradiction causes the tension between the two characters. "I don't need you!" Frances shouts out. Elspeth is shocked to hear that. "Don't you ever say that to me. I was a young woman when I had you. With young woman's preoccupations you taught me to care, my God." As soon as they decide to go for a walk, the change of the environment gives them a chance to express the essence of their anxiety and gives them an opportunity to open up to each other. Gaston Bachelard suggests that when we change the space, we change our nature, "by changing space, by leaving the space of one's usual sensibilities, one enters into communication with a space that is physically innovating" (1969, 206). Later, through the eyes of two young boys, Frances and Elspeth are able to see each other from a different perspective which gives them the final reconciliation.

During the walk they move from the haven of the house to the rocky, flat landscape. At this point again, the environment significantly cooperates in the unfolding of the story. The hostility of the place intensifies the emotions of the characters and leads them to the peak moment of the film. Bachelard compares the immensity of space to the intensity of a character's experience of the place: "the immensity of a desert that has been experienced is expressed through inner intensity" (ibid., 204).



The place for the walk is the grey stony seashore where Elspeth falls over and scratches her knee. It is not on ice but still it refers to the motive of slipping present throughout the whole film. Elspeth slips at the beginning of the story, then an anonymous street walker slips and holds on Lily, Alex falls off his bike, Nita slips on the ice and Chloe loses her balance at the end of the story. At such moments, all the characters have someone close to help them up. An exception is Elspeth at the beginning, where she grabs the railings in order to avoid falling on the pavement. As the film shows, the harder the ground is to walk on, the more people need someone to hold them up.

### **2.1.2 Isolation**

In both crucial scenes at the beginning and at the end of the film, space puts characters into isolation. It is visual isolation caused by either a long distance or fog. The spatial isolation is expressed in many other scenes throughout the film. The town seems to be remote from other towns and villages so the inhabitants have to rely upon buses to get to school or to a funeral. In speeches the characters rarely talk about anything happening around them. They mention events which either happened a long time ago or somewhere far from there.

The first encounter of the audience with an exterior scene in *The Winter Guest* is a picture of an old lady rushing across a snow-covered field. She appears on the horizon of endless frozen fields and she crosses it towards the town. We do not know where she comes from as there is nothing to see or no place is mentioned. This limits our knowledge of the outside world and focuses our attention onto what is actually depicted on the screen.

As a sign in reality, this particular picture of an empty, frozen field is a *natural sign* (Eco 1976, 15) which can be understood as standing for freezing temperatures, the weather at the moment, the climate and a type of soil and agriculture in the area. Being used in cinema, the list of its *signifieds* is much wider. The image appears in the context of other images surrounding it in the film. First of all, the context of directly preceding and following images determines its meaning. The first shot of the film shows Frances dozing in her bed in the early morning. Then an old lady crosses the field. She is in a hurry. We can see a close-up shot of her face and read her mimics. She looks ahead with her concentrated face signalling a strong determination. The old lady walks out of the frame and the camera stays for a while filming the white empty field. There is no sign of where the woman came from.

The image of the field reflects the world of the woman crossing it. The field, empty and cold, mirrors the psychology of the woman. The empty horizon signals emptiness in life beyond it. It tells us about the feelings of the character by mediating the experience of it. The space feels cold and certainly not like a place where one would want to dwell longer than is necessary. Therefore it makes the impression as if it was the viewer's own decision to leave the field behind and focus on where the woman goes. At this point, at the beginning of the film, the immense exterior represents loneliness and anxiety of the character. A very similar depiction of exteriors is seen from an entirely opposite point of view at the end of the film.

In one of the last scenes of the film, a schoolboy called Tom walks on the frozen sea with a kitten under his jacket. Here the picture of the flat white landscape is used again but this time in a different atmosphere. Tom is not on his own, he has got the kitten to take care of. Also the ice is perfectly smooth, unlike the field in the first minute of the film, and so it is easy to walk on. The impression of peace is enhanced by milky fog. Tom is not in a rush, he enjoys the mysterious situation of a quiet white dark as all the dramatic events of the story have passed: "No one has ever been here before, that's a fuckin' miracle, aye? [...] All the time in the world for it." In the very last scene, Tom's friend Sam dares to go on the ice as well and he looks for Tom in the fog. Before, Sam was slightly scared to go on the ice, but as he can see that Tom is safe, he does not want to stay on the shore on his own. The adventure is supposed to be shared with a friend. Tom is visually isolated by the fog, but in fact he is still connected with his friend Sam and with the cat he decides to protect.

The spatial isolation is complemented by social isolation. The freezing cold causes the street to be empty so the protagonists are not surrounded by a lively town. After the traumatising experience of her husband's death, Frances shuts herself off from the outside world. Her separation is voluntary, she does not try to socialise. At the beginning of the day, she wants to be on her own only with her thoughts. In the morning, Frances day-dreams in front of a window, then she looks at photos of her husband, while being immersed in her thoughts. The sudden arrival of the mother in Frances' house represents the mother's intrusion into Frances' inner world. As soon as her mother arrives, Frances shuts the bathroom door behind her and separates herself from the mother's voice by opening the water taps so that she cannot hear what her mother says. She is offended because her mother has stepped into her contemplation and her private world. The spatial isolation helps her to avoid a social contact with her mother. The door helps to save her

privacy until she is ready to face her mother and they both go downstairs to the open living space.

Frances' separation from life in the outside world is expressed in her work as well. She shows her mother a set of photographs she has taken. Elspeth looks at the strict lines in the black-and-white photos of architecture and complains: "you used to have a light in your eyes! [...] I thought you'd take people". Making pictures of people serves here as a symbol of life and connection with life. Taking photos of architecture is solitary work. The photographs taken by Frances have a counterpart in a painting hanging on the wall in the living room. It is a big image of dark brown square blocks on a dark blue background. It refers to the photographs via its shapes and atmosphere. Placing this painting in the scene causes the strict square lines never to be out of the shot. They are either in the photographs when the camera shoots Elspeth or in the painting behind Frances when she is in the shot. Both the art works help to illustrate the feelings of isolation of the protagonist.

The spatial and social isolation expressed in *The Winter Guest* brings into consideration a related question of the local community and the relationship to one's own inhabited place. Frances does not have strong relationship to the place and she does not seem to participate in local life. Her situation represents the current life style of many young people who have moved out of their home town for various reasons. In such a case, no memories are connected to the area and therefore the relationship to the place and community is weakened (Blaikie 2010, 165). This brings uprootedness and a lack of participation in the community life. On the other hand, it brings the advantage of independence and privacy. In the end, *The Winter Guest* prefers staying in one's home and Frances considers changing her mind about moving to Australia when she says "I'm going to clear out the studio, maybe paint the front of the house."

Unlike Frances, the older ladies, Lily and Chloe, have lived in the town for the whole of their lives. Chloe remembers the last time when the sea froze. They participate in the community life in what could be seen as a strange way by reading newspapers and attending funerals of people they know. They interact with the local community by collecting gossip and being the subject of gossip by others. Therefore Lily remarks on Elspeth's old appearance: "Not long for this world", and Elspeth watching Chloe through a telescope says "What's she done to get a face like that?" While Lily and Chloe represent the social rootedness, Elspeth epitomizes the rootedness in a place.

Elspeth is the only character in the film who mentions any real location in Scotland. She reminisces about the beauty competition in Prestwick which Frances attended when she was a little girl. Later, Elspeth suggests that Frances should move to Carnoustie rather than to Australia. She points out that moving out of one's home place deprives people of their roots: "If you're leaving your house and unrooting your son to go somewhere Jamie never went to, I bet he never went to Carnoustie." In this dialogue, David Martin-Jones sees a reflection of a real life on the peninsula: "Frances' extended dialogue with Elspeth demonstrates the East Neuk's struggle with its own diminishing sense of Scottishness, brought about by the settling of the area by rootless, global, middle-class citizens like her" (2009, 114). Community life is not idealised, but neither is independent life in separation.

The complex isolation creates an impression of time being stopped. Everything within the story happens in one day. The characters are kept from doing their everyday activities. Sam and Tom do not go to school because of the delayed bus which Lily and Chloe have to wait long for. Alex cannot go to school because he steps into the freezing water and Frances is prevented from her day-dreaming by a sudden visit of her mother. The spatial, temporal and social isolation plays a crucial role for the story. The characters find themselves in an extraordinary environment in an empty time slot. This situation makes them change their routine and contemplate their life. The contemplation reveals hidden fears and desires and results in a change and in a newly built stability.

What picture of Scotland does *The Winter Guest* create in terms of space? As it is focused on one small area, it refers to the diversity of cultural geography within the country. It does not represent Scotland as homogeneous culture. It rather accentuates the specificity of smaller areas and life of an individual. The lack of relationship to the country is emphasised by the isolation of the town and its inhabitants. The isolation of life expressed in the film is based on the tradition of romantic fictional stories set in the Highlands covered by the tradition of *Tartanry*. *The Winter Guest* transforms this tendency by avoiding the romanticism and omitting the national sentiment of the characters. Unlike the myth of *Tartanry*, the film creates a representation of Scotland as a country where the landscape is not beautiful enough to provide comfort and satisfaction and the remoteness is experienced as negative. The obvious solution may be to move out. Australia is considered

as an option given its post-colonial relation to the United Kingdom. It is remote but still part of the same cultural area sharing its history and language<sup>5</sup>.

*The Winter Guest* points out though, that the isolation is unconsciously created by people themselves, the point is not the landscape but people's loss of roots and lack of relationship with the place. Therefore, moving may not resolve anything. Instead, the story suggests drawing one's attention towards the place and working on converting it into a true home. As Duncan Petrie concludes, "The recurring metaphor of walking out on the ice, emphasised by the fact that the boundary between land and sea is never clearly defined, not only alludes to the courage needed for relationships to endure. It also functions as a subliminal reminder of Scotland's own peripheral status, a cold country on the edge of Europe" (2000, 208).

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<sup>5</sup> This argument could be reinforced by the fact that the modern British literature and arts are indeed marked with writers/artists coming from different cultures (from Joseph Conrad to Salman Rushdie), as well as depicting characters whose identity and life stories challenge the limiting borders of belonging to a single culture.

## **2.2 My Life is in my Own Hands: Cultural Identity**

Apart from the use of space, the identity and self-presentation of the protagonists of the film deserve our attention when analysing *The Winter Guest* and its relationship to the Scottish cultural context. Studying the characters raises questions of childhood and adulthood, national identity, femininity, memories of the past as images able to shape a personal character, reliability of the speaker and many more. From a closer look at the characters we can uncover the cultural identity the film creates. The previous chapter has shown the spatial and temporal isolation of the characters from their closer surroundings. The isolation is expressed also in the identity of the main character – Frances. She is not characterised as a member of a community, nor does she seem to have any friends and social life. Her separateness originates in strong individualism which is her weakness as well as her strength.

### **2.2.1 Individualism**

In the previous chapter, the motif of spatial and social isolation has been described. The characters experience it partly due to the environment and partly because of the difficulties related to the interpersonal relationships. Frances isolates herself because of her grief but also out of her strong individualism. She is convinced she is able to manage her problems herself. Elspeth, Frances' mother, expresses the same individualistic attitude. As mother and daughter, their behaviour is similar to each other and apparently incompatible. Their relationship shows the clash between the individualistic attitude and the need for a close, caring family and friends.

Frances presents herself as a strong and independent individual. She lives in her own house with her son and when her mother comes to the house, it appears that she is rather unwanted. Frances sees herself to be the only person who can be responsible for her life and as an adult individual she does not accept her mother's guidance. She refuses advice that she should look more feminine and does not think about her mother's life when proposing to move to Australia. Frances unsuccessfully fights for her right to be accepted as an independent person. It is not sure if she really knows how to manage her feelings and life and whether she might need help. We can say for sure, though, that she wants everyone to think she does not need help.

Elspeth tries to make the same impression. Scared of her old age, she wants to create at least an impression of not being an elderly person in need of help. She refuses to take a walking stick and she runs ahead of Frances to prove that she is physically fit. Elspeth pretends she can walk in an icy countryside without Frances' help. She as well as Frances tries to create an impression of an individual who does not need anyone. Furthermore, in agreement with the pattern of the mother and daughter relationship, Elspeth wants to feel needed by her daughter. Elspeth in her anxiety acts selfishly. She rejects Frances' individualism while she claims individualism for herself: "I can do what I like. If I can't do that now when can I do it?"

The individualism of both Elspeth and Frances creates the tension between them. Elspeth brought her daughter up by claiming independence for herself but she cannot accept the same behaviour from her daughter. After the death of her husband, Frances tries to establish a new stability based just on herself and her individuality. In the end, this aim appears to be unrealistic because to achieve stability Frances has to balance her self-esteem as well as her relationships with others.

The counterpart to the individualistic behaviour of Frances and Elspeth is the couple of old ladies called Lily and Chloe. Throughout the day of the story, they support each other and express their closeness. They do not make a single step without each other and they share cakes in a café. Sharing food as a symbol of a good relationship is used one more time when Sam and Tom divide a Mars bar into halves exactly measured with a ruler. On the contrary, Frances buys two sandwiches for her and her mother and Elspeth at once refuses to take them. Even though these are just little motifs seemingly insignificant, they illustrate the overall relationships among the characters rather well<sup>6</sup>.

Through the behaviour of Frances and Elspeth the film creates a world where people's behaviour is based on individualism. Individuals are responsible for their own life and they are the only ones to blame if they fail. This results in people acting with little regard to the others because their own benefit is an acceptable justification. Elspeth shouts out "You taught me to care" while she does not realise that she herself had taught her daughter to act

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<sup>6</sup> More about the cultural significance of food and related rituals can be found in Roland Barthes: *Elements of Semiology* (1968, pp.27-28) and in Eva Wiseman's article about the relations of gender identities and food in British culture (2010).

independently to be able to survive in the individualistic culture. Each individual wants to keep control of the situation. Charles Longino and Zanna Beswick point out that “power and control games [...] are a consistent source of conflict within the journey of this film”. They also remark that it is not only Frances and Elspeth fighting over each other for the control:

“Nita and Alex reject and advance [i.e. refuse one another and move forward towards the relationship], as do Tom and Sam, enjoying a tug of war with worldliness [i.e. they try to impress each other with their knowledge of the world]. Chloe explores the issue of power in their [of the two old women] relationship when she accuses Lily of always taking the bus window seat and, on the return journey, moves to a window seat of her own” (Longino and Beswick 1999, 49–50).

As the story of *The Winter Guest* implies, though, individualism does have its downsides and does not guarantee happiness. At the end of the story, characters accept their dependence and allow the others to gain control over the situation and take care of them. Frances as well as Elspeth realise that admitting the need of each other and being needed by one another makes them both much stronger and grounded than trying to ignore their core mother and daughter relationship and their own weakness.

### **2.2.2 Social-class Identity**

Social topics are frequently represented within the Scottish cultural discourse (Blaikie 2010). The tendency to deal with social issues is seen especially within *Clydesidism*<sup>7</sup> but in other discourses as well. *The Winter Guest* does not deal with social problems as a main topic but even so it inevitably constructs a social identity of the characters depicted. A closer look at the social situation tells us more about the construction of Scottish cultural reality in the film.

The main character in *The Winter Guest* represents a rather innovative social role compared to the stereotypical Scottish discourses of *Tartanry*, *Kailyard* and *Clydesidism*. These repeated settings suggest an image of Scots as a working class nation coping with external rule imposed on them. The first two refer to rural peasantry and they are seen as

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<sup>7</sup> For the description and the comparison to the discourses of *Kailyard* and *Tartanry* see the previous chapter (p.12).



discourses creating an image of Scottish culture as non-progressive and politically and culturally insignificant (Craig 1982). The third is very specifically focused on working class men in industrial areas of Scotland. The image of a woman independent artist living in a small town of *The Winter Guest* reaches beyond any of these patterns.

As has been said in the previous chapter, Frances represents a life style of a young middle-class professional. The death of her husband does not bring Frances any economical difficulties as she is not dependent on him being the breadwinner of the family. She mourns her husband purely out of affection. She has a creative job as a photographer and a house with an artistic interior in a nice coastal town. The heating in the house is left broken but not because it would be too expensive to fix it but rather because Frances is too much immersed in her thoughts to care about it. The obstacles preventing her from moving to Australia are just personal, not financial or social. Frances has to work to be able to pay her bills but money does not worry her. The financial situation is nearly completely left aside. Partly this is because money is not a daily issue for Frances, partly because the story is mainly focused on intimate interpersonal relationships and does not directly deal with general social issues.

The concern about the social situation is more present in the talk of the two schoolmates Sam and Tom. Their strong accents signal that they belong to the place in contrast with the more neutral accents of Frances and Elspeth. Considering the connection between a place and a local variety of the language we would expect an even stronger accent in Lily's and Chloe's talk but their language is rather neutral as well as Elspeth's. This could be due to the choice of actors or due to a decision to make an internationally accessible film.

Tom and Sam discuss the social situation of their parents when making an open fire behind some rocks on the beach:

“You get born, pushed out of the house as soon as look at you. Play school, nursery, learn this, learn that. What the fuck for, aye? They're working, you're working. I don't see them happy. I've never seen them happy. I've seen them laughing, I've seen that. I've seen my mum rolling on the floor laughing. It frightened me to bloody death. College, university, work, work. What the fuck do they have kids for?”

The boys want to take home the kittens which they have found abandoned on the beach, but they have to wait until school finishes to be able to come home without creating

suspicion. Sam's mother is at home, maybe she is a housewife. The boys complain about their parents checking up on them and at the same time they blame their parents of not having enough time for their children. The boys feel overwhelmed with school, homework and leisure activities like music school.

The topics they chat about and their opinions provide semiotic material for finding out about their social situation. Their parents work hard spending their days at work or at home working. Thanks to that they are in a good financial situation and therefore they can provide their children with music classes, the Boy Scouts and after school math lessons. From the point of view of the children their parents are always stressed, though. Even if they have enough money to live on they do not seem to be happy as they spend all of their time at work. Seeing this, their children are not motivated enough to study and they do not find good school marks to be relevant for achieving happiness in life. Of course, this conclusion has to be considered with regard to the fact that Tom and Sam are teenagers and are of an age when education is on the periphery of interests for most British children regardless of their family situation<sup>8</sup>.

Considering the social situation of the other characters in the film, their lives appear to be rather trouble-free. The characters do not express any sense of adherence to any social class and there are no class differences emphasised. Even though there might be social differences in the town, for example between Frances and the families of the boys, the differences are not significant for their interaction. No social issues participate in the story dealing with the topic of death and intimate themes of private life and human relationships. *The Winter Guest* takes the point of view which is focused on intimate, personal issues suggesting that class distinction is a concern belonging to another time and place while in the isolated world of a small town people are regarded as individuals and social differences, if they exist, do not affect their daily interactions with others<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> This teenage attitude towards education is caught in a series of British documentary films called *Seven Up!* (directed by Paul Almond in 1964 and Michael Apted since 1970), which is a much older example but nevertheless very telling. Also it is a topic of Bill Forsyth's film *Gregory's Girl* (1981).

<sup>9</sup> As a comparison to *The Winter Guest*, Sarah Street characterises other Scottish films produced during the same time as being concerned with social issues (2009, 139) and Duncan Petrie characterises Scottish cinema as much more focused on unsettling social issues since the year 2000 (2009, 167).

### 2.2.3 Female Identity

Apart from the use of space, the female protagonist of the film attracts the critics' attention more than anything else. Duncan Petrie points out that the Scottish film tradition is predominantly masculine. He argues that Scottish culture in the 20<sup>th</sup> century fused with the discourse of *Clydesidism* and adopted working class masculinity as the representing perspective. The characters and topics of the film narratives as well as the film-makers have been masculine. Petrie claims that Scottish society persists in focusing on masculine issues even in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, "despite displaying a welcome sensitivity to questions of gender relations, the predominant focus of the works of Alasdair Grey, John Byrne and Bill Forsyth was still very much on the trials and tribulations of men, with women still primarily consigned to the realm of 'otherness'" (Petrie 2004, 64).

Recently the situation has been changing and the female perspective has become more prevalent in Scottish cinema. The current female Scottish artists work hard to be released from the tag of femininity seen as *otherness*. The female perspective is no longer being seen as something specific and abnormal. The Scottish writer Janice Galloway expresses this thought when talking about her writing:

"I want to write as though having a female perspective is *normal* which is a damn sight harder than it sounds. I don't think people tend to regard 'women's priorities' as in any way normal: so-called *women's issues* are still regarded as deviant, add-on, extra" (Galloway 1999, 85).

Janice Galloway's wish seems to have been achieved in *The Winter Guest*. The film represents a female point of view created by the screenwriter Sharman Macdonald. It shows an authentically female perspective rather than a female perspective as imagined by men. Even though the film was directed by Alan Rickman, he apparently gave full freedom to his screenwriter and the main actresses to express themselves. That is partly why the film offers a perspective where female is regarded as *normal*. The audience is guided to personally experience Frances rather than watching her from the outside. This is achieved by using cinematic codes and motifs enabling the identification of the viewers with the character. First, Frances is on screen most of the time. At a few points in the film the perspective of the camera merges with Frances' perspective. This creates the impression of watching the world through Frances' eyes. The motif of her watching is integrated into the story also by the fact that she is a photographer observing the world through her camera.

This motif reminds the viewers who is the actual observer of the world depicted. The protagonist's perspective is confirmed also by the environment which has been shaded by Frances' emotions. For the dominant female perspective and the complexity of female characters *The Winter Guest* stands out as an important landmark in Scottish cinema.

Even though Frances' point of view is the dominant one, she is not the only person observing the world here. The motive of a female watching is used several times within the film to interconnect the story with the female perspective. Lily and Chloe watch Elspeth passing by while commenting on her age, Elspeth then returns the 'favour' by watching them through a telescope commenting on the 'ugliness' of Chloe's face. Nita hidden behind a wall watches Alex going to school. Later Alex and Nita hide to avoid Frances and Elspeth passing, Alex hides completely and asks Nita to report where his mother and grandmother are going. At that moment, he watches the world through her eyes. After having a bath in Alex's house, Nita stands in front of a mirror watching her figure and commenting on it.

The *normality* of the female perspective is achieved by being dominant as well as avoiding the contrast with a male perspective. Among the main characters, there is no adult man who would question the female point of view. There is no man who would pose his point of view against it and give it the feature of *otherness*. Simply by not giving an alternative, the female perspective becomes the only one to consider. Apart from the two schoolboys, the only man figuring in the film is the nearly adult Alex. It is him who suggests to Nita that she should come with him to the empty house and then takes her clothes away to dry them. He is a shy young man though, leaving the women a lot of space to express themselves. And it is Nita who actively determines the development of their relationship.

Theatre critic Peter Zenzinger says it is the trait of the work of Sharman Macdonald not to feature any adult male characters in her plays: "Her escape from a male-dominated Scottish culture shows in the almost complete absence of adult men in her plays" (2003: 135). Considering *The Winter Guest* as an example, I cannot agree with this. Even though there is not a male character on the screen, the whole story is about coping with the loss of a husband. The existence of the man then, even if he is just acknowledged and not seen, is the central point of the narrative. Losing him distracts the protagonist's whole life. Elspeth's negative relationship with her son-in-law and Frances's affection for her husband creates the tension between the two women and the husband's death is the determining

event for the story. The specificity of such a presence of a man is his passivity. He does not actively participate in the conflict straight in front of the camera. We know him only from the perspective of the two women and marginally from Alex's point of view. Therefore, as has been said above, the presence of the man does not distract the female perspective by putting it into contrast with his own.

For Frances, her female identity does not commit her to fulfil a social role traditionally dictated to women. Her individual character shapes her behaviour as a mother and a daughter. Her motherhood is depicted rather as parenthood in a wider sense. She does not do what mothers are stereotypically expected to do – spending their days in the kitchen, making breakfast for their children and keeping their house tidy. Germaine Greer describes the mother's role in Euro-American culture in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as suffering from isolation: "Mother is the dead hearth of the family, spending father's earnings on consumer goods to enhance the environment in which he eats, sleeps and watches television" (1981, 263). Frances is not a core member of a family who would either hold the family together or destroy it by leaving.

She rejects her son's attempts to comfort her and does not cling to him more after her husband's death. This situation is different from what Simone de Beauvoir describes as a pattern for mother and son relationship: "she treats her child as a baby. [...] she would have him of unlimited power, yet held in the palm of her hand, dominating the world, yet on his knees before her" (1972, 532). Frances and Alex have an unproblematic, although quite reserved relationship. There is not a single hug between them within the story. This enhances the isolation of both of them. Elspeth blames Frances that she is not paying enough attention to Alex and she hopes that now, after the husband's death, Frances will give Alex "a chance". Although given that Elspeth did not like Frances' husband, we might cast doubt on the reliability of Elspeth's strong point of view.

Frances does not take care of her son properly according to Elspeth but Alex is nearly an adult and he does not seem to be frustrated by this. Frances' feelings towards him are demonstrated when she shows Elspeth her photo of Alex laughing, which she really likes. She knows what he thinks of moving to Australia or of her new hairstyle so we can assume there is an ongoing dialog between them. Alex is worried about his mother's wellbeing but he respects her when she asks him to leave her alone. He is concerned about his mother meeting Elspeth as he is aware of their complicated relationship. Frances is presented as a

caring and sensitive person. Rather than a mother she is a friend to her son needing him as much as he needs her. “I’ve Alex” she replies when Elspeth tells her to not stay on her own for the rest of her life. Frances does not identify herself primarily as a mother, she does not devote her time to her child, but she certainly loves her son and cares for him. As such, she represents a modern parent who has given up a traditional role while remaining in a good relationship with her child more as a friend than a parent.

Elspeth, on the other hand, represents a mother of a different kind. She claims she cannot stop caring for her daughter even after she has grown up. For Elspeth, her motherhood and caring for Frances is a central role of her life. Simone de sees this motif as a main characteristic of mother and daughter relationship: “She makes her child’s happiness her only care” (1972, 533). Elspeth does not talk about anything except her daughter and her main anxiety is that Frances would move to Australia and she would die alone. She is anxious to tie her daughter back to herself rather than leave her to lead her own life. She tries to convince Frances that she needs her mother. At her age, being needed is the only way to feel alive: “A person needs to be needed and if you don’t need me you could lie”. Her motherhood clashes with her individualism and callous emotions and therefore results in a directive and reproaching attitude towards her daughter.

Frances as an adult daughter feels she should be taking care of her mother but because of communication difficulties she adopts a defensive approach. She tries to protect her independence, her own memory and her individual identity. According to Beauvoir, this is a logical reaction to the mother’s devotion that is tyrannical (ibid.). Similarly to Elspeth, Frances says she does not need the other woman. But unlike Elspeth, Frances sees being needed as difficult. She knows she should be taking care of her elderly mother as her daughter. What she wants in return is her mother to admit that she needs her and to become humble. This reveals a competitive essence of their relationship, the like of which is commonly attributed to fathers and sons (Segal 2007, 62). Therefore Frances’ behaviour as a daughter is rather on the level of a descendant without gender specificity.

After the traumatising loss of her husband, Frances does not think about men at all. She does not try to be attractive and does not look for comfort in a man’s arms. She wears baggy clothes apparently after her husband, as we can recognise the same coat she wears in the photos of him. This keeps her in touch with her lost beloved man and also sends a *no* signal to any possible boyfriends when she does not want a new partner at all. This is

exactly what Elspeth cannot understand and she is trying to persuade Frances to look more feminine. Elspeth is trying to force Frances to get over her grief and to start a new life because only then she would be able to find herself a new husband and be happy again. According to Elspeth, her femininity should help her to establish a new identity: “A happy woman doesn’t mutilate herself. I’m not talking about the husband that you lost. A woman is happy in her work. A happy woman doesn’t ruin her own beauty.” Being attractive as a woman should gain her more confidence: “Wear some earrings, for God’s sake. Let the world know you’re a woman.” Elspeth cannot understand why a woman would voluntarily cut her hair short because it does not match her perception of femininity. For her, being feminine means trying to look young, being attractive for men while keeping her independence. And being feminine according to Elspeth is crucial for a woman’s self-presentation.

The hair is not only a sign of femininity but also a symbol of roots, tradition and connection to the past. That is why Frances has decided to cut it off. She rebels against the notion of trying to be attractive as the only man she wants is dead. And she does not share the sweetness of her mother’s memories of the beauty competition in Prestwick which she joined as a little girl. She wants to forget everything and move to Australia. Elspeth, on the other hand, does not have positive feelings for her daughter’s late husband and wants her to keep everything but him in her memory. This is the reason why Elspeth is so shocked when she sees Frances’ short hair for the first time. For Elspeth this is a statement of revolt against everything that she finds important for Frances’ femininity. And as has been said above, for Elspeth acting and looking feminine is the core of a woman’s identity.

Elspeth with her approach to femininity represents the most conventional approach to the mother identity. She is fully focused on her daughter and emphasises stereotypical attributes of femininity and the need of a husband (Beauvoir 1972). Her character is more complex, though. Apart from her statements about femininity Elspeth behaves in an unconventional manner, she is energetic, active, loud and demanding. Peter Zenzinger points out that in a narrative uninhabited by adult men such a character substitutes the male counterpart: “A woman’s bossy mother, whose callousness hides emotional crippling, generally replaces the ‘hardman’ of the traditional pattern” (2003, 135). Considering ‘callousness’ and ‘emotional crippling’ as conventional “hardman” characteristics may be questionable. Certainly valid, though, is the idea of a bossy mother who partially fills the gap of a male character in the narrative.

Rather than by emotional skills, the gender roles are conventionally expressed by activity, energy and reasoning being attributed to men and passivity, patience and emotionality being attributed to women. Germaine Greer describes the stereotype of a woman: “She is more body than soul, more soul than mind. [...] her value is solely attested by the demand she excites in others. [...] virtue is assumed from her loveliness and her passivity” (1981, 67–71). From this point of view, Elspeth dominantly represents masculine characteristics regardless of her claims about the importance of femininity. Because of the conjunction of what she says and what she does, Elspeth appears to be a woman emancipated while still strongly rooted in her traditional upbringing.

This image of Elspeth as a traditional woman therefore clashes with the stereotypical portrait of a female. The stereotype of a female role is a passive object in the male world participating on the building up of a life of a man rather than the woman’s own:

“She takes his name; she belongs to his religion, his class, his circle; she joins his family, she becomes his ‘half’. She follows wherever his work calls him and determines their place of residence; she breaks more or less decisively with her past, becoming attached to her husband’s universe” (Beauvoir 1972, 449).

Therefore when encountering a female character as Elspeth, who is active, independent of a man and still representing traditional female values in the narrative, the image clashes with what we have already learned about the stereotypical depiction of a female. One explanation is, as Zenzinger says, that she substitutes a male character. This answer, though, does not fit the fact that Elspeth is the character most concerned about her own femininity. A more suitable explanation is that Elspeth represents a traditional female character as perceived from a female perspective. From the point of view of a daughter, the mother appears to be stronger and more dominating than she would be from the perspective of an adult man. And because a true female perspective has never got much space in narratives, this is a new and maybe surprising point of view.

Also the other female characters have more complex personalities than just representing their gender as a counterpart to the males in the story. The full palette of characters is achieved by positioning the central character Frances in contrast to Elspeth and the young, vivid Nita in contrast to the old friends Lily and Chloe. Elspeth represents a traditional female perspective which is concerned about being feminine, about appearance and about being needed. But Nita does not see herself to be very feminine and claims her body to be



boyish. She says this not with regret but with subtle pride. Even though she is not conventionally feminine, she is pictured as attractive for Alex. Her attractiveness comes from her mysterious allure of a newcomer, her self-confidence and her surprisingly active behaviour.

Nita symbolises a determined, energetic young woman distanced from the stereotypical portrait of attractive young girls as passive, innocent and childish or seductive, curvy *femmes fatales* (Monaco 2000). In contrast to Elspeth, Nita also contemplates her femininity but she does not consider it to be something she should be trying to achieve. She looks at her 'boyish' body and is proud to leave the conservative values behind, defining a new female identity based on other values than the stereotype. Nita's place in the story is not only to seduce Alex but also to bring new life to him and his home. She is new in the town hence she is not burdened with the shared memory of the dead. Her presence helps Alex to experience new emotions and to turn his attention towards the future. She points out that every day has to be lived as if it was the last one: "What if there is only this one day left to us?" She symbolises a start of a new life in the setting shaded by grief and death and the new perception of femininity.

While Nita is a strong individual representing vivid life energy, Lily and Chloe are presented as a joint character preferring the dead to alive people. Nita lives as if she has just this one day to live, Lily and Chloe plan future visits to funerals with their diaries, cynically commenting on the death of others. Their relationship counterbalances the relationship of Frances and Elspeth. There is no strong tension between them and they take the death of people they know as a natural last step in human life. Unlike Elspeth, they do not rely on any children they may have or husbands to keep them company. They are fixed on each other in a firm friendship. In contrast to Nita and Elspeth, these two characters represent the calm and stable atmosphere of a small-town community. Through them, older ladies are portrayed as enjoying coffee and cakes, funerals and local gossip, they are ladylike and quiet while keeping the ability to enjoy life until the end. Lily and Chloe represent a good-hearted humorous depiction of older ladies' characters.

What reality does *The Winter Guest* construct through its characters? Sometimes what is not present is more telling than what we can see. The characters in this film lack a strong national identity, their belonging to Scotland is not mentioned and most of them do not have any local accent. The main topic is very personal and universally human. Instead of

emphasising local specificity, *The Winter Guest* imagines Scots to be undistinguishable from other people within the wider European culture. The film depicts Scots to be on the edge of a new identity, less specifically Scottish and more open to the rest of the world. It shows life in a small Scottish town in a positive, gently humorous light. People like their local gossip but they treat each other in a good way, they are honest expressing their real emotions, positive as well as negative, without pretence. Tom is not shy to ask Frances for permission to touch her hair and to appreciate it. Even though the first impression is that of naughty school boys, Tom and Sam appear to be kind and sensitive characters. On the other hand, the community is not strongly tied together and therefore people may feel isolated and lonely.

*The Winter Guest* also reflects the current question of women's identity and indicates a change in the Scottish discourse. By fully exploiting the female perspective, it raises the question of what is true female identity. As Frances' hair is cut, traditional femininity is questioned and the result is a new image of an attractive woman represented by Nita. In the end, even Elspeth realizes that it is time for a change: "Time to cut my hair and have a boy touch it". As the film shows, the topics of individualism versus caring relationships and giving more space to females are the issues Scottish culture is dealing with at the present time.

## 2.3. Narrating the Emotions: The Events

Together with a detailed look into the use of space and the identity of characters, it is helpful to examine the elements which make up the narrative of *The Winter Guest*. This chapter focuses on the character of the events, the way they are presented, motivated and connected to one another. A narratological analysis of the sequential structure contributes to the identification of the genre and to distinguishing the features characteristic for the presented culture. A cognitive approach to the metaphors of the narrative is used in order to achieve a better understanding of *The Winter Guest* and its relationship to Scottish culture.

### 2.3.1 The Genre on the Edge of Lyric Poetry

The chronological structure of the text takes the viewers straight into the middle of the story. It starts with Elspeth visiting Frances in her house. There is obvious tension between the two. This holds the viewer's attention and raises suspense. The causes of the imbalance between the characters are to be reconstructed retrospectively from the references in their dialogue. From the beginning of the film, future events unfold in a chronological order. The stories of the different characters are intercut so that we know what they are all doing simultaneously at each moment. The chronological order of the narrated events as in *The Winter Guest* is not rare according to Mieke Bal:

“A conventional construction of a novel is the beginning in medias res, which immerses the reader in the middle of the *fabula* [emphasis added]. From this point she is referred back to the past, and from then on the story carries on more or less chronologically through to the end” (2009, 82).

Considering the chronology of the presentation, *The Winter Guest* is therefore not in any way experimental, it follows the conventional chronological pattern of a novel. This is a simple structure allowing the viewer to focus on the moment, the emotions and relationships of the characters.

The time period of the story which can be seen on the screen is in fact very short. Everything that is shown happens within the one day, precisely speaking, it is not even a whole day, as the story ends before sunset. Mieke Bal recognizes such temporality as a characteristic way of picturing a crisis: “the selection of a crisis form implies a restriction:

only brief periods from the life of the actor are presented” (ibid., 216). During that short moment of Frances’ life, we find out a lot of information to help us interpret her character and behaviour. To keep the narrative brief, everything happening outside this one day appears as short references in the utterances of the characters. No retrospectives or anticipations are shown directly. And except for the note about the beauty competition in Prestwick, none of the retrospectives is mentioned in more than a short hint. This keeps the story of the film focused on the moment shown, avoiding distraction with side stories. It gives the presented events a compact structure of the crisis genre.

Allowing just a day for the whole story reduces the physical events to the minimum. Lily and Chloe go for a funeral and back home. Elspeth comes to her daughter’s house for the purpose of doing their shopping together. Elspeth decides to change the plan and persuades Frances to take her for a walk with her camera. In terms of physical events, the scenario is simple. They go for a walk, they meet Sam and Tom at the beach and then go back home. Alex goes to the bus stop in the morning, spends some time in the streets with Nita and then comes back home. Although he experiences an exceptional day, meets Nita and the day is a start of a new life period for him, in terms of the physical world there is no change between the beginning and the end of the story. Except for Elspeth, all the characters go back to the place they came from, no one new arrives and no one leaves. Consequently, the narrative seems to be slow, yet intense. We spend just a single day with the characters but discover a lot about them. As in a psychological narrative, the emphasis is on the interiority of the characters. The physical events are in the film in order to define the characters.

What is added here compared to the conventional scheme of a psychological narrative is the change in the psychology of the characters throughout the story. The motivating force of the story is in the mindset of the characters and so are the crucial events. The change between the beginning and the end of the story lies in the interpersonal relationships and the emotional state of the characters. The physical events cooperate on the pivotal events of mental nature. In other words, unlike in an epic story, where the physical events create the storyline, here the physical events have the function of visualising the psychological changes and giving an impulse to the changes in the mentality of the characters. The German narratologists Peter Hühn and Jens Kiefer (2005) recognise mental events as one of the specific features of lyrical poetry.

They analysed lyrical poetry with narratological tools and realised that poetry focused on the mental state of its subject displays some features of narrativity<sup>10</sup>. Narrativity in lyrical poetry consists of the subject (actor) and a sequentiality of the events. The specificity of such a narrative lies in the fact that the self-reflexive subject is in the role of a character in the story and psychological events change the subject's interiority. That means the psychology of the subject is set as the initial state and within the 'story' of the poem the psychology changes. This is the principle of the plot in a self-reflexive poem with sequentiality. Another feature of such narrative is that mental events are expressed through rich metaphors, tropes and through formal tools of the text.

*The Winter Guest* resembles the poetry narrative in several aspects. To express invisible mental subjects, the medium of film uses visual tools such as light, space and mimics, gestures and all sorts of visual metaphors. The physical events metaphorically stand for the mental events. The metaphorical meaning of the events is understood through culture-specific conventions. To achieve understanding, the conventions must be shared by the text (film) and the interpreter (viewer). The analysis of the used conventional metaphors allows reconstructing the conventions specific for the culture in which the film was created and has been interpreted.

### **2.3.2 The Metaphors of Life and Understanding**

The conventional metaphors used in the story help with discovering the cultural rituals surrounding the perception of life and death. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson discovered that abstract concepts are visualised through spatial metaphors to help us to understand them better, or as Lakoff and Johnson say: "Once we can identify our experiences as entities and substances, we can refer to them, categorize them, group them, and quantify them – and, by this means, reason about them" (1980, 25). We use this principle of understanding especially when reasoning about ontological subjects of life and death. And as the ontological subjects are so central for every culture, these metaphors are of special importance for understanding the cultural system. If it is our own culture, these patterns of understanding are so subconscious they are very hard to recognize until we compare them

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<sup>10</sup> For more detail about the relation between narratives and lyrical poetry see *Příběh v lyrice (The Story in Lyrical Poetry)*, Tomšů 2010).

to a different culture. In arts, these conventional metaphors are used to achieve understanding, but compared to the convention, they are elaborated and further extended.

In *The Winter Guest*, the elaborated conventional metaphors can be recognised in the background of the narrative. The main plot is the change in Frances' perception of her life and relationship to her mother. This is a mental event. Frances tries to cope with the feeling of emptiness after she has lost her husband. Her plan is to leave her town to be able to forget. She wants to leave for Australia, a place so remote that she would cut off everything that constitutes her life so far, including her mother. The leaving is spatial but when understood metaphorically it stands for a wish for a complete change of her life. Interpreting the metaphor of leaving a place as symbolising a significant change of one's life is so natural because it is a conventional metaphor within the European culture.

Lakoff and Turner identify this as a conventional metaphor of *change of state is change of location*. They categorise the metaphors into groups where coherent metaphors create a whole metaphorical system covering the complexity of the abstract phenomena. The metaphor of *change of state is change of location* is part of the system of metaphors seeing *life as a journey* and *death as going to a final destination* (Lakoff and Turner 1989, 8). As they point out, there may be a combination of various metaphors for the same abstract subject in one piece of art until they all stay coherent. "Life and death are such all-encompassing matters that there can be no single conceptual metaphor that will enable us to comprehend them [...] Each metaphor provides structure for comprehending a different aspect of the target domain" (ibid., 2 and 53). *The Winter Guest* contains more than one metaphor for life as well.

In *The Winter Guest*, life is perceived as a journey in two points. As has been said above, one of them is the motif of changing a place pictured as changing one's life. The other one is the topic of going for a walk. During the walk, we get the most information about Frances and Elspeth, in their conversation they mention points from all their lives since childhood until their future deaths. The walk is a visual symbol of their life together. In conjunction with the metaphor of *life as a journey*, the film works with the metaphors of *life as a day* and *life as a year*. We spend just one day with the characters and within this short period of time we get to know them enough to understand their lives. Lakoff and Turner describe the elements of the metaphor of *life as a day*; the sunrise is birth and the night is death. *The Winter Guest* refers to this metaphor by showing one day as a

representation of a whole life, but does not exploit this metaphor fully showing the life stages associated with the times of the day.

The metaphor more exploited in the film is the metaphor of *life as a year*. Within this metaphor “springtime is youth, summer is maturity, autumn is old age, and winter is death” (ibid., 18). This narrative does not use the whole of the *life as a year* scheme, it emphasises one stage depicting the old age. The story of the film is set in the middle of winter. It deals with the topics of coping with the death of a close person and one’s own. The season matches the topic, the winter is a metaphorical depiction of old age and death, it weakens people, disallows them to walk comfortably and reminds them of their own death. The choice of the season corresponds not only with the older characters but also with Frances’ attitude to her life. She thinks she cannot be happy again in her life. At the end of the film, her decision that she will clear out the studio and paint the front of the house in the spring is a symbol of giving life one more chance. By means of the metaphor of “life as a year” at this point Frances decides to start a new life by referring to her activities planned for spring.

These and many other metaphors together create a coherent metaphorical system through which the abstract concepts of life and death are understood. When Frances says: “That’s all I want, to leave him behind” we do not interpret it in the literal spatial sense but as a metaphor for the wish to forget. For Frances, leaving means forgetting and that is the reason why Elspeth is so anxious about it. She refuses to be forgotten both in her life and after her death.

Other metaphors in the film testify to the importance of not being forgotten. Being remembered after one’s death is a little victory in the fight against mortality. And there are various ways of achieving this. In a moment of weakness, Elspeth comes with an idea of making a solid table: “Maybe I’ll make a table that I can leave behind me. A good strong table with legs that I’ve turned on a lathe of which you can see ...and when you leave it there is, solid... bearing witness.” Creating a firm piece of furniture which survives its creator’s death is the concretization of creating a firm remembrance. People will remember her every time they look at the table. Frances’ husband also left a remembrance, this time in the form of photo portraits. And metaphorically speaking, being seen is being remembered. Viewers do not know anything about his aspiration of being remembered, but it is Frances who holds the memory. She is the one who wants to keep the memory, or

more precisely who wants to turn back time and have her husband back alive. Reminding ourselves of the dead is a way of expressing our affection for them. Therefore even though it is painful to keep his picture constantly in mind and Frances wants to “leave him behind”, she still keeps her house covered with her husband’s photos. As the film shows, by remembering their dead relatives, people pay honour to them and at the same time they hope they will be treated the same way and be remembered after death.

Death in *The Winter Guest* is captured in the traditional Christian way. It is a moment of leaving this world and going to unknown, from light to darkness as expressed by the blowing off a candle during the funeral in a Christian church. Lakoff and Turner identify the metaphors called *death is departure* and *death is darkness* which are both plentifully used in English poetry. The time a person can spend in this world is given to people for a limited, too short a period of time. That is why Nita wants to live fully through every moment and why Elspeth demands Frances to stop mourning her husband and start enjoying her life again.

Frances’ attempt to start a new life is visualised in her having her hair cut. Elspeth is not happy with that, though, as it clashes with her perception of femininity. The hair stands for the present life and the memory of the past, cutting it visually interrupts the continuity of life and gives Frances an opportunity to start again. Elspeth then uses the metaphor of the haircut for a nostalgic longing for her youth. For her, the idea of cutting her hair stands for changing her opinionated principles and opening her mind.

The change in Frances’ decision about forgetting her present life and starting a new one is visualised in another metaphor. Under the newly achieved different perspective Frances decides to stay and build up her new life on the remains of the old one. She visualises this decision in the metaphor: “I’m going to clear out the studio, maybe paint the front of the house”. This metaphor suggests that caring about one’s place means being happily settled in one’s life. As we found out in the chapter discussing space in this film, the house is a representation of Frances’ life, therefore caring about it represents her decision of reconstructing her present life.

The change in *fabula* and in Frances’ attitude is expressed through another visual metaphor. Both Frances and Elspeth get an opportunity of seeing through different eyes. When they are on the way home, they meet Tom and Sam on the beach. Elspeth sits next to



Tom talking to him about his girlfriends, in her posture she expresses kindness and care. Frances looking from a distance suddenly sees her mother in a different light. She takes her camera and makes a photo. Later she makes one more picture of Elspeth sitting on her own looking into the open fire. Through the camera Frances sees her mother as an old fragile lady lost in thoughts and memories. Both the moments which Frances captures in the photos symbolise her comprehension and coming back to life. She takes photos of people which, as Elspeth says, is a sign of connection to life. She gives her mother a chance to be seen as a full personality, not just an elderly mother who needs to be taken care of. Frances claims that her camera sees “what I tell it. Often and often it will sniff out more. It’ll see the person if they let it. If I’m lucky it’ll sense their secrets too and lead them out, every single one.” She uses the camera to see deeper than she can with her eyes. Ironically this time, not even the camera sniffed the secret of Tom hiding a kitten under his jacket. Discovering the hidden kitten is a visualisation of the uncovering of new life. This moment visualises the change in Frances’ mind. It gives her an impulse to focus on life around her again. She starts observing and looking for people’s real self again and realises that life still has lots of secrets to be discovered. Seeing through the camera is a metaphor of understanding. Lakoff and Turner describe this as *understanding is seeing* metaphor: “what enables you to see is metaphorically what enables you to understand” (1989, 64).

The same metaphor of understanding through vision is used to express change in Elspeth’s perception of Frances, she sees her daughter through the eyes of the boy. Tom touches Frances’ hair and appreciates her eyes. Elspeth sees that what she criticises is appreciated by someone else, furthermore by a young boy, symbol of life for her. At the point she realises that her own perspective might be faulty, that she might have been wrong. These two events of photographing Elspeth and watching Tom touching Frances’s hair are shown as physical but their meaning lies on the mental level. The physical event of looking carries meaning of *seeing*, in other words *understanding*. By looking, the characters open themselves to the change of their perspective. The metaphor pictures the change of perspective as enlightenment, as seeing what has been hidden from one’s eyes.

For the narrative, this moment signals a transformation in the story. Lakoff and Turner draw attention to the connection between seeing, understanding and change: “Lightning is instantaneous, and thoughts that are instantaneous do not occur as part of a logical progression. They are flashes of intuition which may seem to come from nowhere. And just as lightning can have a force, so ideas can be forceful” (ibid., 94). Mieke Bal finds a

similar motive of looking in the narrative of *Schindler's List*: “conversion is defined as *seeing*, not in a positivistic or in a psychological but in a narratological sense; seeing differently, and seeing difference turns the *fabula* around, makes the character different” (2009, 19). That is what happens in *The Winter Guest* as well. Seeing, and therefore understanding leads to the change of the characters and their behaviour.

In *The Winter Guest* the metaphor of looking is used also for the meaning of controlling. Portraits of Frances' husband displayed all over her house picture him mostly looking straight in the camera with a serious face and ‘hypnotizing’ look. Even though he is dead, his influence is still present in the house through the photos. That is why Alex feels he sees his father more often than when his father was alive. While Frances and Elspeth just metaphorically opened their eyes, Frances' husband has to close his. He needs to be let go so that Frances and Alex can move forward. As a visual representation of this, Nita takes down the photos around the house and stops the dead gazing and controlling the family. Within these metaphors of looking, photos stand for the people depicted, furthermore they are believed to capture the true self of the people which might not be seen with bare eyes.

What can we learn from the story and its presentation about Scottish culture? First, as far as genre is concerned, we have identified features of psychological narrative and lyrical poetry. This step helps to specify what creates the representation of the culture and what is genre stylisation. For the cultural analysis, the important subject is the choice of the genre. *The Winter Guest* emphasises human interiority, importance of interpersonal relationships and refers to the Scottish lyrical tradition. Given the choice of psychological narrative and lyrical atmosphere, the film creates an image of a mental world of a person experiencing personal and family dramas hidden under the first impression of an idyllic coastal town. In a serious, dramatic way, the film brings forward bare emotions, fear of loneliness and death and expects the viewers to share the experience directly with the characters. Ian Goode recognizes the tendency to focus on psychological topics as prevalent in recent Scottish cinema: “One of the specific most distinctive and productive characteristics lies in the ability to express interiority” (2005, 235). As the film constructs a psychology of Scottish characters, they themselves contemplate their lives sitting on the Scottish seashore observing the emptiness of the sea, perhaps a realistic experience leading to the popular focus on a mental world in Scottish narrative art.

The metaphors constructing the story speak about the cultural background of the narrative. They reveal that it belongs to the European tradition by referring to the general archetypal concepts used for understanding the abstract phenomena rooted in European culture. The concepts of journeys and paths standing for life and death are inherent to other cultures outside Europe as well. They are one of the fundamental ways of understanding life for human culture in general (Lakoff 1987). Some other concepts are more specific for this region. Metaphors seeing life as a year and old age as winter anchor *The Winter Guest* to the area where people experience four seasons. It would be a different story if it was not built up on concepts of Christianity as the religion in the portrayed area. Certainly the climactic scene would change if it did not employ the metaphor of *understanding as seeing*. This metaphor enables visualising the eye-opening moment as looking at each other from the perspective of someone or something else. The same metaphor also stands behind the fact that photos are considered to capture people's true nature. The ontological metaphors are grounded deeply in the culture and therefore shared by people in a wider cultural area. Those described above are common at least within Europe and the English speaking world. They are not specific for Scotland, but they testify that Scottish culture has wider European roots.

### **3. O rodičích a dětech**

*O rodičích a dětech* (*Of Parents and Children*, Vladimír Michálek 2008) is a Czech film constructing an image of Czech cultural reality in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is set in the contemporary Czech Republic but through many retrospectives we are taken back to Czechoslovakia in the 1960s and 1970s. The narrative is focused on issues concerned with inter-personal and personal issues and history is reflected in the background as an inevitable interfering force. The story is relatively simple. An adult man called Honza visits his elderly father called Ivan to take him for a regular walk. Honza's girlfriend Marta, waiting at home, meets Honza's son Robert who is now grown-up. During that one day, Honza and his father walk around Prague, stop in pubs for an occasional beer and discuss their lives. Marta spends the day at home with Honza's son Robert. She is unhappy with her boyfriend Honza and therefore, confused by the resemblance between Honza and his son, she develops an erotic relationship with the son. The narrative raises questions of coming to terms with aging, of personal failure, of values and aims in one's life as well as questions about one's relation to one's home.

#### **3.1. The Ambivalence of Home: The Space**

This chapter focuses on the presentation and function of space created by the narrative. An analysis of the use of space and its meaning in the film can tell us about the perception of people's surroundings in Czech culture. *O rodičích a dětech* is set in Prague, a city where the main character Honza has been living all his life. He visits his father in his flat, helps him to make lunch. Every once in a while during their walk they stop in a beer garden or a pub for a pint. The surroundings of the protagonists in this main storyline is just one spatial layer of the narrative. Other layers are modelled by the retrospectives of Honza's and his father's stories and by Marta's home.

The unique meaning of the surroundings here lies in its role of creating a visual representation of Honza's and his father's living space. The living space is not meant physically but rather in a metaphorical sense as an area defining their mental world. It is not individualised only to one of the characters, rather it visualises the shared features of the unified personality of father and son. Their attitude to life is analogous, they think in a similar way and resemble each other in behaviour. Also the topic of children unconsciously copying their parents is one of the themes of the film. The motif of repeating life patterns

in different generations is emphasised several times in the narrative. This ensures that the difference between the father and the son is mostly in age only. Both the characters of the father and the son get the opportunity during the walk to express themselves fully, even though Honza as the central element of the three generations connects the characters to the one micro world and so his perspective is shown in the greatest detail. The complexity of the meaning of space refers to a general attitude of the three generations.

### **3.1.1. The Limitation of the Living Space**

The space mapped during the walk creates associations with the archetypal scheme of a labyrinth. In the European culture, the motif of a labyrinth has been used frequently by writers and artists as well. André Peyronie recognises two types of labyrinth in European culture: “those with a single passage (which were the only ones to be represented pictorially until the middle of the sixteenth century) and those with several passages containing intersections and offering possibilities for choice, error, etc.” (1996, 685). Typically, the complex labyrinth scheme contains a character on a journey going through a labyrinth for a purpose. In a labyrinth, the character has to either find the single passage or make the right choices to be able to pass. A labyrinth is a closed space containing traps and threatening the character. In this film, the characters walk through parks, greenery, children’s playgrounds, along walls and under bridges. Due to a few repeated motifs the places resemble each other and give the impression that the characters wander about and walk in circles.

In comparison to this conventional use of labyrinth, the film updates the scheme and attaches new meanings to it. The effect of twists and turns is achieved by frequent digressions to retrospectives, dreams and some other stories. Within this updated scheme of the labyrinth, these retrospectives establish metaphorical chambers where the characters dwell for a little while, then they come back from the past to the present point where the retrospective story is narrated. The points in retrospective are often crucial moments of life which could signal the crossings in the labyrinth of their lives.

The characters do not consider those points as moments of choice, though. In their narration the events are perceived as part of a natural course of life where they are just passive objects of the changes, or decisions are made by someone else. For example, Honza does not know that he has a son until he finds out by coincidence when his son

Robert is already twenty five years old. Robert's mother decided to not tell Honza about expecting his baby because she did not want to get into more trouble by staying with him. Honza did not have the opportunity to influence her decision. At another point, Ivan, the father, is not able to influence the decision of his wife, Honza's mother, who goes and asks the five-year old Honza about who he would want to live with if they divorced. Honza, unaware of the importance of the decision, chooses mother, because he wants to make his father angry as he had spanked him for the first time that day. Although Honza makes the decision here, he himself does not see it as a manifestation of his will, because he was a little boy and did not understand the significance of the situation.

Hence, metaphorically speaking, even though the characters go through the labyrinth of life, their life in particular is not seen as a labyrinth but rather as a journey chosen for them by someone else, a journey which they passively accept. The same attitude is imprinted in the route of their walk. The paths do not give them any choice. The characters never stand at a road-fork, the way forward is not questioned. They follow the route unconsciously, perhaps it is a route they have always taken and as a strong habit, they do not even consider it as something that could be changed.

The journey through the metaphorical labyrinth of *O rodičích a dětech* does not have any specific aim. The characters do not have any task to accomplish. The viewers are held in suspense as it is not clear where the characters are going. Slowly as the story unfolds, it is obvious that the purpose of the journey is the experience of the journey itself. Honza and Ivan go for a walk to spend time with each other and maybe also to help to keep the old man fit. They explain to each other events from the past but generally, there is no better understanding achieved between them. The last scene of the film testifies that everything between father and son stays as it has been so far. André Peyronie considers the feature of aimlessly wandering through a labyrinth to be a characteristic of modern art:

“During the nineteen century, the conviction that there was necessarily a path leading to an end died out and, in the space left devoid of its sacred aura, the modern wanderings began. The knights of the Middle Ages meandered through forests under the watchful eye of God, whereas the modern seekers of meaning run the constant risk of indifferent and meaningless peregrinations. The collapse of the image of the centre is undoubtedly the reason for the prodigious development of the theme of the labyrinth” (1996, 719).

For Honza, the purpose of the walk as well as the purpose of his life is to live with as much ease as possible. He avoids conflicts and approaches problems with stoic resignation. The father summarises his life in a similar way: “I’ve always acted as if someone was looking over my shoulder. As if I was writing a sitcom about myself, so stupid that even retirees in a nursing home could get it. So somehow I feel I have kind of screwed up my life.” Honza answers: “Doesn’t everybody?” “Of course, but one should at least try not to.” As they walk through familiar places following their usual way, the two characters identify the same pattern in their lives.

A labyrinth is by definition a closed space which does not allow escape unless you walk through it to the exit. The environment in *O rodičích a dětech* is not so strictly closed. The characters walk through the parks of Prague to escape from the urban environment. For these two people living in the city this substitutes walking in the countryside and provides the feeling of free space. The parks are not truly open and wide areas but they stand in contrast to the enclosure of the urban environment. Commonly, the areas of parks are considered as places where people connect with nature, they provide an easy escape from the rush of a city. In the film, the parks represent an escape from the city as well, but not a fully successful escape. The characters walk on paths constrained by walls, hedges, bushes and buildings. They never appear in an open place. Therefore this shows that even an open space as a park can have traits of the opposite.

In this film, Prague differs significantly from the stereotypical image of local postcards and tourist guides, as well as from the traditional image depicted in literary and cinematic representations. Some examples of the literary representations of Prague where the magical atmosphere of the historical centre is emphasised are Jan Neruda’s short stories *Povídky malostranské* (*Tales of the Little Quarter* 1877), Jaroslav Seifert’s collection of poems *Světlem oděná* (1944) and Miloš Urban’s novel *Sedmikostelí* (1998). Some of the cinematic representations are *Těžký život dobrodruha* (*An Adventurer’s Life is Hard*, Martin Frič 1941) and *Musíme si pomáhat* (*Divided We Fall*, Jan Hřebejk 2000).

On the contrary in *O rodičích a dětech* the city is seen without the attributes of a magical place. The city would not be recognisable if the characters did not specify it in their talk. Instead of architectural monuments, the Prague in which Honza lives is built up from abandoned factories, ruined houses and tower blocks. Through Honza’s perspective, the film shows that the life of a Prague dweller is not located in the city centre. It has been

moved to the periphery. From the viewers' perspective, this is a surprising portrayal of the city which might challenge their previous knowledge about Prague. It shows that despite the first impression from the city, living in Prague is not any different from living anywhere else and without references it is actually an anonymous place. Similar representation of the city is used for example in the film *Děti noci* (Michaela Pavlátová 2008) which also shows Prague without the illusions of a magical place. Unlike in this film, though, *O rodičích a dětech* does not represent Prague as a hostile and dangerous city but rather as a relaxed, well-known environment.

What further creates the impression of an enclosed space is the mental attitude of the characters. Their life in the place they live does not give them much opportunity for choice. This makes them apathetic participants. And so the enclosure of the space is not something forced on them from the outside, but it is created by themselves in their own minds. They think about themselves as being led on their way through life regardless of their own will and if they are able to make a decision they go for the easiest, the most straightforward option. That is why they cannot step out of the natural unfolding of their lives. They escape the city into the parks, but they stay within the safe area of the well known.

The characters' world is a closed micro world with minimal contact with the outside world. The father and the son walk along their route through the city, they stay talking to each other and no one else. The only person who accosts them is a lonely customer in the pub where they go for a pint. He listens to their dialogue, entertains himself with their petty argument and wants to join the conversation. Honza refuses, he feels embarrassed, because the man expressed his surprise that Honza goes for a pint with his own father. As will be discussed later, going for a pint together is a gesture of close friendship, the pub is a place where intimate topics are discussed and where people feel comfortable and relaxed among their friends. Therefore sharing the experience with one's father is a sign of an unusually close father and son relationship. Honza does not want to stand out. Among the old men in a pub, being abnormal is no good and therefore Honza wants to avoid contact with others.

The contrast of the micro world of the two characters and the outer world is accentuated by the motif of trains constantly present. Honza and his father walk under bridges and across railway crossings right at the moments when trains pass by. The train as symbol of travelling is strongly associated with the meaning of journeys, moving, activity and



adventure. Travelling by train has got a point of departure and a destination, the time of the journey is scheduled and the track is clear and well planned, the journey has a purpose. This represents the opposite of the journey of Honza and Ivan. They do not pay any attention to the trains, they cross the railway and look down on it from a bridge but it never enters their thinking or conversation. Their non-interaction with the outer world is illustrated by their enclosure in the little world which they have created for themselves. They observe the outer world passing by, the lives of others are moving forward while these two men blunder about in the same limited area.

We can extract the way the two characters perceive their lives from the comparison of the environment shown in the film with the conventional concept of the labyrinth. They wander around Prague and through life as if they walked through a labyrinth. There is no clear purpose to their journey and so their aim is to go through life as easily as possible. In the end, the father regrets he did not take more risks and he considers his life wasted as a result of always trying to play safe. The labyrinth is associated also with the feeling of enclosed space which the characters have. It is expressed spatially by the delimitation of paths and mentally by the limitations of the characters' everyday lives.

The limitation of the living space felt by Honza and his father is evidenced in the contradictory answer Honza gives about the fact that he has lived in Prague his whole life. His speech stands out as a kind of screenwriter's statement put in Honza's mouth. After being asked by his father, he gives an elaborate speech which does not seem like a spontaneous answer. Therefore there is a good reason for us to consider this statement as one of the important messages of the film. Honza claims Prague to be the only place where he is able to live because it gives him opportunities and a good level of freedom. In his opinion, people living elsewhere cannot escape their routine lives. Ivan: "Why would you want to spend your whole life in Prague?" Honza: "Anywhere else would be worse. Prague is the only place to be." Ivan: "Why, have you lived anywhere else?" Honza: "Two weeks anywhere else and the emptiness would drive me nuts. The blinkered vision that rules these people's lives. If you're a shoemaker, you stay a shoemaker until you die."

Honza is convinced that living in Prague saves him from a routine, predefined life. The contrast between what he says about living in Prague and how he actually lives is quite clear. The limited environment which Honza criticizes in other places is similar to the environment in which he lives in Prague. He is convinced he can get to know a place by

spending two weeks there. The attitude that Prague is the only place to be limits him and makes him spend his whole life there. His worries that he might have to move make him live a routine, slightly boring life where the only way of not getting bored is having a “bitchy” girlfriend. His father has got a similar attitude, but as he gets older, he looks back on his life retrospectively and regrets he did not take more risks. He sees a comfortable life spent in a familiar place as not enough for a well-spent life. He cannot change his past so he pushes his son not to repeat the same mistakes.

Honza is unable to see the limitations of his life, but the viewers are guided to understand this message. As viewers, we have the advantage of an extradiegetic perspective allowing us to see what the characters cannot. Honza represents a type of Prague character, a local dweller who finds everything he needs there. As his aim is to go through life as easily as possible, his needs are quite modest. He is not motivated to travel anywhere, and if he does, he experiences frustration from the unfamiliar. Hence he sees Prague as the only place to be. He represents a safe lifestyle where desire for adventure is satisfied by occasional sexual affairs. The spatial area the character interacts with symbolises the mental space of his mind. From the inner perspective of the character, it seems that the area of Prague is the largest and culturally richest in the country and therefore the least limiting. From the outer perspective of a viewer, we can see that Prague limits Honza as any other place would limit him because of his approach to life.

The motif of limitation of life to one place with the meaning going further to the limitation of one’s mind is a well exploited topic in recent Czech cinema, for example in Tomáš Vorel’s *Cesta z města* (*Out of the Town* 2000) or in David Ondříček’s *Grandhotel* (2006). The main plot of these films is a plan for escape from a place where the characters spend all their lives. In both cases the attempt is unsuccessful. Honza in *O rodičích a dětech* in his passive resignation reconciles himself with staying in Prague. As it is “the only place I know how to live in”, he is satisfied with the situation. Unlike in the other two examples, he does not even think about leaving and deludes himself into believing his life in Prague is better than it would be anywhere else. The narrative is aware of Honza’s false approach and guides the viewers to see the real limits of Honza’s life.

### 3.1.2 The Security of the Enclosed Space

The limitation of the living space leaves the characters passive and resigned. On the other hand, it has got positive aspects as well. Within their limits, the characters orientate themselves with ease. They are comfortable in their familiar environment. The enclosed space creates boundaries through which it is hard to penetrate. On the other hand, the boundaries protect the inside from an outer intrusion. Within their world, the characters know every corner, every pub and every plant. They can hardly be surprised. Moving confidently through the familiar and well known area gives the characters an illusion of control. It also enables them to pay attention to their memory and imagination and to occupy themselves with the memories of the past and with their thoughts instead of focusing on the direction of their journey. Moving within the limits of the familiar does not stimulate curiosity but enables them to move to a different time in life and linger there for a moment.

A closed space linked with security is examined by Gaston Bachelard. He associates a closed, familiar place with a house and a room of one's own where a dweller finds shelter and comfort. His contemplation of a closed space leads him to discover immensity in interiority (Bachelard 1969). When the characters reside in a secure closed space, they feel safe enough to limit the awareness of their physical surroundings and immerse themselves in their thoughts. The space found in human interiority is infinite. When a human being muses, their thoughts move from the present into the past, into overheard stories, dreams, imagination and emotions. In the centre of a closed space there is a whole world hidden. The closed world of *O rodičích a dětech* creates such a place of safety. The characters are turned towards their insides, they just sporadically refer to their surroundings. Due to that we are shown episodes from the characters' past, their dreams and the stories of their friends. We are shown episodes from their interiority.

The motifs participating in creating the image of a closed, limited space have been discussed above. At this point we must examine how the complex familiarity and consequently the impression of security is created since not every closed place is

automatically safe and familiar<sup>11</sup>. *O rodičích a dětech* uses various motifs and cinematic tools to create the impression of familiarity experienced by the characters.

Except for a few retrospectives, the story is all set in Prague. As has been said before, this place is familiar to the characters, they both were born here and lived here all their lives. Ivan, a doctor of natural science, recognises every plant in the parks they walk through. His orientation is faultless until a moment at the end of the story when suddenly because of his old age he gets confused and cannot recognise where they are. This is seen as abnormal, as a sign of his age, because he usually knows the place well.

There is another argument for perceiving the representation of Prague as a safe place in the film. Stepping out of the narrative, the question of choosing a location in the context of Czech cinematography puts the locality of Prague in the position of a safe option. There is a strong tendency in Czech cinema to locate the films in Prague<sup>12</sup>. The location offers the advantages of a rich, variable setting and especially for the films and television series which depict upper class inhabitants it is a natural environment. Considering practical reasons, in the Czech Republic, Prague is the place where the majority of the Czech film industry is located and where most of the filmmakers live. Prague as “the place to be” applies not only to Czech, but also to Slovak filmmakers. Film makers from Slovakia find more opportunities for work and funding in Prague than in Slovakia. This concentration of creative forces in the capital of the country is probably responsible for the ubiquity of Prague locations in the current Czech cinematography. The films reflect the life experience of the filmmakers. As a consequence, such dominance of Prague in Czech cinematography creates the impression that life in Prague is a major representation of the life in the whole country. In reality, the population of Prague constitutes approximately one tenth of the population of the Czech Republic (see ČSÚ). Therefore the narratives of life in Prague represent the life of just a fraction of the Czech population.

For the film makers though, Prague is a neutral environment and a different locality is often depicted in the cases of characters originally from Prague travelling to the

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<sup>11</sup> Compare the meaning of the motif of prison in Daniela Hodrová: *Vězení jako místo přístupu k bytí* (1997).

<sup>12</sup> The rich mutual relationship of the Czech arts and Prague is examined profoundly in the book of Angelo Maria Ripellino *Magická Praha* (2009).

countryside<sup>13</sup> or the locality is symptomatic for the story and its meaning like in Vladimír Morávek's *Nuda v Brně* (*Bored in Brno*, 2003). And so if the environment of the narrative is to be neutral the story is set in Prague<sup>14</sup>. These meta-narrative facts further affirm the representation of Czech culture constructed in *O rodičích a dětech*. It creates the illusion that the only place possible to live in is the capital, it is the only place where the creative force is concentrated and where people have a choice in their lives. People living in Prague focus their attention inside the city with the impression that there is nothing to miss outside. The voices from the countryside stay silent.

*O rodičích a dětech* in its ironic self-reflection is aware of its own limitation in the safe area and deals with it not by overstepping the limits but by admitting them to the viewers as a sneer at itself. The protagonist of the film lives in Prague, he complains about how life elsewhere is boring and predetermined while his life in Prague is in fact not any better. The film is located in Prague as well and therefore follows Honza's conviction. The self-irony is in the fact that the film points out how wrong Honza is when he thinks that living in Prague saves him from a routine, while the filmmakers stick to the Prague locations as well. An association can be seen with the cowardly nature of the literary soldier Švejk (Hašek 2008), commonly considered as a possible representation of the Czech "national character". Švejk embraces both sides of the dialectics; he stays in a safe position without self-reflection while it is unclear whether he is a fool and a coward or whether he is able to see himself from an external perspective, sneering at his own cowardliness and using it deliberately to make his life easier. Unlike Švejk, *O rodičích a dětech* clearly expresses self-reflection and therefore shows the image of the "national character" in a more positive light.

What anchors the narrative in a familiar Czech cultural context is also the motif of men going for a pint to a pub as a significant activity of a good relationship. As they walk, the two characters stop every now and then in a pub to have a rest. The pubs symbolise places

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<sup>13</sup> Some examples amongst others are Tomáš Bařina's *Bobule* (*Grapes*, 2008), Bohdan Sláma's *Venkovský učitel* (*The Country Teacher*, 2007) and Karel Janák's *Raftáři* (2006).

<sup>14</sup> A significant exemption is the work of the director Bohdan Sláma, whose films are mostly set out of Prague, in the countryside, and these places are shown as a neutral environment.

where men are safe in a familiar environment with their friends, they are connected by belonging to the same group. In Czech culture, pubs are of exceptional significance. Vladimír Macura (1997) argues that during the Czech National Revival pubs were the place of public discussion in the Czech language. Back then, the Czech language used in public was associated with a lower class and informal communication. “The guests in a pub or a café could have chosen which language they want to speak and what they want to talk about. That created a micro space with different social rules and still publicly accessible, not private”<sup>15</sup> (ibid., 65). Macura then adds that in the Czech cultural context, pubs are associated with drinking beer which is a symbolic Slavic potion. According to Macura, the symbols of pub and beer raise ambiguous feelings in Czech culture. On one hand, there is the pride in the Czech cultural space, on the other hand, the fact that culture develops in relation to drinking alcohol makes it feel inferior and insignificant.

As Jiří Gruša points out, the pubs serve the aim of talking and narrating stories. “I speak therefore I am” he summarizes (2009, 52). According to Gruša, Czechs like to go to a pub and impress others with their stories. This motif is pictured in *O rodičích a dětech* when Ivan pulls a book out of Honza’s backpack and starts reading it to the amused drinkers in the pub. When the father wants to hear about Honza’s newly discovered son, they go to sit down for another beer. The shared experience of drinking beer makes the talking easier and having the glass of beer in hand gives the characters the option to ease the tension between them at that moment.

In the Czech narrative art, the pub is a place where people feel secure but also, as is common in small groups, it sets the rules of what is normal and acceptable among its members. Going for a pint together is a symbol of a close relationship. Only good friends go to pubs, as it includes private talks about personal issues and about women. That is why the customer in the pub is surprised when he finds out that Honza goes to the pub with his own father. Sharing intimate topics with one’s father is seen as unusual. Honza feels the abnormality of his situation and so he refuses to socialise with anyone. Finding his father entertaining the whole pub with Honza’s book, he cannot bear the attention and rushes

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<sup>15</sup> The original in Czech: “Hosté v hospodě či kavárně však mohli stanovit poměrně svobodně jazyk, ve kterém hodlají mezi sebou komunikovat a o čem, vytvářel se tak miniprostor s jinými sociálními pravidly a přitom veřejně přístupný, nikoli soukromý”.

away. The image of the pub situation in the film together with all the behavioural patterns of the characters involved creates a familiar representation of Czech pub culture.

Apart from the motives of Prague and pubs, the impression of familiarity in the film is achieved by many other means. The camera often uses *medium shots*, shots from a medium distance, creating the effect of being involved in the conversation of the two men. The story unfolds mostly in the chat of the two characters and is reminiscent of a pub dialogue which anyone can listen to from the next table. The viewers feel as if they were a third person on the walk. The lighting is bright as the story takes place on a sunny day in spring. In the retrospectives, the light is softer and toned down, thus being reminiscent of old faded photographs. It associates childhood, the period of life in which what is later going to feel familiar is set up. The retrospective intercuts the presence and emphasises the feeling that all the childhood experiences connect the character with the place.

These memories being narrated by the characters walking through space create a visualised mental map of the father's and the son's lives and memories. The city works as a blank space into which the characters imprint their lives. As they walk and tell each other the stories from their lives, they reveal their mental maps to the viewers. Based on the principle of mental mapping, the characters "hang" the recollected memories on the places around the city. The area then becomes a rich meaningful space containing all their lives, not only physically as they have never moved out, but also psychologically, as it stores their memory and shapes their experience of life. It creates a strong tie between the characters and the place. Leaving the place would mean destroying the coherent mental map imprinted in the space.

The approach to space participates in the construction of cultural representation in the film. It models the space as a relatively closed area, limited to Prague and its parks. The space stands for a spatial symbol of life. It has got the features of limitation and security of a closed space. From the characters' approach to their surrounding, we deduce their passivity and reconciliation with their life in the place. *O rodičích a dětech* creates the impression that the lifestyle of Prague is the representation of lifestyle in the Czech Republic as a whole. This way it continues in the tradition of Czech cinema taking Prague as the ultimate location. There is a strong bond between the people and the place they live in. It is considered to hold their memories and to participate in building up their identity. It portrays Czechs as not particularly interested in their surroundings but unconsciously being

connected to them by storing all their life memories in the area where they live. The overall feeling from such a life is something between claustrophobia and comfort.



## **3.2 Detachment and Belonging: Cultural Identity**

The use of space is one of the features which construct the cultural background of the film. Another component carrying cultural meaning is the identities of the characters themselves. The types, their behaviour and relationships build up a presentation of Czech society and its cultural identity. This chapter examines the construction of the social roles and relationships depicted in the film. The characters of *O rodičích a dětech* represent a common kind of film characters in Czech contemporary cinema. This has been deduced from the fact that the reviews of the film do not mention the characters as standing out or abnormal that would attract the reviewer's attention. The characters seem to be familiar to the reviewers and their motivations are quite easy to read (Blažejovský 2008; Peňás 2008). Therefore it is justifiable to take the characters of *O rodičích a dětech* as a telling example of cultural representation in contemporary Czech cinematography.

### **3.2.1 Story-telling**

The identity of the two main characters in the film is partly constructed by the stories they tell each other. The retrospectives together with the narration of dreams and episodes from their imagination participate in the composition of the image of the characters. The function of these insertions is explanatory. The viewers directly witness the episodes and consequently they are able to reconstruct how the characters experienced the situation. As the stories are told by Honza and his father themselves, they reveal not only the event but also their own perspective on it. As the story unfolds, the characters reveal more and more about themselves and construct a complex portrait of their personalities.

The stories give an epic feel to the situational setting of the walk and give a concrete shape to the abstract emotions and experiences. They reveal the characters' tendency to narrating and shaping the memories from their subjective perspective. The events are presented as not necessarily true, with emphasis on attractiveness. Behind that lies the effort to impress by the strangeness of the story. The unbelievable stories on the edge of credibility give the characters' life the excitement which they lack in their present reality. Especially Ivan tries to create an impression of having led a rich life in the past, although he is willing to admit that his life was actually not very exciting.

Telling interesting, partly made-up, stories as a substitute to a rich life experience is connected with the pub and beer tradition in Czech culture. Sitting in a pub telling unbelievable stories to fellow customers belongs to a stereotype of Czech culture. In literature this motif has mostly been employed by Jaroslav Hašek (*Švejk*, 1921–1923) and Bohumil Hrabal (*Pábitelé*, 1964). In the identity of the characters of *O rodičích a dětech*, the tendency to story-telling accompanies the limitations of life space described in the previous chapter. It also forms the image of the teller in the eyes of the other character. The teller has an opportunity to rewrite history and create a new memory of his own life. It needs to be said that they do not always present a positive image of their lives. Seeing it retrospectively, the self-portrait is often ironic, it points out immaturity and carelessness of the character in the past. Jan Čulík argues that „This seems to be a confirmation of the fact that contemporary Czech cinema feels the need to argue over and over again that Czech men are self-obsessed weaklings” (2013, 244). But in this case, the film shows the men’s own perspective on their lives and therefore the negative self-perception needs to be understood as lack of confidence and self-belief rather than a true portrayal of what the men are really like.

The father and son relationship is caring but also competitive. The stories are instruments of a power game played by Ivan and his son. When Ivan tells his son a story about a monkey which escaped from the zoo and was eventually found drunk, he looks at his son and expects him to be astonished. Honza, his son, is not astonished at all, he has heard that story many times before in different versions, so he does not even believe it. Then, he tells his own story to his father. This time it is a story about friends eating human flesh out of curiosity. His father is astonished but he is not sure whether to believe it or not. If he believes the story and it is not true, it means his son has won the “game”. The stories work as instruments to get control over the situation and to get predominance. They are used to attract attention and to make the impression of a rich and interesting life.

The narrated stories are mostly related to private life and women. They either deal with sexual relationships or with one’s relationship to his mother. This shows that the relationship of men to women is one of the main topics of the film. This film shows these relationships predominantly from the male perspective. As a whole, the narrative is a subjective testimony of the situation from the perspective of the male characters.

### 3.2.2 Male Identity

The topic of the male and female relationships in the film emphasises the differences in social roles attributed to the different genders. From the male characters' self-presentation we understand how masculine identity is understood within the film. In this film, the male perspective is dominant. Even though women participate in the story, their characters are presented as seen through men's eyes. The only female who is not part of the male's storytelling is Marta. She offers the female perspective but her role in the narrative is to participate in the males' story. Therefore, instead of counterbalancing the male topics in the narrative, she ensures the focus on them by turning her attention to the male characters. Jan Čulík sees the narrative as being "a work about men, and about 'male values', about the 'meeting of the souls' of two male characters, about typical male characteristics and male anxieties. Women are discussed, but they do not participate in the debate" (2012, 244) Masculine identity is pictured as neutral. Male subjectivity shapes the perception of the world and the portrait of identities of men and women as well.

From the dialogues and the behaviour of the characters we can reconstruct their values and their perception of what it means to be a successful person (man). Within the father and son power game, Honza's father is trying to convince his son about the adventures of his life to get his son's respect. The stories which are supposed to create a positive picture of Ivan do not construct heroic narratives of the teller's past but rather amusing stories of how he managed cleverly to escape from tricky situations. That is the case when Honza's father tells him a story about being at a party with his brother-in-law, the brother of Ivan's wife, and a newly married beautiful woman. His brother-in-law asks him to entertain all the people at the party for a while so that he can have quick sex with the woman. Ivan is proud to have been able to occupy the people with so much fun that no one noticed that the two left the room. His story about meeting a beautiful woman in a spa town where he went for therapy is also a story of an escape. He thinks he was going to stay overnight with an attractive woman but he realises that she is not what she pretends to be. His reaction is to run away. We can see that the stories are not heroic but fall into the category of rather self-ironic entertainment.

In his approach to the situations, Ivan reveals what he considers to be a success. He values his brother-in-law for having been able to have any woman he wanted to. What fascinates Ivan about his relative is not only his ability to seduce women but also his courage to live

as he wanted regardless of what people think. His brother-in-law died because he went fishing while it was recommended to him that he should stay in bed. Ivan is secretly jealous of his ability to enjoy life, he admires his relative and regrets that he has not lived his own life to the full. On the other hand, he wants his son to stay in a long-term partnership because he considers a stable family to be an important value: "I just want you to stay with Marta. You're not cheating on her, are you? I'm your father I don't want you doing the same stupid things I did!" To sum up, his perception of success is to get the most beautiful young woman a man can find and have a nice stable family relationship with her.

Honza also wants to have a beautiful young girlfriend, but even though he finally gets one, it does not give him any credit in his own eyes. His father considers her to be his son's success after all Honza's previous girlfriends: "By the way, if I remember well, you were a rather handsome man. Although that didn't help, considering the women you lived with." For Honza, his own appearance and success with women is not so crucial, what matters to him is to be comfortable: "That's because deep inside, I was in chaos. Now, my face sags like a monkey's ass, but I'm comfortable inside, even happy sometimes." His father finds this hard to understand and asks Honza why he is happy. Honza replies: "No reason. That's just the way it is. I don't need to comprehend the inexplicable mess of my love life." For Honza the highest value is to be comfortable, happiness is an additional reward. Unlike his father, Honza makes himself comfortable independently of his relationships with women. What he needs for his feeling of comfort is not to be bothered by his erotic relationships. Honza does not express much concern for his own success. He does not have any aspirations regarding jobs or his private life. As has been said before, his ambition is to go through life with as little stress as possible.

Honza's son Robert has his notion of success based on the ability to live his life to the full. Just as his father, he does not relate his life ambitions to success with women. He is not trying to build up a career or settle down. He buys a motorbike instead of a flat and for him this is a symbol of fully lived life. It is not clear whether he has got a job, but he gets his money wherever possible and spends it on things which he can enjoy. He does not mind being financially dependent on other people. He comes to his mother for money every week and he takes three hundred thousand crowns (approximately nine thousand five hundred British pounds) from his father whom he has just met for the first time in his life. His aim is to enjoy life. That is the main value for him.

We can see the shift in values and life aims of the men across the three generations. Honza's father Ivan is focused on getting a pretty and a kind wife and on having a nice family. At least that is what he wants his son to do. He claims people are in this world not only because of themselves but also because of reproduction. Apart from the traditional point of view, this claim represents also his interest in biology. He emphasises the role of reproduction for the evolution of life. His son Honza is resigned, he knows he will not achieve anything major in his life, he does not feel the need to "spread his genes". He thinks his genes are not worth it. He likes women but he does not find them to be a central part of his life. Honza's son Robert tries to live his life as one big adventure. He wants his life to be exciting and rich in experiences. He does not think about money or a family.

The film creates an image of changing values not only between generations but also between age groups. Ivan did not defend family values when he was younger and Robert, the youngest, may change his views when he gets older. The film shows the older generation as people who have sobered up from the excitement of youth and now they are trying to persuade the young to be more responsible. But the younger generation represented by Robert is interested only in the present. This portrait of the two generations is not exceptional within the current images of Czech culture. Both characters stand for a typical image of their age.

Honza, the middle-aged character, stands between the young and the old and therefore does not express the attitude of either. He represents the middle generation which is disillusioned, no longer cherishing the dreams of their youth but still not experienced enough to be able to maintain a detached perspective and to review their life. Honza has lost the spontaneity of his youth and unlike his father, Honza thinks that mistakes are inevitable, because they are not seen as mistakes until they had been made. As a result, he goes through his life without excitement and without surprise. He represents the feelings presented in many Czech films from the 1990s (Čulík 2007), where people disillusioned from the euphoria of the 1989 revolution have slowly realised that the new regime is not what they expected from democracy before the fall of communism. Jan Čulík summarises the attitude of these films: "Today is as it is and as it always will be. The situation is

immovable. This, what we have now is normal. Nothing will ever change. No other world is possible”<sup>16</sup> (2007, 30).

When analysing masculine identity depicted in the film we need to look at the social roles attributed to men in the world of the narrative. *O rodičích a dětech* shows men in the social roles of partner, son and father as well as a young adult and a retired old person. For Ivan, his role as a lover and partner dominates his life. He and his wife got divorced when their son was a small boy. Honza stayed with his mother and this gave Ivan an opportunity to try to lead a life full of sexual adventures. His own perspective on the marriage is that his wife, Honza’s mother, was so tensed up and so dominating that it was impossible to live with her. Even so, it is her who suggests the divorce. This situation gives Ivan full innocence. He does not take any responsibility for the break-up of the marriage. On the other hand, it gives him the attribute of passivity. He did not do anything wrong, nor did he do anything well. Just like his brother-in-law, Ivan considers women to be the objects of desire, he tries to seduce them actively. Paradoxically, it is the women who control the situation. His wife files for a divorce and a mysterious lady in the spa town makes a fool of him.

Honza’s approach to women is similar. He also sees them as objects for sex and entertainment rather than equal partners. He claims he does not like nice girls because they are boring, unlike the “bitches”. And he is proud that he manages not to cheat on his present girlfriend, unlike on all the previous ones. Just as his father, Honza also does not have any control over his relationships with women. His former girlfriend hides from him the fact that she was pregnant with him and his current girlfriend Marta starts an affair with his son while Honza is out walking with his father.

The traditional image of the men-women dialectic where man is the active one and the woman is a passive participant in the man’s activity (Beauvoir 1972) is used here as well. In this film though, the relationship is updated by the ironic situation showing that it is in fact women who are active controllers. The film critically shows the naivety of the men

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<sup>16</sup> The original in Czech: “Dnešek je takový, jaký je, a bude takový vždycky. Situace je zakonzervovaná. Toto, co máme v současnosti kolem sebe, je normální. Už se nic nezmění. Jiný svět není možný.”

thinking they have got their love relationships under control while in fact they are controlled by the women. This topic with similar conclusions is plentifully represented in contemporary Czech cinema. It signals the need to deal with the problem of male and female roles in romantic and sexual relationships. The traditional roles in these relationships are not functional anymore but there are no new roles established, therefore men do not have any alternative to use which would be more successful. The situation is similar to what Lynne Segal finds in the US: “North America is now apparently populated by confused, insecure, anxious, ‘makeshift males’” (2007, 109). Czech film makers keep returning to this topic pointing it out as an important question for which the culture needs to find an adequate answer.

The theme of people thinking they control their own lives while they are controlled by someone else is not limited only to male-female romantic relationships. In *O rodičích a dětech*, the women are not fully in control. Honza’s former girlfriend Táňa decides to not tell Honza about her pregnancy because she does not want to get into more trouble by staying with the young, irresponsible Honza. But even though her son does not grow up with his biological father, he turns into him and grows up into Honza’s younger copy. He is selfish and irresponsible, perhaps as much as his father was at the same age. Táňa, although she tried to avoid Honza’s influence on her son, was not able to prevent what is biologically determined.

The theme of trying to control while being controlled has been present in Czech narrative art significantly since Milan Kundera’s *Žert* (*The Joke*, 1967). While in *Žert* it is politics that affect the main character’s life, in *O rodičích a dětech* and in other contemporary films like *Šťěstí* (*Something like Happiness*, Bohdan Sláma 2005) or *Muži v naději* (Jiří Vejdělek 2011) control stays in the hands of people around the character. Political and social issues are sidelined and the focus is on private topics and inter-personal relationships. The depicted issues are caused and dealt with within a small group of people. This adds one more dimension to the motif of the enclosed mental space, which has been exploited in contemporary Czech cinema and which has been discussed in the previous chapter. Although the portrayal of society is limited to a small private world, the setting within the small world stands metaphorically for a setting within much broader boundaries. Therefore the illusion of having control while in fact being controlled is not valid only for private issues but for political and social issues as well.

The portrayal of the romantic and sexual relationships between men and women is not the only important indicator of a wider cultural and social setting. Another such indicator is the relationships between fathers and sons. Within the three generations of men in the film we have got two of them in the role of the father and two of them in the role of the son. Neither of the two couples lived together during the son's childhood, therefore their relationships have not developed naturally. Even so, the sons are strongly influenced by their fathers in both the cases. In the film, it is explained by their shared genes and by the fact that no one can escape their fate.

Ivan, the oldest man, lived with his son until he was five years old and as it seems he has never entirely lost contact with him. Even though his son Honza is over forty, Ivan still cannot stop behaving like his father telling his son what he would like him to do. He cannot stop caring and being worried. His tendency to care is not intense though, he calmly advises his son rather than strictly insisting on his opinions. A few times he points out that he asks all the personal questions and gives his advice because he wants Honza to be happy. He is the type of father who behaves like a wise, old mentor. For him, fatherhood means caring by showing that he is interested in his son's life. His behaviour is not authoritarian. On the contrary, sometimes he himself behaves like a child in need of care by his son.

Honza did not have a chance to see his son growing up either. Honza's former girlfriend Táňa split up with him without telling him that she was pregnant. Her reason for that is that she did not want to put herself into more trouble than was needed. She found staying with Honza to be a complication as he was young and irresponsible. She preferred to raise their son on her own. From her point of view, the young Honza was not capable of fulfilling the role of a father. Ivan himself admits: "Christ, I was young and stupid." These two cases in the film suggest that when young, men are able to have children but they are still not mature enough to fulfil the role of a father which means they are incapable of taking care of their children properly.

When they get older, they are trying to compensate for what they did not do in past. Honza now when he knows about the existence of his son, feels that he should behave like a father to him. For him as well as for his father, fatherhood means to take care of his child. The fulfilment of this role gets complicated as his son is now grown up. Honza finds himself correcting his son's eating habits and helping him to sort out his love troubles. He also



gives his son three hundred thousand Czech crowns, a grant for which he and his girlfriend were waiting for three years. He claims that “for the first time things made sense”. His relationship to his son is not based on a long term relationship and long-term love for his own child. What makes Honza feel his fatherhood is simply the fact that now he knows Robert is his son. That notion activates what he thinks is a father’s behaviour.

This situation in the film shows the concept of fatherhood as seriously confusing in contemporary Czech culture. The role of fathers has been changing within the twentieth century and a new model has not been established yet. Every father has to find his own way of approaching his new role. The film suggests that this might be difficult for a young man within his naivety and childishness. Within the films made after the fall of communism, Ewa Mazierska identifies a trend of single men in their twenties or thirties who “behave as if they were children themselves”. In agreement with Robert Pynsent (1994), Mazierska argues that the previous socialist government took over the role of father of all citizens and consequently “by making their life easy, disrupted their passage from boyhood to adulthood” (2008, 106). According to Mazierska, in the Czech and Slovak films young men overcome their boyhood with difficulty and stay childish until adulthood.

Apparently even after the socialist regime lost its influence, the disruption in the masculine identity has stayed. In *O rodičích a dětech* Robert, the youngest man, represents such a character. He is twenty-five, but does not feel any responsibility even for his own life. In his case, it is not the socialist regime which would not let him to become an adult. It is suggested that the reason is the genetics, he is exactly the same as his father Honza was in the age. Another reason is his restraining mother who is dominating, strict and does not mind financially supporting Robert. Honza’s mother represents the same type. Therefore like the authoritarian socialist regime it is in fact the mothers who do not allow their sons to grow up and become adults responsible for themselves.

Mazierska points out that in Polish post-communist cinema, the character of a man abandoning his pregnant woman occurs frequently, in Czech cinema, this motif is found as well. “Consequently, the impression is given, that unlike motherhood that is a woman’s duty fatherhood is a man’s right, which can be taken an advantage of as he wishes” (ibid., 122). In the case of *O rodičích a dětech*, the fathers do not abandon their wives out of choice. Rather, it is a decision of the women to live without their child’s father. In this

film, fathers do not have the choice, they are powerless. That means, from the perspective of this film, the women are not seen as victims of the irresponsible men, but they are themselves responsible for their situation.

Mazierska considers the character of father in film to stand for a representation of authority. Therefore the way the character is presented refers to an approach towards authority, more precisely the state and the government. She finds authoritarian, faultless fathers in the socialist-realist films from the 1950s and weak, disoriented fathers in the films made in 1960s. According to Mazierska, the image of fathers and that of children approaching their authority tells us about how social authority is perceived in each culture.

*O rodičích a dětech* features the type of father who is not authoritarian or faultless, nor is he ridiculous in his efforts to hide his weakness. Here, the fathers are modest, they know about their inability to serve as a good example, they do not ask to be respected by their children. They themselves behave like children sometimes. What they want is their children not to repeat their mistakes and so the fathers advise them from the perspective of older age. They take care of their children but they do not significantly support them. When Honza tries to support his son and gives him money for a flat, Robert buys a motorbike instead and seduces Honza's girlfriend. The only one, rash attempt for support is not appropriately received.

The social authority represented by the fathers in the film is perceived as something that people cannot avoid because they share genes, memories and culture. Contemporary Czech society, represented by the sons in the narrative, does not take the father's authority seriously. Yet society is aware of the social authority's flaws and approaches it with leniency. People do not rebel against the social authority's strict rules as the rules are evidently weak or nonexistent. People do not rely upon the social authority's help, they live independently. As the film suggests, when the social authority tries to help, it does not go to the right place. Currently, the social authority does not have the power of those social authorities from the past. It is rather just another fallible subject which is an inevitable part of people's lives.

### **3.2.3 The Continuity of Generations**

As has been mentioned above, the father and son relationships of both the pairs in the narrative are disrupted by the fact that the two men have not had a chance to live together.

Despite that, the sons resemble their fathers' characters. When he meets his own son, Honza notices that he behaves exactly like his father. Robert lives a similar carefree life as Honza did at his age and furthermore he makes the same gestures. This motif suggests that despite of all the effort no one can escape their roots. The continuity of generations is inevitable. As shown in the film, people make the same mistakes as their parents and grandparents did and their life is based on the same models despite the fact that the circumstances have changed. The fatalistic perception of a person's belonging to a chain of generations gives the characters an option to evade personal responsibility. It gives them the feeling that there is no escape from their situation because it is not affected by their personal decision-making. A son makes the same mistakes as his father even though his father warns him and tries to prevent his son from repeating the mistakes. But the son cannot change.

A motif that goes through the whole narrative is the repetition of the same mistakes in men's approach to women. Ivan, the oldest, is trying to warn Honza to not cheat on his girlfriend. Ivan himself apparently used to cheat himself, but he found out that it destroys the stability of a relationship. The importance of this recognition cannot be transferred to his son, though. Honza claims he does not cheat on his girlfriend but when he gets to a night-time bar for a coffee, he starts flirting with a female customer. Another repeated mistake is paying too little attention to their partners and taking them for granted. In one of the retrospective insights we can see Ivan's wife complaining about not getting enough attention and entertainment from her husband. That is one of the reasons for her filing for a divorce. A similar mistake is made by Honza. He does not spend any time with his girlfriend, he does not tell her that he is going to stay overnight at his father's and he does not tell her that he has given all their money to his son. As a result, she loses patience with him and finds a new partner in his son Robert.

Not only generations, but also individuals repeat their mistakes. That is why Honza keeps dating intolerable girls following his belief that nice girls are boring. His girlfriend Marta falls in love with Honza's son because she is disappointed by Honza. She cannot help it even though she knows that Robert is a very similar character to his father. Marta's behaviour refers to Táňa, Robert's mother and Honza's former girlfriend. She used to go out with young Honza and when she got pregnant, she considered it to be a mistake and decided to rather stay on her own. Through the inter-generational connection between the two women it is suggested that Marta's life might unfold in a similar way. From this

example, it is clear that not only men repeat their mistakes and the mistakes of their fathers. It is a more general problem concerning everyone regardless of their gender.

Honza is aware of the inevitable fate caused by the fact that he has the characteristics of his relatives and that makes him resigned and passive. The others, Marta and Robert, have the illusion of making decisions according to their will but they do not realise that what they are doing copies the actions of the previous generations. The inevitable connection with a chain of generations and the subconscious repeating of mistakes is linked to the motif of the enclosed living space analysed in the previous chapter. The life pattern has got the shape of a labyrinth where only a limited number of options is possible.

The portrait of cultural identity presented in *O rodičích a dětech* emphasises the role of the male subjects. It shows people's tendency to story-telling as a tool for impressing others. The film also features an image of different generations, depicting the young as irresponsible and spontaneous and the old as revising their life in their loneliness. The middle generation is portrayed as a generation which has lost their illusions and has become apathetic, thinking that they are not able to change anything. They take reality as it is and try to go through life with as little difficulties as possible. The film sees male identity as constructed on the male's success with women. Even so, there is a weak connection to females, even to a man's closest ones. Mother is ignored or even destroyed in a man's imagination. Women are needed by men to define themselves by sexual success with them, but women are not a part of the men's world. On the contrary, the narrative presents men as strongly connected to their male relatives. That gives a man a feeling of belonging to a group giving them security as well as limitations. Within the male group, they are all caring and understanding. The film shows the males as alienated from their female relatives. Partly due to this, the men cultivate their bonds with other men. From the perspective of this narrative, the traditional male family roles in current Czech society are disintegrating and new roles have not been stabilised yet.

The film shows Czechs as living under the illusion of having control over their own lives. From the point of view of the film, the Czechs deal with disillusionment and failure by hiding the disappointment behind their self-ironic stories. When people realise that their life is not in their own hands, they react with passivity and apathy. The image of Czech culture created by the film shows a society enclosed in ever-repeated patterns and at the same time protected by the continuity and stability of the same patterns. *O rodičích a*

*dětech* does not offer any way out of this situation. The final scene brings a conclusion showing that harmony and serenity comes when a person accepts their fate and finds reconciliation with their past.

### 3.3 Life as a Collection of Stories: The Events

The analysis of the film *O rodičích a dětech* has so far been focused on the subjects of space and the identity of the characters. Another dimension needed for cultural analysis is the construction of the narrative itself. In this chapter, the events and their sequentiality are examined. This helps to identify the features of the genre and the features creating a presentation of the culture. Narratological analysis is combined with a cognitive approach which allows us to see particular features of the narrative as culturally determined mental patterns. *O rodičích a dětech* is a narrative rich on events, the main story line is cut through with the retrospectives and episodes which take place in the character's imagination. At the same time, the viewers watch events happening simultaneously during the walk and in Marta's flat.

#### 3.3.1 The Genre in the Czech Tradition

*O rodičích a dětech* is advertised as a "poetic comedy/drama" (see ČSFD). However, viewers might be disappointed if they expect a poetic story. The notion of a poetic atmosphere is evoked only by the fact that the main story line of the father and the son during their walk unfolds quite slowly, without any major events. The emphasis is on their mutual relationship, their emotions, their memories of the past and the ways of dealing with the world around them. Nothing significant happens in the physical world they walk through. But, on the other hand, the intercut other storylines and the storyline of Marta and Robert are rich in events, even dramatic ones. These parts justify the label of drama. Just as many other contemporary Czech films, *O rodičích a dětech* also uses features of comedy to lighten the atmosphere of the dramatic moments. The overall impression is then bitter-sweet.

Journalist Irena Hejdová (2008) compares the film to several famous American and German films. In her view, the Czech film seems to be nearly as "good" as the American and German films, but still not as "good" as the others. Such a comparison makes the controversial assumption that Czech culture should be trying to emulate other cultures. This approach is fully in line with the feelings of constrained existence, expressed in the film, when the author says that Czech culture has to be considered with regard to its limitations and, within the limitations of Czech culture, the film is good enough.

“The film *O rodičích a dětech* is in fact a road movie. More precisely, a walking road movie in the (better) Czech tradition. While the characters in an American movie moved off in a fancy sports car, the characters in Czech films go on a slow ride in *The Ride*. While in *Lola*, life was at stake, in the Czech film *Děvčátko (The Little Girl)* [emphasis added] life slowly flows among blocks of flats”<sup>17</sup> (ibid.).

Perhaps a more sensitive comparison is suggested by Angelo Maria Ripellino. He identifies a tradition of Prague walkers in Czech culture. Inspired by Komenský’s *Labyrinth* (first published 1631) the motif of a walker has been common to Czech art and literature for centuries. And walking around Prague seems to be one of the beloved activities of Czech poets. Especially, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Czech poets found much inspiration in their walks (Rippelino 2009). *O rodičích a dětech* follows the Prague walking tradition of the Czech artists. In the light of the local cultural context, the film simply is not just a weak version of an American or a German road movie. It reveals its contextual inspiration. It anchors its roots in Czech culture.

The main storyline of the walk serves as a frame for the stories hanging on it. It is focused on the dialogue of the father and the son where they answer various questions about their past and present to each other and to the viewers. The situation of the walk contains very few events. It is the most “poetic” part of the narrative. The events in this part of the film take place in the mental world of the two male characters. If the stories which the characters tell were put aside, the events would mostly involve a changing dynamic between the father and the son constantly competing with each other in terms of who understands the world better. Dominance switches from the father to the son and back throughout the story creating an oscillating dynamic between the two characters.

The peak event changing the dynamic takes place when the father, Ivan, accuses Honza that he has never been able to like anyone. Honza just stares unbelievably at his father. From the following events it is clear that Ivan was slightly out of his mind when he claimed this. Just a few seconds later he asks Honza where they are because he cannot recognise the city. This point releases the tension between the two men. Honza forgives his

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<sup>17</sup> The original in Czech: “Film *O rodičích a dětech* je vlastně roadmovie. Konkrétněji pěší roadmovie v (té lepší) české tradici. Kde se v americkém filmu vyrazilo v nadupaném sportáku, u nás se konala spíš poklidná *Jízda*, zatímco *Lola* běžela o život, české *Děvčátko* volně plynulo mezi paneláky [emphasis added]”. This

father, takes care of him and helps him to get back home. Even though this is the culmination of the film, it is not depicted in a very dramatic way. The tension does not accumulate before and Honza does not react in any charged way. The culmination event matches the slow pace of the walk by not being dramatised.

The whole film takes place during a single day. Within such a time frame, the narrative can assume two contradictory extremes. On one hand, it can be dramatic and eventful, as in the genre of crisis, within a single day the whole life of a character is turned upside down. On the other hand, the narrative can be rather slow and lyrical, poor in events, the focus being on experiencing every moment to the full. *O rodičích a dětech* is closer to the second type. The events happening during the walk are not numerous. Despite that, the narrative of the whole film is rich in events. These events all take place at different times or different places beyond the walk. The images are intercut into the walk and so the viewers see the stories told by the characters. Also the story of Marta and Robert is intercut into the walk so that we know what all the characters are doing at the same time. This technique creates an illusion of the day being a long period of time uncovering a whole life. On the day when the narrative is set, the main characters are not present during the events. That gives the impression of the father and the son living in a “bubble” of slow, calm life, while changes happen at a distance from them or have already happened in the past.

The intercut stories add an epic feel to the walk and give a concrete shape to the abstract emotions and memories experienced by the characters. They reveal the characters’ tendency to narration which is associated with the term of “pábitel” (palaverer) invented by Bohumil Hrabal for his literary characters. “Pábitels are characters from the periphery of society who are overflowing with stories from their lives. With pleasure they tell the stories to anyone who is willing to listen. The stories are exaggerated, muddled up, recast with the use of inspiration”<sup>18</sup> (Galík 1994). On the official web pages devoted to Czech literature Radim Kopáč discussed the book *O rodičích a dětech*, which the film is based on:

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assertion is not even true, *Děvčátka* (Benjamin Tuček 2002) is a horror movie about loneliness and it also features the death of an important character.

<sup>18</sup> The original in Czech: “Pábitelé jsou postavy z okraje společnosti přímo nabitě událostmi svého života, jež se značným potěšením sdělují všem, kdož jsou ochotni poslouchat – zveličené, zpřeházené, přetavené diamantovým očkem inspirace”. See also the original book by Bohumil Hrabal: *Pábitelé* (1964).



“While the purpose of Hrabal’s palavering is a search for the poetic ‘pearls of the deep’, extraordinary, stunning events in everyone’s life, a total realist Hakl [the author of the novel and of the film script] presents the confession of a person who admits sceptically that he is often at his wits’ end. Hence he simply has no time to look for the ‘pearls of the deep’”<sup>19</sup> (Kopáč 2010).

What is valid for the narrative of the novel on which the film is based applies to the narrative in the film as well. Honza and his father comment on life without any illusions. They do not express excitement about variety of life and about hidden gems in peoples’ characters. For this reason, they may be closer to reality story-telling which is associated with spending life in pubs, drinking beer, listening to stories and telling them further. In such a situation, the purpose of such story-telling is simply to keep contact and fill the time, or alternatively to impress one’s fellow drinkers with one’s extensive knowledge of the world. No philosophical purpose such as looking for hidden, fascinating facts within the human soul is involved.

The cultural presentation which this film creates is that of Czechs’ living a slow, unexciting life which is balanced by telling exaggerated stories of a person’s past. The Czech soft spot for epic stories is indicated also by the choice of the genre. The walk itself is apparently considered as not sufficient for a film narrative. That is why the stories are not only told by the characters but they are further emphasized by being directly shown on the screen. Also the simultaneous storyline of Marta and Robert’s love unfolds like the beginning of a dramatic love story. This is not to say that the discourse of pub story-telling is specific for Czech culture. Certainly people sitting together telling stories for no other reason than entertainment purpose are a common feature everywhere in the world. What is significant in Czech culture is the use of this model in the arts. Its existence in contemporary art has been pre-determined by the literary tradition. The reason pub talk is so popular in the Czech art context might be that Czech culture has always been connected

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<sup>19</sup> The original in Czech: “Zatímco však smyslem hrabalovského pábení je hledání a nalézání poetických ‚perliček na dně‘, totální realista Hakl předkládá čtenáři zповěď člověka, který s moudrým odstupem skeptika uznává, že si sám se sebou mnohdy neví rady, tuze často zakouší pocit, že „život nám ujíždí pod zadkem jako autobus s řidičem, raněným mrtvicí...“a na hledání ‚perliček na dně‘ mu tudíž jednoduše nezbývá čas”.

to the pub environment, which has always been seen as a place of unrestricted Czech discourse<sup>20</sup>.

The main characters of *Honza* and Ivan slowly walk reminiscing about their lives, while the main event of the day is taking place in Honza's flat. In accordance to what has been said above, this event takes place where the main characters of Honza and his fathers are not. Robert comes uninvited to the flat which Marta shares with his father Honza. He comes to return a book and have a chat with his father. Instead, he finds here sleepy Marta, who is at first on her guard, but quickly becomes friendly and relaxed. The change in her approach takes place when Robert manages to fix her laptop. This event puts him in the role of a friend instead of a stranger intruding into her private space. When he tells her about getting money from his father and using it for buying a motorbike instead of a flat, this discovery does not change Marta's perception of Robert, but makes her angry with her boyfriend Honza because he did not tell her he was going to give their shared money to his son.

These two events of Marta befriending Robert and her estrangement from Honza prepare the ground for the climactic event of the narrative. Marta decides to leave Honza. Honza receives a phone call from Marta that he should not come back home again. When he finds out, his eyes fill with tears and he is immediately depressed. In the final scene, though, he goes for another walk with his father again, as if nothing has changed. The narrative suggests that regardless of what happens in our lives, we can come to terms with it. This notion of life which is predetermined, of acceptance of everything which makes it easier to live, seems characteristic for Czech culture:

“*Of Parents and Children* [emphasis added] is a Czech film through and through; it is cosy like a den, at times it is as dark as the Koněprusy cave. It may make us sad or angry, but we will not become different. Michálek has managed to help us to come to terms with it at least for a moment”<sup>21</sup> (Hejdová 2008).

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<sup>20</sup> For a closer insight into the connection of Czech culture with pubs, see the chapter analysing space in *O rodičích a dětech* here (p.53) and also the relevant chapter of the book *Poetika míst* by Vladimír Macura (1997, pp.63-71).

<sup>21</sup> The original in Czech: “*O rodičích a dětech* [emphasis added] je film prokletě český; útulný jako pelíšek, občas přitom temný jako Koněprusy. Může nám z toho být smutno, může nás to štvát, ale jiní už nebudeme. Michálkovi se aspoň na chvíli podařilo nás s tím trochu smířit”.

The genre of a bitter-sweet intimate comedy combined with a series of dramatic moments seems to communicate this message rather well. The choice of the genre helps to create particular presentation of Czech culture. The genre refers to the traditions of walking and story-telling as traditional ways of communicating messages in Czech art. However, a walk would not be eventful enough for a whole film and so it needs to be intercut with the episodic events and a secondary storyline. The film expects viewers to like stories and fulfils their expectations. The genre also presents a tendency to lighten serious topics by self-ironisation and by humour.

### **3.3.2 Cultural Knowledge of Social Roles and Metaphors**

The description of the event structure and temporality moves us closer to the question of what shapes the events to fit the forms they have in the narrative. The events are based on the contrast between what is the expected behaviour of the character types in certain social roles and how they behave in the narrative. The expectation is partly based on cultural knowledge of people's social roles in reality. According to our culture, we have a notion of what is common behaviour of each participant in a social situation (Holland and Quinn 1987; Schank and Abelson 1995). We learn this throughout our lives. Every culture accepts certain regulations for the inter-personal relationships of its members. These regulations are constantly challenged by the individual needs of people. The narratives steeped in a culture examine the situations of when the regulations are overstepped by the characters. This creates the plots of the narratives. What the regulations are and how they are overstepped tells us more about the cultural system. The film works with this knowledge and surprises us by not meeting our expectations. If our expectations were different, the motivations in the narrative would be incomprehensible. The viewers without relevant cultural knowledge might find it hard to understand the plot because they lack background knowledge. It is possible to read what the expectations are on which the film relies and therefore what the background cultural knowledge is.

Our understanding of the main events of *O rodičích a dětech* depends on the viewers' cultural knowledge. Primarily, the meeting of Marta and Robert unfolds in an unexpected way considering the fact that their social roles are those of Honza's girlfriend and Honza's son. The narrative plays with the fact that the viewers know what is appropriate for their roles. Their relationships to Honza should prevent them from seeing each other as potential sexual partners. The situation is more complicated though, as Marta is much younger than

her partner and Robert is an adult without a strong bond to his father. The notion of their relationship to Honza lies at the back of the characters' and the viewers' minds and gives the encounter its feeling of strangeness. Later the strange encounter transforms into a close friendship and subsequently into a sexual relationship. Different aspects of the social roles are emphasised at different moments. The main point is that Marta and Robert step outside the expected behaviour suitable for their roles in their culture.

Robert as Honza's son is expected to respect Honza's girlfriend, he should not see her as a source of sexual attraction. On the other hand, he finds himself in a room with a young woman who is apparently unhappy in her relationship. His role of Honza's son is easily forgotten as he has only recently met his father for the first time. For Marta, the situation is more difficult. Her relationship to Honza has got a stronger base. In her role as his girlfriend, the cultural model tells her that Honza is the only sexual partner for her. Therefore she feels uncomfortable when she is attracted to Robert. What allows her to step across the line is the fact that Robert is physically very similar to her boyfriend and his own father. He looks like Marta's lover and he behaves like Marta's lover. In a certain way, Marta chooses Honza again, but she goes for the one who is young, who is present, who pays attention to her and who talks to her. The narrative creates a dramatic situation where the characters are confused by their contradictory social roles given to them by the culture they live in. To be able to understand why the relationship is not a happy love story, the viewers need to share the knowledge of the attributes which are carried by the characters' roles.

The same principle of unfulfilled social roles lies behind the event of Honza killing his mother in his imagination. Both he and his father are traumatised by the character of Honza's mother, Ivan's former wife. In their memories, she is a cold, strict and dominating woman. After she had divorced Ivan, little Honza lived with her. In his dream she stands in their living room looking out of the window. Honza, now grown up, smokes at a coffee table. When he wants to use an ashtray, she does not even look at him before she tells him to use a different ashtray because this one is freshly washed. At that point, Honza loses patience and hits her on the head with a big metal toy penguin: "I realise I do not feel anything. No sorrow, no compassion, no anger. [...] All I see are all the years of dusting and vacuuming and watching the dumbest TV shows from the 1970s and the 1980s". In his mother he kills her conformist lifestyle in the communist regime but also his anger that his mother was the opposite of what a mother is expected to be like.

Honza's mother is strict and serious, she is emotionally cold. She cannot cook but she keeps the flat scrupulously tidy. From the point of view of the two men, a mother is expected to be caring, gentle and forgiving, they do not find her tidiness to be a relevant quality. Honza in the role of her son is expected to be loving and respectful. When he tells his father this story, the father is naturally shocked that Honza has got such feelings towards his mother. This is because the mother and son relationship is disrupted by the mother's character: she did not fulfil her role of mother as defined by the culture.

Apart from the cultural knowledge of the role models, the narrative is based also on the viewers' knowledge of the metaphors employed in the culture to visually express ontological topics which cannot be seen or described. These metaphors are in common use within the culture. The knowledge of them is shared by all its members. They are employed in the arts and in poetry, where we are used to encountering metaphors, but also in everyday communication. This is because they are not specific to figurative language but they reside in people's thinking about the world. According to George Lakoff and Mark Turner "we know unconsciously and automatically many basic metaphors for understanding life" (1989, 5). Thanks to our knowledge of the metaphors we are able to understand poetry which uses them in a peculiar way. The metaphors are given to us by our culture and therefore are understandable only by those with the particular cultural knowledge.

In this film, the metaphors participate in the form of the narrative. Primarily, we can notice the connection between the trail of the walk and the lives of the characters. Lakoff and Turner identify the metaphor as *life is a journey*. They find it in various modifications in English poetry as well as in everyday language. In *O rodičích a dětech*, the metaphor allows the depiction of the life of the two characters as a walk. During the walk, we get to know all about their lives. They occasionally stop on the way and similarly, they occasionally stop their conversation in dramatic moments of their lives. The one day walk is based on the metaphor of *life is a day*. The characters meet in the morning, the father is old but still keen minded. During the day, they unfold various moments from their lives. In the evening the father is getting tired and after dark he loses his sense of direction and he needs help to get back home. The knowledge of the metaphor of life as a day makes the connection of a whole life story told within one day perfectly natural.

Another moment in the narrative based on a commonly used metaphor is the situation of Robert and Marta saying goodbye. They are both sad that Robert has to go because they have had a nice day together. At the moment when he is about to leave, standing on the threshold he looks deeply into her eyes. Nothing is said or done. The next shot shows Robert in his underwear back in Marta's living room and Marta half-naked sitting in her armchair looking at him with reproach. As viewers we are supposed to figure out what had happened in between these two moments, namely that Marta and Robert have slept together.

To be able to find this out, we need to read the signs in the right way. The fact, that the characters are half naked afterwards is quite straightforward, but the motivation in the situation before the not shown sex scene might stay hidden if we did not have the cultural knowledge. The event is based on the metaphor of *knowing is seeing* and *seeing is touching* (Lakoff and Turner 1989). By looking at Marta one more time on the threshold, Robert realises that he is in love with her and he does not want to leave. What is presented as him looking into Marta's eyes is a metaphor of him figuring out that he wants to be with her. The act of looking metaphorically stands for the act of touching. We see Robert looking into Marta's eyes, then her, sitting in her armchair without her tee shirt on. We do not see Robert touching her but together with him we can see her half-naked body. Seeing is a metaphor of touching. Instead of direct presentation, the main event is gently suggested through metaphors. Without our ability subconsciously to understand these metaphors it would be hard to understand the sudden change in the *fabula*.

The analysis of the narrative construction reveals underlying metaphors which belong to its wider cultural background. We have seen how the events participate in creating a construction of Czech culture. It signals its belonging to the Czech literary tradition by using the motifs of a walk and of story-telling. In accordance with many other contemporary Czech films, the narrative of *O rodičích a dětech* uses humour to lighten the serious atmosphere and it adds narrative features to the lyrical topic. The film presents a cultural understanding of some social roles. It emphasises that caring and understanding are the most important characteristics of motherhood. It also shows that caring about one's partner's feelings and being faithful are the most important characteristics of a successful relationship in Czech culture. Failing to fulfil the expected social norms creates feelings of disappointment and confusion and prevents people from having close relationships with others.

## 4. A Comparison of the Czech and the Scottish Construction of Culture

The previous chapters discussed the two films *The Winter Guest* and *O rodičích a dětech* separately as works of art constructing images of their cultures. This chapter puts the two films together and compares them. In the analysis of *The Winter Guest* and *O rodičích a dětech* we have already noticed a few aspects which are possible to compare. We have discussed the representations of space and their meanings for the films. Also we have analysed the social roles and the constructions of identities of the film characters. We have also dealt with the specific principles on the basis of which the narratives are constructed. In the comparison of the two films, more features will stand out as not as natural as they might have seemed when they were discussed separately, but rather as culturally specific. The significance of this is that via the comparison of the films we are able to compare their constructions of their cultures. Subsequently this chapter raises the questions of the relationship of the Czech and the Scottish culture and their constructions in these two films.

### 4.1 Shared Cultural Background

In case of these two films, the film-makers chose the topic of a parent and child relationship and used *fabulas* which share their central features. This signals that the Czech and Scottish cultures have got much in common. The fact that the same topic appears in Czech and Scottish cinema within a decade means that in both the countries there was a need to deal with the questions raised by this topic. The films testify that contemporary narrative art in both cultures deals with intimate and personal issues. They both focus their attention on problems which are part of people's daily lives and towards the importance of the family. They present the issues of loneliness of old people in today's Czech and Scottish society as well as the confusion of the middle-aged adults who lack guidance and support in their lives. Both depict the characters as isolated from their local community. Both films raise the question of who should take care of elderly people when they need it and whether people have got the right to completely separate from their parents. The two films also deal with the problems of how to behave to one's own children when they become adults.

The two films agree on a similar conclusion. An adult person does not have the right to leave their parents alone. Both films suggest that relationships can be in harmony if the

adult children take care of their elderly parents and if the elderly parents respect their adult children as grown-up, independent personalities. According to the films, healthy family relationships help people feel happier. A family based on healthy relationships is able to support its members in difficult moments of their lives. In the two narratives, this conclusion is achieved in different ways. *The Winter Guest* suggests that everyone can make things better by trying to see the true nature of the problems while *O rodičích a dětech* proposes coming to terms with the existing social conditions and personal circumstances, which cannot be changed.

Both films have many features in common. Evident are the similarities in the narrative motifs such as the family roles of the characters: the parent and the adult child, as well as the technique of intercutting the main story line with the secondary story lines. What is not so evident at first sight is the shared concepts on which the structures of the narratives are based. As has been said in the previous chapters, the narratives are based upon certain mental concepts and metaphors which are used as an instrument to understand abstract topics. These metaphors are used subconsciously and they are transferred from generation to generation. As they constitute the base for our understanding of the world, they are very stable within each culture. According to George Lakoff and Mark Turner (1989), the metaphors which we have identified in the two films are common to all the European cultures which have historically been in close contact and therefore share the same influences among themselves.

#### **4.1.1 The Parents and the Children**

At the first sight the roles of the protagonists – the adult persons and their elderly parents – are the same in both films. Both films keep the narrative intimate and focused on the protagonists and a few other characters and on the close surroundings of the protagonists' home. The similarities in the understanding of parent and child relationships signal that in the background the films share the same general concepts. Even though they are based on a biological foundation, the parent and child relationships are culturally shaped. Anna Wierzbicka (1992) points out that these basic family relationships are understood differently in different cultures and the only part of them which remains universal is the concept of a person's biological mother and father. Apart from the biological relationship, everything else that we attribute to the concepts of mother and father is culturally specific. Therefore what we can see in the two films are these relationships as understood by the



cultures. The fact that we are able to understand the conflicts between parents and children in the films means that we either share the same concept of the relationships between the parents and their children or we have become acquainted with the concept valid for the particular culture.

The questions the two films raise about the parents and children relationships are comparable. The main issue for both of them is the clash between a strong relationship and personal independence. They both deal with the problems of how parents approach their children when they become adults and how the adult children treat their parents. The situations in the films show what parents expect from their children and vice versa. The clash is between caring for the other while remaining an independent individual. The fact that the two films share the same attributes of the parent and child relationships signals that they both share some cultural background.

The Scottish and the Czech film show that for parents, the patterns of behaviour adopted when their children are small are nearly impossible to change. The films present the parents as weakened by their age but still behaving like parents to their children. Being a parent in these films means taking care of their children's well-being, being worried about their happiness but also controlling them. In the Czech film one more attribute of parenting is added and that is the financial support of adult children by their economically active parents. The frustration of the parents comes from the inability to fulfil the parental role any more as the children are adults now. As expressed in both films, being an adult means taking responsibility for one's own life. It means being economically but also emotionally independent of a person's parents. It does not mean, though, that an adult can become completely independent. As the films show, adulthood reverses the roles of parents and children after people become adults, they are expected to take care of their parents.

As the films present it, in both Scottish and Czech culture adults are expected to be responsible for their behaviour and a young person is no longer required to be obedient to their parents once they have reached adulthood. The parents, though are not required by society to stop caring. This situation reflects the combination of the Christian tradition and modern Euro-American individualism. Christianity stands behind the concept of respect for a person's parents. Even though the knowledge of Christianity is slowly vanishing from the daily lives especially of young people, the concepts are still present in the patterns of social behaviour. Frances as well as Honza find it hard to stand up for themselves against

their parents' reproaches and advice because they have been brought up to respect their parents and also because they love them. Both Frances and Honza feel they have the right to lead their lives the way they want. This approach is characteristic for the individualism prevalent in current European cultures since the rise of Protestantism and the Enlightenment (Rapport 2010, 298–302). This individualistic attitude brings the advantage of freedom as well as the burden of responsibility. The interesting point is that the reactions of the protagonists to these contradictory tendencies are significantly different in each of the films.

#### 4.1.2 The Conceptual Metaphors

In *O rodičích a dětech* and *The Winter Guest* the metaphor of *life as a journey* (Lakoff and Turner 1989) stands behind the central motif of the walk. In both narratives the characters meet in the morning at home, where they stay for a short while before going out for a walk. During the walk, their dialogue reveals the core moments of their lives and the nature of their relationships. The moments from the protagonists' lives are “hung up” on the places through which they walk. Due to the metaphor, moving in time is understood as moving in space and the surroundings reflect the character's feelings about their lives. Due to the background metaphor commonly understood in both cultures the connection of going for a walk and presenting one's whole life during it appears natural.

In both films, the walks start from one of the characters' flat or house. As Gaston Bachelard (1969) says, a person's home is a reflection of their soul. Therefore both the walks start by delving into the character's inner world. Then the images of the environment in each of the walks unfold differently. In *The Winter Guest*, the walk takes the characters to an empty sea shore where the dramatic atmosphere of the argument between mother and daughter is emphasised by the hard stones and ice in their vicinity. They walk to a place with no shelter or greenery. In comparison, the walking track of *O rodičích a dětech* adheres to inhabited areas. There are pubs on the way and the walk goes through lush green parks. The surroundings are much more hospitable. Both the walks end back in the home town when the characters are reconciled with each other and harmony is restored. At the end of the story of *O rodičích a dětech*, the relationship of the father and the son reverts to the same state where it was in the beginning and so the walk through their lives is a circle rather than a line. *The Winter Guest*, on the contrary, moves the relationship of the mother and the daughter to a different stage.

The understanding of life metaphorically as a journey together with other influences leads Frances to the thought of moving to Australia after her husband's death. She perceives the place of her home as a stage in her life from which she can move on to another one. On the other hand, Honza in the Czech film is happy in the place where he lives and wants to stay there for the rest of his life. The pattern of the walk indicates that the metaphor of *life as a journey* is present in the culture, but there are other influences due to which the journey of life takes place within a character's well known area. According to the conventional metaphor understanding a change of state as a change of location, Frances wants to change her situation and therefore move away while Honza, comfortable with his life, wants to stay at the same place.

Another metaphor that can be identified behind both narratives is that of understanding *life as a year*. Although the same metaphor informs each film, each of them employs it in a different way. *The Winter Guest* depicts the winter stage of the year associated with old age and death. The open space of the stony sea shore, grey sky and ice emphasises the feeling of cold emptiness. The depiction of the environment corresponds to the topic discussed by the characters. In comparison, *O rodičích a dětech* takes place during a sunny spring day. The environment is in direct contrast to the attitude of resignation the characters express. This contrast between a spring environment and, the 'autumnal' mood of the characters emphasises their detachment from the world. Compared to *The Winter Guest*, the environment here participates in creating a relaxed, leisurely atmosphere which corresponds to the aim of the walk: a refreshing activity cultivating the father's and the son's relationship. It also emphasises Honza's new-found comfort in life.

The turn in the *fabula* of both films is expressed through the metaphor which visualises *knowing as seeing*. In *O rodičích a dětech*, the turn takes place in the story of Marta and Robert. When Robert takes a long look into Marta's eyes the situation metaphorically implies that he realises he is in love. In this case, seeing means that Robert became aware of his own emotions towards Marta and has decided to act accordingly. In *The Winter Guest* the metaphor of *knowing as seeing* stands behind the climactic event. Frances sees her mother through the camera and Elspeth sees her daughter through the eyes of the little boy. In this case, seeing means a change of perspective and therefore a better understanding. In the Czech film, the situation of seeing the true state of Marta's and Robert's relationship can be predicted from their flirtatious behaviour prior to the climax. In the Scottish film, the situation where both women change their attitudes is not

anticipated by any motifs. While in the Czech film this situation makes the characters more confused and worried in their relationships, in the Scottish film it leads to a new harmonious state. The narratives unfold in different directions but the metaphors in the background are the same.

## 4.2 Gender identities – Traditional and Modern Roles

Even though both the films were created within the relatively small region of Europe where the cultures have a lot in common, the comparison of the depicted gender roles reveals similarities as well as differences. The specific way the gender roles are approached in the films not only shapes the narratives but also contributes to the cultural constructions created by the films. Both the films present males and females in various social roles and in various age groups. The character identities in the narratives create complex signs which present gender identities in the two cultures.

### 4.2.1 Motherhood

Both narratives include the character of mother and in both mothers have several characteristics in common. The shared features are found in the characters of Elspeth in the Scottish film and the characters of Honza's and Robert's mothers in the Czech film. *The Winter Guest* features two mothers who play significant roles within the narrative. According to the classification of Kath Woodwarth (2003), the two mothers represent two opposite types of mothers present in "Western" media discourse, one traditional and one modern. The Scottish traditional mother as presented by Elspeth in *The Winter Guest* is fully focused on her children, predominantly concerned about their well-being. She considers femininity to be an important value for the life of a woman. Apart from that, she is also concerned about trying to make her daughter stay with her, so that she does not get old on her own. This concern is depicted as selfish and as preventing her daughter from leading her life independently. According to this film, the mother does not have the right to demand her child's presence. Her concentration on what would benefit her is seen as a "bad mother's" characteristic.

Frances stands for the opposite type of mother. She lets her son indulge in his own interests and focuses on her work, she does not demand anyone's participation. She does not keep the house in perfect order and does not prepare her son's breakfast the way a traditional mother would. She also does not care about presenting herself as feminine. Despite the fact that she is not a traditional "good" mother, she is portrayed in a positive light and with understanding. The film evidently supports the modern type of mother protecting a person's right to live according to their own wishes regardless of their gender.

On the other hand, in *O rodičích a dětech* the mothers are in subsidiary roles, perceived through the eyes of the male protagonists. They both represent one type of mother which is quite similar to the one represented by Elspeth in *The Winter Guest*. Just as Elspeth, they are both pictured in a negative light as overbearing. They both care about their feminine appearance. Unlike Elspeth, though, the mothers in the Czech film are anxious to live their lives properly, they both require their families to observe proper manners. Compared to them, Elspeth is a rather wild tempered person. Both Czech mothers fulfil the requirement that they should take care of their families. Honza's mother expresses this through her impeccably clean flat, Robert's mother does this by providing money to her son. Despite that, both the mothers fail to create emotional bonds with the members of their families. From the point of view of the male protagonists, being kind and warm-hearted is considered to be the most important value for a "good" mother. Lack of kindness ruins the protagonists' relationships with their mothers. All the other things that the mothers in the Czech film do for members of their families such as providing food and money is taken for granted.

Both films offer portraits of imperfect traditional mothers. The imperfection lies in them being emotionally reserved. The Scottish mother furthermore is portrayed as making selfish demands on her child while the Czech mothers are seen as requiring extreme levels of cleanliness and good manners. The Czech film does not feature any alternative portrait of motherhood while the Scottish film depicts an alternative type of mother who does not care about the tidiness of her household but is tolerant and emotionally warm.

#### **4.2.2 The Sons**

Not all the gender roles in the two films are comparable but apart from mothers, the characters of sons appear in both films and offer an interesting comparison. The sons are very different from each other and by comparing them, we can find out what constitutes the images of young men in both cultures and how these images are seen from the perspective of either of the films. Alex in *The Winter Guest* is much younger than Robert in *O rodičích a dětech*. Neither of them has a father around. Alex has just lost his while Robert has his discovered just recently. Therefore their mothers are the only ones who treat them like sons. During the narrative, Robert finds out about his father and so he gains a missing parent while Alex loses his father and so he suddenly has to become more of an

adult. While the personality of Alex is perceived in a positive light, Robert is pictured with some reservations.

In *The Winter Guest*, Alex, the son of Frances, is a teenager. He lives with his mother in a small coastal town. He seems to be rather shy, quiet and mature for his age. He is approached by a girl who secretly fancies him. In the development of their relationship she plays the active role. He does not have any friends around and so spends time on his own. On the other hand, he is not completely introvert and is not shy to stand up for himself when necessary. He seems to be relatively confident and balanced. He does not rebel against authority or try to dominate people around him. His personality is between that of a boy and a young man. He overreacts when his feet get wet in the freezing sea but at the same time, he is caring and thoughtful. He supports his mother and tries to protect her from any further emotional distress. He offers Nita a hot bath when she is cold and, being a gentleman, does not use this opportunity to seduce her. He is seen as a serious and responsible young man. His masculinity is signalled not only by his mature body but also by his behaviour towards women around him, towards whom he is caring and protective. After his father's death, Alex partly takes over the role of taking care of his mother. He is a "good" son, subtle and attentive, he does not demand anything for himself. Being closed up and introvert gives him a mysterious allure which attracts Nita.

Robert from *O rodičích a dětech* is a very different type of young man. He is in his mid-twenties, he lives on his own but he is still financially dependent on his mother. He meets her every Friday to get some money from her. He is a spontaneous, playful and careless type. He lives in the present and he is not worried about the future. His concerns are how to get more money and how to understand women better. Rather than understanding them, though, he tries to impress them. His attention is focused on himself. He does not take care of his mother and he talks about her with contempt. His masculinity is signalled by a number of stereotypical attributes characteristic for a "tough guy" in Czech culture<sup>22</sup>. He has got "tough guy's" hobbies like playing in a metal band, riding a motorbike or playing shooter computer games. Also he is better than Marta when working with computers<sup>23</sup>. His

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<sup>22</sup> This concept of a "tough guy" is particularly well represented by the images of the members of the most popular Czech rock band called *Kabát* (see *Kabát*).

<sup>23</sup> In Czech culture IT is commonly seen as a "men's world" (Sokačová 2007; Kristová 2008).

life's success – just as the life success of his father – is based on his success with women. He is not portrayed in such a positive light as Alex, his behaviour is shown as immature and irresponsible but he balances the negative traits by being fun company. That is also why he succeeds in seducing Marta. Although she can see his faults, he impresses her with his computer skills, his jokes and a vitality which her partner Honza has lost.

Honza, the protagonist of *O rodičích a dětech* is also in the role of a son. Compared to his own son Robert, he is much more caring and understanding towards his father than Robert is towards his mother. As he himself says, it is because of his age. Unlike in *The Winter Guest*, in this film, being caring and protective is related to being mature. According to this film, a young person is not expected to care about others<sup>24</sup>. While in the Scottish film the young son presents a stable point, in the Czech film the young son is a destabilising element.

*The Winter Guest* portrays the young Scot as fully-fledged member of society who has got responsibility and independence. His attempts to stabilise the world of the adults does not prevent the young man from starting a relationship which helps him to overcome his problems. *O rodičích a dětech* features a type of the young Czech who is at the stage of “emerging adulthood” (Arnett 2004; Macek 2007). According to sociologists, this stage of life is characteristic for people in European cultures.

“The combination of specific life conditions, lifestyle, and key personal issues in this life stage is expressed by other significant characteristics of this period such as self-focused age, the age of identity exploration, the age of instability, and the age of possibilities” (Macek 2007, 445).

Robert is an adult but he is still dependent on his parents and at the same time he is not taken seriously as an independent, mature personality. That is why he achieves self-realisation through a childish rebellion against his mother. The narrative depicts this phenomenon recently emerging in Czech culture and shows how problematic this stage of life is for all the people involved.

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<sup>24</sup> In comparison, a sociological survey among young Czechs proved a different opinion: “Our research does not have a representative character, and its result cannot be generalized. Nevertheless, in the replies of emerging adults the fact that the opposite point of view, that adult children and their parents should look only after themselves, did not appear is, in our opinion, very interesting” (Macek 2007).



### 4.3 Contrasting Images of Space – Infinity versus Enclosed Space

The complex of features which puts the two films into contrast is the most visible in the depiction of the environment in the two narratives. As has been said in the previous chapters where we have dealt with the images of space, both films use the environment to complement the characters' mind-set. In this chapter, the meaning of the surroundings will be put into the context of all the other aspects of the narrative. In this connection, we will see that the images of space participate in creating coherent sets of cultural characteristics expressed in the narratives. These sets of cultural characteristics stand behind the main differences between the two narratives.

The most evident is the contrast on the scale of *infinity – enclosure* of the space depicted. *The Winter Guest* takes the characters to the seashore and leaves them unprotected in an open area of flat stones with the sea on the horizon. But the walk in *O rodičích a dětech* leads through parks, bushes and along walls creating an enclosed area similar to a labyrinth. At the first sight, these differences may be due to the different geographical conditions of the two countries. The matter is not so simple, though. The seashore could be depicted as an enclosed place, located between impassable rocks and the sea. Parks can be depicted as an open area in contrast to the enclosed space of the city. Geographical characteristics certainly participate in shaping the culture and its constructions but this is just one of the factors involved, apart from contacts with different cultures, historical influences and other aspects.

In both narratives, the surroundings function as visual signs denoting various aspects of the inner lives of the protagonists. The enclosed space of *O rodičích a dětech* emphasises the boundaries of the protagonists' life options. The surroundings illustrate the limits which the protagonists establish for themselves. The open space of *The Winter Guest*, on the other hand, associates the unlimited number of choices a person has in his or her life. The protagonist claims the right to do what she wishes to do in her life. Her mindset is influenced by the post-colonial heritage of her country. She considers some faraway countries as a possible home. These countries, once ruled by the Empire, adopted its language and culture and have a shared history. Regardless of the distance, for Frances, these countries are close to her cultural identity. On the contrary, without such "imperial" heritage, the protagonist of *O rodičích a dětech* would feel foreign anywhere outside the

Czech Republic, more precisely outside Prague as his microcosm. The characters in these films experience *freedom* and *limits*. These are connected respectively to the *infinity* and *enclosure* of their surroundings.

The meaning of *freedom* in *The Winter Guest* is associated with the need to take *risks*. In this narrative, freedom brings responsibility for one's own decisions and therefore requires *risk*. None of the life choices is ideal and no one can foresee the future consequences of their decisions. This is seen as a burden related to the freedom of living according to a person's own wishes. That is why Frances hesitates whether she should or should not leave for Australia. She is not sure whether moving is the right decision. Compared to the situation of Frances, the limited living space of *O rodičích a dětech* is connected with the feeling of *safety*. Honza knows his surroundings and the way of life of the place. He does not think that he could benefit from leaving. He is comfortable and safe in his home place. The meanings of *risk* and *safety* are further associated with the contrasting features of *infinity* and *enclosure* in the two narratives.

The features of *freedom* and *risk* in *The Winter Guest* imply the characters' *activity*. The present situation can be changed only by a person acting. That is why Frances feels that she needs to move to be able to change her life. Elspeth is actively trying to persuade her daughter to stay and Nita decides to take action and remove the photographs of Alex's father from the walls of his house. In comparison, the *limits* and *safety* of *O rodičích a dětech* imply *passivity*. The characters take their lives as they come and they achieve happiness by coming to terms with what they have.

These meanings are developed further by attaching the features of *individualism* and *uprootedness* on one side and *belonging* and *continuity* on the other. *Freedom* and *risk taking* is associated with *individualism* and *uprootedness* in *The Winter Guest*. Both Frances and Elspeth claim the right to focus on themselves and to do what benefits them. Because they feel responsible for their own lives, they want to make independent decisions. They do not feel connected to their relatives and the local community. The notion of individual responsibility makes the characters act selfishly. *O rodičích a dětech*, on the other hand, emphasises that people belong to a chain of generations. The characters cannot avoid repeating the mistakes of their parents and grandparents. The notion of fate is present, although it is unarticulated. Honza and his father feel they belong to the place where they live. Even so, they do not participate in community life, as they do not feel

connected to the people in their environment. They only feel connected to their male relatives and the place where they live. The belonging to one's home place and a bond with one's parents and grandparents cannot be avoided.

Another feature distinguishing the two narratives from each other is the difference in the genres. The main motifs and the structures of the *fabulas* are very similar, but the film makers have chosen quite different genres. *The Winter Guest* is a psychological narrative close to the genre of crisis. Problems are approached seriously. The characters behave in a dramatic way emphasising how emotionally upsetting their relationship is. The narrative has got a lot of lyrical features, it sidelines physical events and highlights the emotions of the characters. The *fabula*-turning event takes place in the mental world of the characters when Frances and Elspeth change their perception of each other. Frances, as the protagonist, is depicted as a brave and independent woman, she only claims what she has a right to require. The narrative features positive characters, mainly Alex, who brings hope to the whole situation and lightens the dramatic story by heart-warming moments. There is subtle humour to lighten up the atmosphere in a few moments. The humour, though, is almost completely assigned to the subsidiary characters, the schoolboys and the old ladies.

*O rodičích a dětech* creates a different impression. Its emphasis on story-telling and episodic stories breaks the lyrical atmosphere of the walk. It unfolds like a chain of short stories framed by the situation of the walk. The protagonists do not experience their problems directly at the moment, which makes the problems less acute. The protagonists do not talk earnestly, they joke about their troubles and present their past in an ironic, self-deprecating way. These features shift the narrative towards the genre of comedy. The narrative of *O rodičích a dětech* does not feature any character who could be seen in a positive light. Unlike Jan Čulík, who sees this film as “again” dealing “with the relationship between an “impossible” man and a practical sensible woman” (2013, 244), this analysis proves that in this film, the “impossibility” is more of a general problem concerning everyone regardless of their gender. The film suggests that no one is ideal. Men are seen as selfish and ignoring their partners, mothers are seen as too dominating and oppressive and the young woman in the film is portrayed as slightly naïve and easily manipulated. In comparison to *The Winter Guest*, *O rodičích a dětech* emphasises *epic* and *comedic* features above the *dramatic* and *lyrical* features prevalent in the former film.

The features which have been described above create coherent sets of meanings presented by the films. We can see the features of *enclosure, limits, safety, passivity, belonging* and *continuity* in *O rodičích a dětech*, together with the preference for epic and comedic features in the narrative. On the other hand, *The Winter Guest* is characterised by *infinity, freedom* and *risk taking, activity, individualism* and *uprootedness* with the emphasis on the lyrical and dramatic features in the narrative. It needs to be said that each of the films is a complicated structure and contains features from both ends of the scale. For example, the Czech film features characters who are mostly active as well as those who are mostly passive. However, the point of this comparison is to identify features which are dominant in the two films.

## 5. Conclusion

In this thesis I have examined one Scottish and one Czech film, *The Winter Guest* and *O rodičích a dětech*. The aim of the analysis was to interpret the construction of the culture which each film offers. These two particular films were chosen because they share their main topic. This enabled me not only to analyse each of them separately but also to ask how the two films which rise from two different cultures depict a similar topic. More precisely, the research question was how Czech and Scottish culture depict the topic of adult children and their elderly parents conducting a dialogue about their lives and their mutual relationships. A related research question was whether the Scottish and the Czech cultural constructions in these two films have anything in common. In other words, the question was whether the images of culture which the two films create are similar or different.

My methodology has combined semiotics, narratology and cognitive science. My semiotic approach was based on the theory of Umberto Eco and on Jonathan Bignell's application of semiotics on the media. I have also used Mieke Bal's narratological approach. Mieke Bal uses narratology for cultural analysis. I have also found inspiration in George Lakoff's theory of conceptual metaphors and in the theory of culturally determined cognitive patterns of Roger Schank and Robert Abelson. The combination of these three approaches has allowed me to examine the films from various angles. It has provided a theoretical background needed for identifying the cultural content of various aspects of the films.

My analysis of each of the films revealed features participating in the construction of Czech and Scottish reality. In the last section these features were compared. The main findings of this thesis are discussed in detail in this comparative section. Based on the analysis of the two films, I have found out that Czech and Scottish cultures are strongly rooted in unconscious mental patterns shared throughout Europe. This is not a surprising finding but I decided to point this out in order to be able to separate these features in the films from some other, more culturally specific features. It is also useful to notice what aspects in the films perceived as natural are in fact culturally specific. I have shown that the same conceptual metaphors are present in both Czech and Scottish cultures. The cultures also share the same system of narrative genres and their attributes. Both films are about the relationships of adults and their elderly parents. Both cultures find this problem

topical and in these two films they are trying to find appropriate answers within their local discourse.

In the next part of the comparative section I have described some features which are depicted in the films as similar both in Czech and in Scottish. These features are mainly related to the gender identities, social roles and interpersonal relationships. The films suggest that especially the gender roles and the social expectations are changing in both cultures. That is why the films are so concerned with the differences between generations. I have found that both the Scottish and the Czech film depicts the traditional women's roles in a similar way. Also the depictions of the middle-aged generations share some attributes.

Some other features of the films appear to be contrasting. This applies especially to the images of the environment. The ways the films depict the environment were linked with the mind-set of the characters. I have found that the images of the environment participate in creating a complex picture of the characters' approaches to their lives. According to my findings, the choice of genre also participates in creating contrasting images of Scottish and Czech cultures in these two films.

So far, not much research has been done in the field of cultural analysis of contemporary Scottish cinema. Even less has been done on contemporary Czech cinema. This thesis is concerned only with two films and therefore its conclusions cannot be taken as statements of general validity. This thesis needs to be considered as a first step, which raises more questions than it answers. In further research it would be fruitful to analyse a number of films from each of the two cultures to be able to reach some more general conclusions. Considering films from different eras would tell us how the images of cultures have changed with time. Also, comparing the cultural constructions in the films with other materials such as literature, visual art or theatre would bring interesting results. Another related question is the issue of the cultural background of the researcher and its impact on the work he or she does.

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