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## Selling 'Czechness' abroad: images of Jan and Zdeněk Svěrák in promotion and reception of *Kolya*

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### ABSTRACT

In this article I argue that debates about *Kolya* (1996) and the images of its two authors Jan and Zdeněk Svěrák that were circulating in the media at the time of its release reveal several hopes and anxieties about Czech national cinema's coming to terms with the effects of post-communist transition. I will analyse interpretations and discourses about the film circulating primarily in Czech press. The aim is to look at how the talk about *Kolya* developed as several discourses and interpretative strategies were introduced in different attempts to make sense of the film. The time frame I focus on here starts before the film's release and reaches until the coverage of the Academy Awards ceremony in 1997 where the film received an Oscar for the Best Foreign Language Film. I argue that in this timespan, the film's value was negotiated and contested prominently along a set of two references – the 'truthfulness' of the Czechness it represents, and the importance of international recognition for Czech cinema. I analyse these discourses in the context of changing conditions in Czech cinema after the Velvet Revolution in 1989.

### KEYWORDS

Film reception; film awards; Czech Cinema; post-communist cinema; national cinema

When *Kolya* was released in the Czech Republic in 1996, debates about it heavily focused on its 'Czechness.' One critic writing his review a few months after the premiere notes that '*Kolya* has ... become more than just a *film* event: we can gauge from some critiques as well as audience reactions that this work is also perceived as an important accomplishment on the *national* field' (emphasis in original) (Štindl 1996, 131). Indeed, a prominent interpretation that appeared in reviews and articles saw the film as drawing on Czech cinema traditions. Similarly, the film's elements of kind humour, irony and tragedy were commonly found to be demonstrating and speaking to many national characteristics. Despite the fact that the film was co-financed from French, British and Czech sources, there was never a doubt that this was primarily a Czech film. However, it is not the case that these ideas of Czechness were always unproblematically accepted. The authenticity and sincerity of the national identity the film was representing at home and abroad became what Barker, Arthurs, and Harindranath (2001, 12) have called a 'terrain of debate' – an agreement over topics that need to be debated and around which notions of the film's value were negotiated.

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As Andrew Higson points out, in a globalised environment claims fervently trying to assert a film's national identity are often 'a question of promotion, a means of forging a brand name, an assertion of difference from Hollywood' and are quite often signs of anxieties 'about national identity and national status' (2003, 6–7). Indeed, in this article I will argue that the debates about *Kolya* reveal several anxieties about the state of Czech cinema in the 1990s.

After the Velvet Revolution in 1989 there was first a sense of optimism regarding what this might mean for Czech cinema. As Peter Hames points out on this topic, 'The removal of Communist censorship would, it was hoped, lead to something like a return to the conditions of the 1960s New Wave, in which filmmakers, free of political constraint, would be able to create relevant films in a free and open manner' (2013, 43). However, the disappearance of censorship did not necessarily lead to an increase in the quality of films produced, at least according to many critics. Furthermore, the removal of the state's quota on the distribution of foreign films also allowed an influx of a large number of Hollywood productions. While at the end of the 1980s only five per cent of all films released in Czechoslovakia were American, this number rose to 77 per cent in 1993 (Danielis 2007, 68). Throughout most of the 1990s about two thirds of all distributed films were classified as American (78). Furthermore, due to rapidly diminished funds and state support for the national cinema, the number of films produced also declined. While during the planned economy the country produced between 40 and 45 films a year, these numbers have never been met in the post-communist market conditions. In 1992 only 6 Czech films were released, and pessimistic critics were of the opinion that commerce would eventually 'kill quality Czech film production' (68–69).

In this context, I argue that media constructed the images of the writer and star of *Kolya* Zdeněk Svěrák and his son, director Jan Svěrák, as beacons of hope for the national cinema. In the first section I analyse Zdeněk Svěrák's image in promotion and critical reception of *Kolya*. I specifically look at the attempts to promote the film in opposition to Hollywood action cinema and Svěrák's reputation as an author working in the best traditions of Czech comedy. As I will then show, the terms associated with Svěrák's image became the primary interpretative framework of *Kolya* in reviews. While Svěrák's son Jan directed the film, it was usually the writer's 'handwriting,' characterised by humanist and kind humour with touches of irony, that were seen as a prominent source of the film's Czech qualities. The film, many critics claim, returned quality to Czech cinema in an age of mediocrity. Conversely, media saw Jan Svěrák as a talented and ambitious young director who was keen to show these Czech traditions to the outside world. I focus especially on how articles surrounding *Kolya*'s release establish his adoration of Hollywood cinema and how this image, as well as the film's status as a co-production, transpired in debates about the authenticity of the film's Czechness. In the second section I therefore look at how debates about *Kolya* were marked by hopes about its, and by extension national cinema's, potential success abroad that would recall the international recognition films of the Czechoslovak New Wave had gathered in the 1960s. I will adopt Mette Hjort's concept of politics of recognition to analyse the discourses about Czech cinema these debates reveal. Hjort discusses politics of recognition as 'a desire to see expressions of culturally inflected identities recognised as valuable both internally and externally' (2007, 25). While she finds the politics of recognition to be an ambition driving the state support of Danish cinema throughout the 1970s and 1980s, we can notice hopes of recognition as an underlying discourse in debates about *Kolya*'s cultural value.

## Star image and traditions under threat

*Kolya* tells the story of two people meeting under unconventional circumstances and developing a strong friendship shortly before the fall of communism in 1989. Louka (Zdeněk Svěrák), a talented musician is condemned to playing only at funerals because his reckless jokes had displeased the state officials and cost him his job at the Czech Philharmonic. He tries to earn extra money where he can, so he can finally buy his own car. One day he therefore agrees to be a part of an arranged marriage with a Russian woman (Irina Bezrukova) who wishes to emigrate from the Soviet Union. However, Louka unexpectedly ends up having to look after her little son Kolya (Andrej Chalimon) by himself. In the rest of the film, the two gradually learn to understand and live together, despite their differences and Louka's dislike of children. They develop a close bond by the end of the film, but little Kolya is eventually returned to his mother and leaves the country with her.

As Barbara Klinger has argued, the production of film involves construction of its several 'consumable identities' – developing different elements of the film 'into a premediated network of advertising and promotion that will enter the social sphere of reception' (1989, 9). One such consumable identity that was granted a prominent place in the promotional campaign introduced *Kolya* as a 'moving film.' Several elements from the film were used to reinforce this identity – from plot elements, to the imagery chosen for the poster and trailer. This aim to present *Kolya* as a moving film is explicitly expressed in a voice-over of the Czech trailer provided by the star Zdeněk Svěrák himself. In the closing seconds of the trailer he exclaims in a calm voice, 'Yes, it is a moving film, we're not going to deny that, but there's also fun in it,' as if he is merely confirming to the audiences what they should have already guessed from the trailer by now. Other materials released before the film's premiere similarly did not shy away from bringing attention to *Kolya*'s emotional charge. Articles presented a film that 'will stroke your soul' (Unruh 1995), a film that 'is not ashamed of feeling, compassion and emotion' (Jeníková 1996) or simply 'a moving film' (Štaudová 1996). In interviews the director confidently assumes that audiences will be leaving cinemas with wet eyes and that 'tissues are going to be handed out in cinemas' (Říhová 1995, 27). This was simply meant to be a film where the audiences were welcome to cry.

While it can hardly be said that there is anything specifically Czech about moving stories, and the promotional campaign never explicitly made that connection, this consumable identity was important for the film's claims to Czechness. Specifically, it was used to frame *Kolya* as an alternative to the films dominating Czech cinemas at the time. The scriptwriter Zdeněk Svěrák especially spends considerable effort in interviews in order to distance *Kolya* from what he presents as the usual fare found in cinemas. Several articles report him saying 'I believe that we miss a film that is about things like feeling and compassion' (Bičíková 1996a, 28; also in Vítková 1996b). In another article he claims that many filmmakers ignore that 'there are many dramas [in life] that are not about death' (Svěrák 1996, 41). In fact, several critics later found death to be one of the film's themes (for instance in Foll 1996a); the protagonist spends a lot of his time at graveyards and the titular character himself has to cope with the unexpected death of his grandmother. The writer's reference to death in contemporary cinema instead seems to be a metonym standing for the action film and by extension Hollywood cinema. For example, when asked about the main message of the film, Svěrák starts his answer by exclaiming 'We are making a non-action film, I'd like to emphasise that' (Říhová 1995, 27). The scriptwriter's assumptions about the presence of action

films in cinemas has some factual base. In 1995 several films that can be attributed that label succeeded in Czech box office: *The Specialist* (1994), *Waterworld* (1995), *Die Hard with a Vengeance* (1995) and *Timecop* (1994) all made the top 10 box office hits. On the other hand, *Forrest Gump* (1994), arguably quite close to the emotional goals of *Kolya*, topped the box office that year by a considerable margin (Halada 1997a, 39). Svěrák is therefore correct to assume that there is a market for films exploring ‘gentler emotions’ but at the same time, they were not quite disappearing from Czech cinemas. Instead, his statements seem to refer to the action film in order to establish the film’s Czechness. In fact, he decided to contrast his film to a genre that is rather un-Czech; usually demanding considerable budgets, it does not have much place in common perceptions about Czech cinema. Somewhere else he therefore makes it clear to audiences that this film is not ‘action-packed “america” [sic] but a family film’ that can be enjoyed by people of all generations (Dvořáková 1995, 7).

These attempts to frame *Kolya* in opposition to the Hollywood action film in the film’s promotion are not very different from examples in other national contexts. For instance, in his analysis of the promotion and reception of *Elizabeth* (1998) Andrew Higson observes the importance of differentiating the film from Hollywood productions in order to establish the film’s national identity. Despite being funded from large multinational corporations, *Elizabeth* was meant to be a ‘real British film’ that would never have been green-lit in Hollywood (2003, 200–201). Svěrák’s statements about the sentiments of *Kolya* therefore function in a similar way. By comparing his film to an Other that has strongly American connotations he helps to establish the film as an example of Czech qualities disappearing from Czech cinemas.

Importantly for the interpretative and evaluative frameworks later employed in critical reception, this construction of *Kolya* as a film of gentle emotions was reinforced by Zdeněk Svěrák’s image as an auteur of kind, humanist scripts continuing the best traditions of Czech comedy. Comedy, manly a specific branch of comedy that is characterised by certain ‘kindness’ towards its characters and mixed with traces of tragedy, has had an established place in notions of Czech artistic traditions for some time. Jindřiška Bláhová has noted that American reception of the Oscar-winning *Closely Watched Trains* (1966) tended to concentrate on the film’s combination of humour and tragedy and its focus on ‘the little Czech man’ (2014, 83–84). A blend of these elements was perceived as a sign of the film’s ‘Czechness’ and gradually became the touchstone against which other films coming from the country could be assessed as ‘more, or conversely less, “Czech New Wave”’ (83). In one attempt to analyse the influences that cemented the association of comedy with Czech culture, Peter Hames highlights Jaroslav Hašek’s series of novels *The Great Soldier Švejk and his Fortunes in the Great War* (1921–1923) and the plays of *Osvobozené divadlo* (Liberated Theatre) of Jan Werich and Jiří Voskovec, that were produced during the inter-war period (2000b). The character of Švejk especially is a primary reference in many an account of Czech comedy traditions. In the novels, Švejk is an ordinary soldier serving Austria-Hungary in the First World War. With his simple-mindedness he reveals the futility of war and disrupts the image of order and discipline the military strives to radiate. Švejk has been interpreted as a symbol of ‘the indestructibility of the human spirit’ and a manifestation of the disruptive power of laughter (66). Svěrák’s work has often been seen as following in the footsteps of these masters of comedy, for example in his and Ladislav Smoljak’s absurdist satirical plays

for Jára Cimrman Theatre which gained immense popularity during the normalisation period in the 1970s and 1980s (73). Svěrák's connections to the canons of Czech comedy were also reinforced through his work with the director of *Closely Watched Trains*, Jiří Menzel, on *Seclusion Near a Forest* (1976) and the Oscar-nominated *My Little Sweet Village* (1985) for which he wrote scripts. Furthermore, several of the films Svěrák had written scripts for had become accepted parts of popular Czech culture.

These associations of Svěrák with canons of national culture and wider popularity can be gauged in the numerous descriptions of his image in *Kolya*'s publicity. One such account can be found in Ondřej Štindl's review, who describes Svěrák's merits as follows:

Svěrák himself is actually an institution of its own kind: a wise man with kind eyes who would hardly harm anyone, publicly sides with unquestionably good things and is, moreover, sometimes even quite funny....[His previous work] was sufficiently understandable to the broadest audience; at the same time he has for many years managed to remain within the boundaries of good taste and thanks to this managed to retain the favour of even the 'more difficult' part of the public. (Štindl 1996, 131)

Throughout his career Svěrák simply built a reputation that was respected by broad audiences.

This seemingly universal reverence for Svěrák posed a bit of a problem for critics wanting to criticise *Kolya*. Commonly, expressing a negative view of the film is also accompanied by a gesture of admiration for Svěrák's previous work. Two such reviews are especially interesting to look at in more detail now because of the very similar rhetorical devices and descriptions they use to introduce their opinions. Both reviews, for instance, open by mentioning the same story, that Svěrák has been recommended by MPs for the position of an ombudsman. The first sentences in a review of Jiří Peňás read:

Recently a certain MP seriously came forward with an idea that Zdeněk Svěrák should accept the position of cultural ombudsman. It was telling that in his justification he ... fully focussed on the traits certainly not only he associated with the character of the charismatic scriptwriter and actor. (Peňás 1996)

Štindl's review starts in a very similar way:

In debates about whether it would be advantageous to instate a function of ombudsman, someone put forward Zdeněk Svěrák's name for this position. We would hardly find a more fitting candidate, if we wanted to express the way the public perceives this actor and author. (Štindl 1996, 131)

What is fascinating about these very similar introductions is the fact that they serve to set the context the writers see themselves as writing in – the purpose of mentioning the story in the review is to remind readers of the admiration Svěrák attracts, the fact that his influence has the potential to reach into the sphere of national politics. By reminding this image, these writers admit that the negative opinions that follow might be somewhat unpopular. As a result, they first need to express their awareness of the 'undying merits' of Svěrák's previous work. As Štindl continues in his article,

if a reviewer intends to raise his reservations about some of Svěrák's works, he also finds it necessary to clarify beforehand that he is well aware of all unquestionable merits of the object of his critique. After all, as can be seen, even the writer of these lines is no exception. (Ibid.)

Svěrák was therefore clearly a highly respected name at the time and, as both authors indicate, he even became a ‘character’ or ‘an institution’ in his own right. The popularity of this character and its associations with quality national production were also commonly emphasised in the promotional campaign of *Kolya*. Several publications wrote articles about the life and work of the writer and in describing his personality and writing style, journalists tend to resort to a consistent set of terms. The writer, we learn, represents a special combination of kindness, intelligent sense of humour and national consciousness. A three-page interview for the magazine *Kinorevue* that was published four months before the release of *Kolya* for example starts with a wordy description of all the numerous charitable traits Svěrák senior seems to possess:

Most people associate his person with sparkling humour, effortless refinement, pleasant demeanour and first of all with ingenious texts the high standard of which many of his fans have started to take for granted. Zdeněk Svěrák has been leaping over the highly set bar with remarkable ease so far: he is sophisticated and intelligible, decorous, and funny, and even despite the growing pressure of his popularity he manages to avoid getting absorbed in cheap trivialities. One can rarely see such meticulously measured amounts of conciliatoriness, kindness and adequate portion of proud patriotism (Bičíková 1996b, 31).

In this extract the journalist finds an impressive number of virtues with which she can describe Svěrák’s personality (funny, sophisticated, refined, pleasant, conciliatory, etc.). At the same time, she paints an image of Svěrák very similar to the one presented in other articles, such as Peňás’s description of Svěrák as a ‘wise man with kind eyes who would hardly harm anyone’ (Peňás 1996).

As several academics have pointed out, star images often struggle to reinforce values under threat. Barbara Klinger, for instance, explores in her analysis of Rock Hudson’s image ‘the relation between a star’s popular meaning’ constructed in films and publicity ‘and the social function this meaning serves’ (1994, 97). She sees Hudson’s image to be reinforcing conservative values that were contrasting contemporary anxieties about virility. She points out that ‘Hudson was in this sense the veritable “Rock,” a sign of the stability of certain old-fashioned notions of the “natural man” uncontaminated by complex social developments’ (116). It is therefore possible to see Svěrák’s image as part of such struggles to reinforce notions threatened by recent socio-political changes. As I mentioned above, many of the Svěrák’s qualities that journalists identify and celebrate in their articles, traits such as kindness and intelligent sense of humour, are also attributes that have been associated with the cherished masterpieces of Czech comedy. In other words, Svěrák’s character is turned into an embodiment of the best of Czech values in these articles. Furthermore, several descriptions of Svěrák are also closely followed by claims about his patriotism. According to the above-quoted journalist Svěrák is the personification of ‘measured amounts of conciliatoriness, kindness and adequate portion of patriotism’ (Bičíková 1996b, 31). Similarly, Štindl also adds that on top of all his virtues Svěrák ‘wishes only the best to the Czech nation’ (1996, 131). Peňás observes in his review that in Svěrák’s image, the virtues of ‘wisdom, kindness, irony, humour ... all meet in some sort of holy amalgam which we are thrilled to consider to be the essence of Czechness itself’ (1996). Representing a cherished face of Czechness, Svěrák’s image and his prominence in *Kolya*’s promotional campaign therefore seem to indicate certain anxieties about national identity. It is perhaps telling that as a personification of Czech values Svěrák’s character also occasionally turns into a teacher of



the nation who refines the audiences through his work. For example, we find out that ‘Zdeněk Svěrák lightens this noble combination [of qualities] with soft irony, meticulously aimed at any signs of arrogance, cruel primitivism, intolerance or simple human stupidity, no matter whether manifesting on a national or private level’ (Bičíková 1996b, 31).

As these examples indicate, the anxieties Svěrák’s image seems to be addressing could potentially be analysed in relation to the socio-political developments in the country after the Velvet Revolution in 1989. However, it is not my aim here to look at all the indications of the crisis of Czech national identity in post-Cold War world. Instead, for the purpose of this article I interpret the prominence of Svěrák’s image in relation to ideas and opinions about Czech cinema in the 1990s. In the context of decreased production and unfulfilled hopes about increased quality of post-1989 cinema, Svěrák presents a stable and reliable source of national quality. Undoubtedly helped by the immense promotional campaign that preceded the film’s release, for many journalists this was the most anticipated Czech film of the last decade. Svěrák’s popularity and reputation as an author continuing the best traditions of Czech comedy are seized upon in publicity texts and turn him into a hope for national cinema. This much is indicated by several critics in their reviews. As one critic says, ‘The whole nation likes Svěráks and respects them, *Kolya* was therefore anticipated as if it were to redeem Czech cinema from its crisis’ (Jeníková 1996). Another critic similarly writes in her review that the premiere of *Kolya* was anticipated (implicitly by everyone) as a ‘moment of hope’ for Czech cinema (Kroupová 1996).

Svěrák’s established reputation as a producer of quintessentially Czech and universally revered works had the effect that he was commonly perceived as the authorial figure behind the film. In contrast to this, the discussions around his son who directed the film form an image of a young creative worker trying to find his own signature and aiming to step out of his father’s shadow. While not ever dismissing Svěrák junior’s work as sub-par, critics usually spend the majority of reviews discussing the script and performance of his father. The director’s contribution tends to be summarised only towards the end of the review, often in conjunction with other aspects of the film (usually cinematography and music). Critics deal with the writer’s prominence as the auteur figure in numerous ways, however. Some embrace his dominance as natural (‘if a picture is to be worth anything, its base stone is a quality script’ (Kofroň 1996)) or they might try to redeem the director’s work (‘Previously the son “obediently” filmed daddy’s work. This time he took dad’s script off the ground ... and gave it wings’ (Baldýnský 1996)). In any of these rhetorics, however, critics merely reaffirm the perception of Svěrák senior’s status as the dominant figure in the creative duo.

As a result of the writer’s reputation, many critics evaluated *Kolya* in the context of his previous work. It is therefore not unusual to see critics praising the film for ‘typical Svěrákian wit’ (Jeníková 1996). Furthermore, the terms critics used to describe the film were remarkably close to Svěrák’s image maintained in promotion. Kindness, humour, and intelligence noticeable from the film’s script were all highlighted as *Kolya*’s great qualities. A variation of these words was mentioned in virtually every major review while the phrase ‘kind comedy’ was used as a common generic label. For instance, daily newspaper *Lidové noviny* finds the film to be mainly relying on ‘situation and dialogue humour – enormously human and kind’ (Tulajdanová 1996). Another critic also praises the film because, there is ‘no trace of aggression, malice and vulgarity,’ in it, with ‘humour inoffensive and kind’ (Kofroň 1996). That these qualities are part of the writer’s oeuvre is pointed out by another critic who thinks



that ‘in Svěrák’s case it is unnecessary to emphasise the suaveness, wit and punchiness of really funny dialogues, [which are] today essential parts of his handwriting’ (Wohlhöfner 1996).

Not only did critical reception draw heavily on Zdeněk Svěrák’s image in order to negotiate the film’s value, the film’s qualities were also presented in reviews as national traditions disappearing from current Czech films. A strategy that critics commonly employ in order to highlight *Kolya*’s exceptionality is contrasting the film’s qualities with perceptions about contemporary Czech cinema. Reviews of *Kolya* depict Czech cinema as a rather desolate wasteland, or as one critic calls it, a land of ‘schoolboy experiments’ (Kroupová 1996). Specifically, 13 out of the 16 positive reviews collected for this article compare the film to the mediocre recent output of Czech filmmakers. One critic for instance thinks that ‘after a long time ..., an exceptionally played, emotional and intelligent Czech film’ emerged (Foll 1996b). Another critic also thinks that *Kolya* is ‘enormously human and kind [and] does not have anything in common with the ironic or sarcastic smirk of many Czech films made after 1989’ (Tulajdanová 1996). By reiterating Svěrák’s image as a guarantee of quality that does not disappoint even in these dark times, these critics not only nostalgically remind readers of a past that was more creatively productive but also define the characteristics of this more valuable past. As a result, *Kolya* and its qualities are often presented as ‘returned’ and ‘renewed.’ One critic simply states that the film ‘rehabilitates Czech cinema’ (Wohlhöfner 1996); another critic points out that the film ‘returns pureness and compassion’ into Czech cinema (Štaudová 1996) or that *Kolya* ‘returns ordinary human story to Czech cinema’ (Kroupová 1996). These critics seem to be hungry for quality Czech filmmaking and in this seemingly barren environment, *Kolya* finally managed to not only deliver it but bring it back.

## Showing Czechness abroad

So far, I have looked at how the interpretative strategies circulating in the promotion and reception of *Kolya* were influenced by anxieties about the state of Czech cinema. The dominating presence of Hollywood and dissatisfaction about the quality of contemporary film production constituted a seemingly ideal environment for Svěrák’s image as a writer of Czech quality texts. As a result, a large amount of publicity drew heavily on his image and valued *Kolya* as a return of Czech quality after a long time. However, as Mette Hjort points out, ‘within certain discourses of a nationalist bent, cultural specificity is systematically linked to ideas about international publics’ (Hjort 1996, 520). Using Danish cinema as an example, Hjort argues that ‘the creation of a national cinema is part of a politics of recognition’ (1996, 520). Relying on the discourse of equality, in the politics of recognition ‘it becomes a matter of claiming that it is an individual’s basic right to demand that his or her particular mode of authentic self-expression be recognized as having at least the same value as other forms of self-expression’ (527).

Indeed, we can glimpse this desire for recognition from outside in articles about *Kolya*. They were undoubtedly fuelled by several elements, for instance by its status as a co-production financed from the European *Eurimages* fund and a British co-producer. Secondly, one of Jan Svěrák’s previous collaborations with his father *The Elementary School* (1991) was nominated for an Oscar in the foreign language category a few years before *Kolya*. His short film *Oil Gobblers* (1988) was even awarded with a Student Academy Award. Moreover, news that the film was going to screen at the Venice Film Festival and that the US

distribution rights had been acquired by Miramax appeared in newspapers even before the film's Czech premiere. This acquisition was seen especially important, since as one critic clarified, 'Apart from the fact that a Czech film will appear in cinemas of the United States after a long time, it means an important base in case *Kolya* is nominated for an Oscar' (Spáčilová 1996b). This article was published one day before the film's Czech premiere and almost a year before it actually won the Oscar, but it indicates how early the promise of foreign recognition was established in the talk around the film. Similarly, several reviews of the film hypothesised about its international reception a few months in advance. The nostalgic rhetorics in them not only evoke ideas of quality missing from contemporary cinema but also define the past of Czech cinema as being capable of attracting international attention. One review, for instance, believes that: 'After a long time comes an unmistakably Czech film capable of appealing also to foreign audiences' (Wohlhöfner 1996). Another critic exclaims that *Kolya* is a film 'that will surely attract domestic audience, and which perhaps again has a chance to succeed abroad' (Vítková 1996b). The film's audiences have barely started buying tickets to see the film, but this film's standing as a potential representative of Czech cinema abroad was already being incorporated into evaluations of it.

The road towards recognition often involves tuning the national to the interests of international publics. In her work, Hjort looks at the strategy of leveraging that she finds several Danish filmmakers active in the 1970s and 1980s to be employing in order to satisfy the national cinema's politics of recognition. She argues that these Danish directors consciously rely on certain 'international elements' that aim to extend a film's relevance to foreign publics. For instance, characters in *Pelle the Conqueror* (1987) talk about their dream to emigrate to America. In this sequence the film therefore reminds stories of people from other countries who were driven to emigrate due to poverty and constructs America as 'the crucible in which all European nations have been combined' (August quoted in Hjort 1996, 530). The assumption behind the idea of leveraging is that national cinema of a small nation can hardly attract recognition by vehemently insisting merely on its foreignness and otherness. Instead, its place in the world needs to be constructed as connected to foreign publics.

With its aims to go abroad, *Kolya*'s pre-release publicity also indicated the presence of leveraging strategies in the film's production. For example, if Zdeněk Svěrák's image was central in shaping the film's connections to Czech traditions, the image of his son helped to reinforce the hopes that this Czechness will successfully appeal to international audiences. Articles depicted the thirty-one-year-old Jan Svěrák as a young director of great talent, especially after his previous nomination for an Oscar for *The Elementary School*. Interviews and previews present him as keen to learn from the best and often finding inspiration in Hollywood films. In these accounts, instead of representing a threat to national cinema, Hollywood is a hive of beauty, professionalism and refined craft. In an interview promoting *Kolya*, Zdeněk Svěrák for example talks about his son as a director who puts in his films 'what he admires about American films' (Bičíková 1996b, 32). Especially the director's previous films *Accumulator 1* (1994) and *The Ride* (1994) were being described as homages to 'his American idols' (for example in Bičíková 1996a, 28, but also in Sedláček 1997, 54–55 and Halada 1997a, 122–125). Similarly, in one interview the director himself confesses his love for the orchestral scores of 'the beautiful great American films' and admits to his dream to one day collaborate with John Williams (Svěrák, J. quoted in Unruh 1995, 15). Somewhere else he describes Spielberg as 'the king of film narration' and Ridley Scott as a 'film magician. His *Blade Runner* is in my VCR all the time' (Sedláček 1997, 56). Therefore, if on the one

hand *Kolya* was meant to be a form of resistance to the dominating presence of Hollywood in Czech cinemas, it was also highly indebted to it. As Hjort argues, in the strategy of leveraging, what she calls ‘international elements’ ‘become the lever enabling various forms of cultural specificity to appear before, and to be recognized by, international publics’ (1996, 530). We can therefore see the parallel evocations of Czech comedy traditions and inspiration in Hollywood quality as promises of leveraging similar to what Hjort describes. With the help of this young filmmaker, Czech traditions might find a form even foreign audiences can connect with.

While in the environment of small national cinemas introducing and promoting the ‘international elements’ of a film can therefore mobilise hopes for recognition, it also brings dangers of minimising the cultural specificity. As Hjort, points out, ‘Only rarely does the imitative capacity to produce products resembling those of a dominant culture meet with applause’ (526). Therefore, in the case of leveraging, it is important that the particular film is still clearly rooted in a national culture. Similarly, as *Kolya* travelled abroad, overt ‘internationalisation’ loomed over the debates about it as a potential danger. Despite the image of Czechness the scriptwriter fervently portrayed in promotion (or maybe because of it), one discourse appearing in articles after the film’s release was questioning whether *Kolya* was truly authentically Czech or whether it was overly sacrificing its specificity to better its chances in foreign markets. Some critics especially associated the film’s pathos as either an example of Hollywood influence on the filmmakers or simply as their attempt to try to appease broad audiences. What appears in critical reception is an image of Hollywood as sentimental, excessive, overbearingly powerful and not subtle. The Czech mode of expression would be, assumingly in contrast to this, modest and small. One critic for instance thinks that ‘while on the outside *Kolya* disarms emotionally almost in Hollywood style, it nevertheless remains rooted in local hills of small tragicomedies, kind loves and concrete politics’ (Spáčilová 1996a). The threat of Hollywood excess is noticeable in this review; in order to argue for the film’s value, the critic highlights its indebtedness to local traditions and clarifies that the levels of sentimentality do not quite reach the Hollywood levels. Another critic, on the other hand, while being generally favourable towards the film, finds the film’s sentimentality to be overdone, reaching the levels of ‘blackmail’ and ‘kitsch’ (Vítková 1996a). According to her, ‘It seems that in those moments *Kolya* associates itself rather disparately with the narrative style of *Accumulator 1* rather than the modest, funny and simple narration of *The Elementary School* which is evidently more closely related to it’ (Ibid.). As I mentioned above, a number of articles published around the release of *Kolya* perceived *Accumulator 1* as the director’s homage to high-energy American films. On the other hand, *The Elementary School*, with its idyllic landscapes of post-war Czechoslovakia and status as Zdeněk Svěrák’s semi-autobiography, was commonly recognised for its engagement with notions of Czech heritage. What this reviewer eventually seems to be calling for in her preference for the ‘more modest’ *Elementary School* is a more ‘Czech’ film.

Apart from the film’s sentimentality, what *Kolya* was perceived to be indicating about Czech national identity was also questioned by some critics. In the most negative reviews, the Czechness of the film was interpreted as deceiving rather than an authentic representation of the nation. The title of the review published in magazine *Respekt* can be translated as ‘Screen Dreams about Ourselves’ (Peňás 1996). The author of the review calls the film ‘Wunscherfüllung,’ an uncritical image merely showing characteristics Czechs would like to see themselves as possessing (Ibid.). Another critic, writing for the literary newspaper

*Literární noviny*, also agrees that the film feeds Czech self-lies. According to him, *Kolya* 'dismisses mystery, surprise, desire to search – we know here straight away that the modest Czech chivalry and slightly self-ironic congeniality will win, it's only about presenting the journey tastefully, "classy." At the same time, it's supposedly not meant to be a fairy tale but the "whole truth"' (Cieslar 1996). For both, the film is not a truthful exploration of Czechness but a dream and a fairy tale that was selling distorted images not only to home audiences but also the world. To develop his dissatisfaction with the film, Jiří Cieslar comments that *Kolya* gives the impression that it 'was made for foreign tourists' (Ibid.). According to these critics, in its goal to please many publics, the film seems to have sacrificed too much.

In the end *Kolya* did satisfy many publics at home and abroad. It successfully drew Czech audiences to cinemas in a year of record-low attendance. Apart from its generally rather positive critical reception, newspapers seemed to be thrilled to report that 'after a long, long time a film has come to cinemas that is sold out and tickets to which are being bought many days in advance' (Tesařová 1996). Indeed, it became the highest grossing film of 1996 (Halada 1997a, 39) and remained in cinemas long after its premiere. At the same time, news articles reported on the film's successes at international film festivals. When *Kolya* won two awards at a film festival in Madrid, one article bringing this news to its readers had the modest title 'Kolya conquers the world after Czech cinemas' (Sitařová 1996). Similarly, when the film won the Oscar, this news was commonly broken in articles that claimed that *Kolya* 'conquered America' (Česká tisková kancelář 1997). Another writer labelled *Kolya*'s Oscar win as 'the return of Czech film to the imaginary Olympus of world cinema' (Lederer 1997a).

The importance of such recognition as a matter of national representation was not negligible. After all, the submissions for the Academy Award for the Best Foreign Language Film (called Best International Feature Film since 2020) are chosen by national academies, and each country is allowed to submit only one film per year. The submission for the category itself therefore involves the selection of a work that is going to represent the annual output of a whole national cinema. Similar to sports events, it is not only individuals (or teams) who compete here but whole countries. Therefore, when Jack Valenti presents the Oscar for the category in 1997, he says that 'the Oscar goes to the Czech Republic for *Kolya*' (Oscars 2014). The director, the writer, as well as the Russian boy and British producer who also take the stage to accept the award are doing so seemingly on behalf of the Czech nation. In this patriotic spirit, one newspaper article also reported that: 'We have an Oscar after thirty years' (Anon 1997a), as if the whole nation somehow contributed to or shared the film's success. This success and especially the recognition from the American Academy therefore had a strong presence in the media and was seen as an important moment for Czech culture and nation. Articles bringing the news about the success at Academy Awards were widely printed on the front pages of national and regional newspapers. Apart from being accompanied by the smiling faces of the filmmakers with the statue, they also commonly mentioned that the president of the country congratulated them for this achievement.

In the case of *Kolya*, the nationalist discourse in the film's publicity also indicates a nation rebuilding its image after 1989. The director, apparently somewhat conscious of the role he was playing at the Academy Awards, phrased his acceptance speech as a geography lesson to the Oscar (and the international audience in general): 'Dear Oscar, ... you're going to Prague. You don't know where it is, it is in Europe' (Oscars 2014). As Ladislav Holý has pointed out, in the 1990s the Czech Republic aimed to portray an image of a cultured nation for whom the Velvet Revolution and the subsequent transition to market economy marked

a 'return to Europe' after the (non-European and uncivilised) communist rule (Holý 1996, 151). The director's success at the awards ceremony with this quality film production further underlined by his speech therefore seems to be showing to the multi-national audiences that the country had, indeed, returned to the cultured Europe. Similarly, the (mis)translations of the director's speech in Czech press are also a fascinating indication of these image-building hopes held for the film's recognition. One writer for example replaces Prague with the Czech Republic, and thus further highlights the metonymic function of the city in the speech (Lederer 1997b). Magazine *Cinema* (in a special issue dedicated to the film's Oscar success), on the other hand, reports the director saying that Prague 'is in the middle of Europe' (Anon 1997b). This change to the speech reminds the Czech dislike of being classified as part of Eastern Europe and preferring to think of the country as being located in 'the heart of Europe' (Holý 1996, 151). Other commentators in the press also noted the political goals the film's success could be used for. One journalist describes the fans of the film in the government as hopefuls aiming to turn the film 'into a miracle weapon, the effectivity of which, as well as its compatibility with American belief in human goodness, can open our doors to NATO' (Kafka 1997).

## The importance of foreign recognition

As I have argued in this article, *Kolya*'s reception is a fascinating terrain indicating hopes and anxieties about the state of Czech cinema after 1989. In the environment riddled with uncertainties about the future of national cinema, *Kolya*'s achievements were deemed to be several; many film critics saw it as a rare quality product in an otherwise unexceptional output of the nation's cinema. The film's indebtedness to traditions of Czech comedy was also welcomed because of the recent dominating presence of Hollywood films in cinemas. Furthermore, this quality Czech cultural artefact achieved a success that could even help shape the nation's image abroad.

The success at the Oscars also reveals the extent to which the foreign recognition itself was seen as valuable. In arguments of some writers this success started being employed as an ultimate validation of the film's significance. While *Kolya*'s initial critical reception was rather positive (only three out of sixteen analysed reviews panned the film), negative opinions aroused rather strong emotions. To counter the negative opinions, a particular rhetoric started being employed by the defenders of the film in this debate. They insisted that the film's recognition abroad surely outweighed any of its flaws. As Marijke de Valck says, 'A prize or award is the most tangible form of symbolic capital' (2016, 110). Several writers tended to use the film's collection of gathered symbolic capital, especially after the Academy Awards ceremony, as a bullet proof confirmation of the film's values that seemingly invalidated any criticism directed at the film; how can anyone speak negatively about a film that achieved more than any other Czech production since the revolution? For instance, in one post-Oscar interview actor Ondřej Vetchý expresses his annoyance over the fact that 'some, instead of being proud of what the two of them [director and scriptwriter] did for Czech cinema, talk about emotional calculation and kitsch' (Vetchý quoted in Anon 1997c, 28). According to Vetchý, such criticism is nothing else but envy (Ibid.). The interesting thing about these counterarguments is that they often aim to divert all the attention to the recognition achieved, seemingly making it the primary criterion of the film's value. Another writer urges his readers, for instance, to focus on the film's achievements: 'Let's not concern

ourselves with the evil tongues that accused *Kolya* ... of subjecting much to foreign success and getting the statue. Whether it's true or not, it will all be forgotten sooner or later, but the Oscar and its mark on history will remain' (Halada 1997b). In this article the award is not only a tangible evidence of quality but also an eternal demonstration of the film's achievements.

When *Kolya* won the Oscar and therefore reached the 'home base,' as some journalists called it, many defenders of the film in fact calmly admitted that perhaps it did intentionally appeal to large publics at home and abroad, but this was completely acceptable since it succeeded in its aim. As one commentator puts it, 'how can something overly try to be liked if it really is liked' (Just 1996). If the film still manages to demonstrate some connection to cultural specificity, some form of a compromise is tolerable for these critics, especially if the film can justify the compromises with tangible evidence of recognition. Peter Hames shows this most clearly, when he evokes the rhetoric of equal rights in his argument, which, as Hjort points out, is central to demands for recognition (1996, 527). In a defence of *Kolya* written a few years later, Hames argues that despite clearly being a product aiming to succeed with international audiences, it does not lose what he calls the 'Czech touch.' According to him, *Kolya*

is no different from most Hollywood products and many other 'European' movies (e.g. *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *The English Patient*). [But] [w]hy should films from small countries be of only parochial interest? Isn't it important that the 'Czech touch' should also reach others? ... *Kolya* is careful to maintain a level [of] irony and authenticity. It is not a sell out. (2000a, 81–2)

In this argument, the appeal to international publics is an acceptable compromise, since it allows the nation to demand the attention it deserves under the ideology of equal rights. No other Czech film has since then accomplished the same level of international recognition. However, the emphasis placed on it in the discourse around *Kolya* reveals the prominence with which international recognition figured (and arguably still figures) in perceptions about a 'healthy' and 'strong' national cinema. In the Czech Republic these hopes have since remained somewhat unfulfilled. On the other hand, the validation *Kolya* received from international awards arguably helped to further cement associations of post-communist Czech cinema with elements of kind humour and tragedy that some critics have started to label somewhat pejoratively as the 'pretty, Czech' (hezký český) film.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

**Richard Vojvoda** recently completed his PhD at the University of East Anglia. His research looks at the reception of post-communist Czech cinema, especially at the shifting notions of value in relation to the so-called 'retro film.'

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