

The Secret History of Art



Noah Charney on Art Crimes and Art Historical Mysteries

“Shanghai Gypsy,” Premieres in Europe

October 3, 2012

I was pleased to attend the European premiere of the new Slovenian film, *Shanghai Gypsy* (*Šanghaj* in the original Slovene). The opening in Ljubljana, packed with local stars, came shortly after the film, written and directed by the talented young Marko Naberšnik, won a prize for best screenplay at the Montreal Festival of Foreign Films. The film did not disappoint—it is probably the best Slovenian film I’ve seen. That statement will come with a small caveat, but one which will not undercut the achievement of the film.



Shanghai Gypsy is an epic on a small scale. It tells the story of four generations of a gypsy family living in the far-flung Prekmurje region of Slovenia. Prekmurje boasts a rich ethnic diversity, with a strong representation of gypsy families. Prekmurje is to Slovenia as Ireland once was to England—an impoverished but heart-achingly beautiful land of poets. (To understand Prekmurje, I recommend the music of a friend of mine, Vlado Kreslin, also from that region—his poetry will be published in English for the first time this November).

The film begins with our protagonist, Belmondo Mirga, on trial. He reflects back on the generations that preceded him. We see his grandmother, who took a new husband when her first went to prison—and kept both of them when he was released. We see Belmondo’s father, Ujaš, who flees his ramshackle village and abandons his family, only to return having

made a small fortune in nearby Italy, in a small-scale business of smuggling goods into Yugoslavia. Belmondo is raised in the business and takes it over, turning it into a more profitable black-market enterprise, and establishing a village of his own, called Šangaj (Shanghai) of which he is lord and master. Belmondo is sent to prison when he refuses to integrate his smuggling operation with a local larger-scale crime boss, who then sabotages him. When he is released, he finds that his son has strayed, and he must bring him back home once more. This multi-generational epic of a microcosmic family in a forgotten region of Europe is flavored with beautiful scenery and just the right amount of humor to keep things light.



Slovene films tend to be of a particular type: slow, introspective affairs, driven by characters with rough-hewn faces, around whom relatively little, in terms of traditional plot and action, happens. Of course things do *happen*, but one is hard-pressed to describe what happens in so many of these films. This is in stark contrast to Hollywood films, where *happening* is all that happens, where character, thoughtfulness, and the willingness to move at a leisurely pace are thrown out the window. Hollywood films are a shot of vodka and Red Bull; Slovene films are a good single-malt Scotch that you sip on a long, cicada-sung night by a meandering river. The good ones are worth savoring, but you must be in the mood to savor—if you're looking for pace, you should look elsewhere. There is a lack of urgency in Slovene films, which is not necessarily a bad thing, it's just a style—but I have a feeling that Hollywood-raised viewers will find even the excellent ones, like *Shanghai Gypsy*, rather slow. It is more a fable than a story in the traditional sense, with something of Coelho's *The Alchemist* in its mood. I happen to like this mood, and I cannot think of another film that does slow-and-savoring better than this. But such films can stray into the realm of boring all too easily. This one never does, and it rewards the patient viewer with beautiful cinematography (Miloš Srdić), a charming script by Marko Naberšnik (from a novel by the poet-laureate of slow, character-driven Slovenian/gypsy fables, Feri Lainšček, available in English—it has a terrible turn-off cover, a still from the film, but it is well worth reading despite external appearances), and roundly brilliant acting.



The acting is a particular treat and will feel wonderfully exotic to Anglophone viewers, as the cast boasts actors from a wide variety of countries, speaking more than half a dozen languages. The film is Slovenian, but features Bosnians, Macedonians, Italians, Serbs, and Croats, to name a few, and languages range from Italian to Slovene to Albanian to the Prekmurje dialect of Slovene to the gypsy tongue. Actors had to learn these languages for the film, an impressive feat. The result is a mellifluous cacophony, relating the interplay of so many languages over a small territory in Prekmurje. Americans are used to everyone speaking English, and so having a few square kilometers of land in which half a dozen languages are spoken, often by a single person, will come as a surprise, but is a nod to realism. Naberšnik's tendency to linger in close-ups is rewarded by the character-filled faces of his cast, with particularly strong performances put in by Bosnian Senad Bašić, Slovene Bojan Emeršič, and the revelation of a lead, Macedonian actor Visar Vishka, who turns on a dime from sweet and baby-faced to a menacing gangster, a slender Balkan version of the remarkable chameleon act of James Gandolfini as Tony Soprano, who was one moment a teddy bear, the next a snarling grizzly.



Marko Naberšnik has quickly stepped into the role of auteur film director, with a distinctive and winning style. His first film, also adapted from a book by Feri Lainšček, *Petelinji Zajtrk* (*Rooster's Breakfast*), had a similar feel—also a quiet, character-driven story about melancholic, lyrical residents of rural Slovenia. Friends and I have a joke that you can't have a Slovene film without someone going to jail and without a nipple appearing on screen (both accounted for here), but the consistency of Naberšnik's two films results in giving him a distinctive artistic "voice," never a bad thing. Of this type we might also consider Branko Djurič's *Traktor, Ljubezen, in Rock 'n' Roll* (*Tractor, Love, and Rock 'n' Roll* also reviewed in this column), which has a similar feel, story, and location but edges more into tragicomedy

than Naberšnik's work. Much of the pace of Slovene films may be down to moderate budgets, which makes it harder to pull off thrillers—the explosion that appears in *Shanghai Gypsy* is a rare inclusion of pricy special effects (this was the most expensive film in Slovene history). But within the context of this type of film, *Shanghai Gypsy* is rewarding: thoughtful, beautiful to look at and exotic for, its wash of languages and otherworldly location.

Noah Charney is a best-selling author and professor of art history. He spends part of each year in Slovenia—a feature article on the Slovenian film industry will follow in this column.

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