

Personal and Transpersonal Perspectives in Czech and Slovak Ecocritical Cinema

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Inspired by the concept of “transpersonality” in contemporary psychology, this study seeks to expand its possible meanings – not only in relation to the sometimes overly mystical current ecocritical strands of thought, but even more significantly, in relation to contemporary trends in essayistic or experimental cinema. The study achieves this by analysing the films of three Czech and Slovak female directors, who are united by their ecological concerns stemming from the theme of (the planet as) home. Compared to more traditional examples of ecocriticism in these two local cinemas, the films analyzed here shift away from an objective viewpoint and the expository mode of documentary cinema toward essayistic narratives with a strong personal perspective. However, this shift occurs within a broader context of the need to *overcome* the personal as well – in favour of a multiperspectival perception of the fate of humanity, and toward a “transpersonal perspective” as an ecological choice. Through the analyses of selected films, the study shows different stages of this process and suggests that the transpersonal perspective can be understood precisely as a deliberate ecological choice – one that embraces a personal viewpoint in order to *transcend* it in a post-anthropocentric fusion between human perspective, nature, and the universe.

Keywords: Czech cinema, Slovak cinema, ecocinema, transpersonality, personal perspective.

What is the right approach to becoming ecocritical? And what role does the personal perspective play in cinematic approaches to ecocriticism, considering that many answers to these questions have been proposed and explored in the last quarter century, most of which emphasize the need to transcend anthropocentric perspectives? This shift has also led to a relativization of the importance of classical narrative or even documentary cinema, with many forms of filmmaking that can be described as ecocritical also serving as a source of inspiration for rethinking essayistic forms of filmmaking and the importance of personal perspective in cinema. Finally, many ecocritical approaches to filmmaking align with what Richard Grusin calls “the nonhuman turn.”¹

In this paper, I will primarily draw on my knowledge of the regional Czech and Slovak cinematic context to raise the more universal question of the relationship between the ecocritical approach to cinema and the increased demand for personal engagement and subjective perspectives that persists in arthouse documentary filmmaking. My main hypothesis is that a truly ecocritical approach should actually relativize and reassess subjectivity – and, by extension, the “personal perspective” – in response to an increased vigilance against humanity’s potentially destructive self-centredness.

In 2010, Timothy Morton poetically delineated “the ecological thought” as “a virus that infects all other areas of thinking,” encouraging us to think about ecology not merely as a matter of “global warming, recycling, and solar power.” It has not only to do “with everyday relationships between humans and nonhumans. It has to do with love, loss, despair, and compassion. It has to do with depression and psychosis. It has to do with capitalism and with what might exist after capitalism. [...] It has to do with doubt, confusion, and skepticism. [...] It has to do with delight, beauty, ugliness, disgust, irony, and pain. [...] It has to do with coexistence.”²

Already a decade ago, these words were quoted by the editors of *Screening Nature: Cinema beyond the Human* “as part of a broader shift in the ways we speak and think about cinema.”³

In this paper, I draw on a similar range of feelings and themes as outlined by Morton. However, my primary focus is the search for various ways

1 Richard Grusin (ed.), *The Non-Human Turn* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

2 Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Harvard University Press, 2010), 2.

3 Anat Pick and Guinevere Narraway (eds.), *Screening Nature: Cinema beyond the Human* (Berghahn Books, 2023 – first edition 2013), 1.

to transcend the limits of the human *self*. I will try to define some of these approaches through an analysis of selected examples from Czech and Slovak documentary cinema. Since the most inspiring examples happen to be made by female directors, my paper will position itself at the intersection of regional cinema history, ecofeminism, and “the ecological thought” in the Mortonian sense. It is this intersection that allows me to work with the proposed new perspectives even if it means being constrained by a limited terminology.

In particular, I intend to analyse three different examples of personal perspective – not with the aim of conventionally affirming it as a traditionally valuable approach to reality in (not only documentary) cinema, but rather conducting an ecocritical interrogation of the very meaning of “personal.” However, although in my paper I refer to some examples of reflection on both post- and transhumanism, I have chosen not to use these terms en bloc, but rather as starting points for exploring *some* of the many ways of questioning the “personal.” I believe that what I am concerned with cannot be fully contained within the concept of posthumanism. Posthumanists often insist on blurring the boundaries between humans and animals, nature and culture, the natural and the technological, and the individual and the environment.⁴ However, this stance is at least as problematic as the transhumanist one,⁵ and has already been critiqued by many. In her article “The Humanism in Posthumanism,” Kate Soper writes: “The irony of any posthumanist invitation to collapse these distinctions is that if we were wholly able to do so, we would no longer recognize the force of the moral issues we are being called upon to address. We would have conceptually undermined the conditions for any form of moral, political and scientific critique” – and even the appropriate response to the potential climate apocalypse.⁶

4 Typical and already classic examples are works by Donna Haraway like *When Species Meet* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008) or *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (Routledge, 1991).

5 Simona Micali, the author of a recent book on critical posthumanism in literature and cinema, considers transhumanism “as a grand revival of anthropocentrism,” since it is “still well grounded on the vision of humanity as a unique species, autonomous and separated from the others, placed at the top of an [...] evolutionary ladder.” Simona Micali, *Towards a Posthuman Imagination in Literature and Media. Monsters, Aliens, Artificial Beings* (Peter Lang, 2019), 196–197.

6 Kate Soper, “The Humanism in Posthumanism,” *Comparative Critical Studies* 9, no. 3 (2012): 375.

Given the lack of more accurate terminology, I propose the term “transpersonal perspective,” inspired by the central premise of transpersonal psychology: human perception is preserved, with the ego *remaining available*, but being superseded by higher development.⁷ This approach, I believe, is shared by the three directors whose work I will analyze in this paper. I will not focus on their gender, leaving this coincidence for further research, as I do not yet consider it a significant factor in determining the common qualities of their works.

However, it is worth noting that, in Czech and Slovak cinema, ecocritical tendencies have typically appeared in documentary films by male directors. Recent examples include Dominik Jursa’s *Zlatá zem* [*The Golden Land*] (2020), a film about the struggle of the local population against a foreign oil giant, or, more traditionally, in mountaineering films of genre veteran Pavel Barabáš, and the more recent natural history films by Branislav Molnár.

While these films are usually narrated as classical reportages or travelogues in a predominantly expository mode,⁸ another important trend warrants critical attention – the gradual adoption of an ecocritical perspective by relatively young female directors in both national cinemas, who increasingly employ essayistic and often personally engaged approaches. This trend is the reason I chose to examine the works by three Czech and Slovak women directors, with the aim to compare their different approaches to ecocritical cinema through their shifts from objectivized to personal or even – to use my term – “transpersonal perspectives.” Once again, I do not consider the gender of these directors a decisive factor in the creation of their distinctive perspectives. However, it is possible that their femininity may have influenced their more restrained views on the objectivity of cinematic narrative and their inclination to perceive the planet as home, beyond distinctions of species, race, or nationality – thus aligning with what I call “transpersonal.” This gendered perspective remains speculative, though. Therefore, I propose we focus on the simple fact that the films I have chosen to analyze were created by three women from a relatively consistent

7 Bruce W. Scotton, “Introduction and Definition of Transpersonal Psychiatry,” in *Textbook of Transpersonal Psychiatry and Psychology*, ed. Bruce W. Scotton – Allan B. Chinen – John R. Battista (Basic Books, 1996).

8 Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Indiana University Press, 2010), 142–171.

generation born in the 1980s and 1990s: Viera Čákanyová, Veronika Lišková, and Greta Stocklassa.

First, I propose the term “transpersonal perspective,” partly inspired by a comparable concept in contemporary psychology and psychiatry, where “transpersonal” refers to “experiences in which the sense of identity or self extends beyond (*trans*) the individual or personal to encompass wider aspects of humankind, life, psyche or cosmos.”⁹ This understanding aligns with certain strands of ecocriticism, which advocate for a unification of humanity through the acceptance of a shared sense of Earth Grief and the reconciliation of humans with nature, as in Stephen Harrod Buhner’s works.¹⁰ It also resonates with a more restrained relativization of the distinction between nature and culture, and thus humans, as exemplified in Bruno Latour’s term “Nature/Culture” in *Facing Gaia*.¹¹ While these different strands of thinking often balance on the edge of mysticism – a tendency I aim to avoid – I find it essential to envisage a specific field of meaning for the term “transpersonal perspective” as part of moving beyond the limits of the anthropocentric ego through a series of examples found in the films explored in this article. Specifically, I will analyze the debut film by Czech-Swedish director Greta Stocklassa, *Kiruna – překrásný nový svět* [*Kiruna – A Brave New World*] (2019) as well as the most recent films by Veronika Lišková and Viera Čákanyová, whose experimental trilogy on AI and climate change I have already analysed in other contexts.¹²

The first example of potentially transpersonal perspective is Greta Stocklassa’s film, which, in a somewhat traditionalist manner, presents the varied fates of the inhabitants of a small town threatened by an ecological catastrophe. The film was released in cinemas as the debut feature of Stocklassa, then still a FAMU student with Czech-Swedish roots. It tells the story of Kiruna, a northern Swedish town where years of iron ore mining have caused

9 See more in Roger Walsh and Frances Vaughan, “On Transpersonal Definitions,” *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 25, no. 2 (1993): 199–207.

10 Stephen Harrod Buhner, *Earth Grief. The Journey Into and Through Ecological Loss* (Raven Press, 2022).

11 Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia. Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime* (Polity Press, 2017), 16.

12 E.g., Jana Dudková, “Umelé a umelecké v post-antropocentrickej trilógii Viery Čákanyovej” [Artificial and Artistic in the Post-anthropocentric Trilogy of Viera Čákanyová], *Slovenské divadlo: revue dramatických umení* 71, no. 1 (2023): 5–25.

the land to cave in, forcing part of the town to be resettled and demolished. Understandably, this situation affects many inhabitants *personally*, with their feelings ranging from sadness and a sense of uprooting to an optimistic view of witnessing the creation of a new city. This optimism is also the reason why Stocklassa chose the film's subtitle as a direct reference to Aldous Huxley's famous novel¹³ (which, coincidentally, also inspired the final part of Viera Čákanyová's trilogy, which I will analyze later). However, Stocklassa does not frame her film around personal confessions; instead, these feelings are expressed only peripherally through public discussions led by a local activist, Timo Vilgats, with the town's inhabitants. Vilgats is just one of the film's three protagonists. The other two are Abdalrahman, a young asylum seeker, and Maia, a high school student who is reconnecting with her Sami roots.

The film's dominant theme is not only the ecological threat but also the broader redefinition of identity in the contemporary world. Against the backdrop of preparing an entire city for resettlement – and thus the literal erasure of its *sites of memory* – we also encounter themes such as xenophobia, immigration, and minority identities. However, none of these themes are deeply analyzed. Stocklassa's documentary strategy relies mostly on observing the protagonists in their social interactions, without delving into their personal reflections on the events unfolding around them. On one hand, the film emphasizes the need to consider *multiple* perspectives as a basis for – among other things – ecological awareness. On the other, the formal means of representation used in the film, along with the interviewees' words, convey the narrative without extensive reliance on personal confessions or direct authorial imprints from the director and her collaborators. The essayistic elements are achieved only through visual metaphors of a city in motion – especially the recurring shots of trucks transporting houses destined for resettlement along the highway, or of trains carrying iron ore out of the city. This ore, a long-standing source of profit and a symbol of local identity, is also responsible for the town's destruction. Combined with Pavel Jan's original organ music, which references the Baroque conception of the transcendent, these are the only significant authorial commentaries on the plot.

13 Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (Chatto & Windus, 1932).

In contrast to *Kiruna*, I understand the “transpersonal perspective” much more as an evolution of a deeply personal perspective and as a deliberate ecological choice. This choice involves adopting and *accepting* a personal *perspective* and *story* in order to *transcend* it, dissolving individual interests into a version of a post-anthropocentric fusion with not only the rest of humanity but also with nature and, in a broader sense, the universe.

Yet, I do not suggest replacing “transpersonal” with “posthuman.” Not all films I have chosen to analyze emphasize the posthuman, but all of them lean toward the transpersonal. In this context, *Návštěvníci* [*The Visitors*] (2022) by another young Czech director, Veronika Lišková, serves as a kind of intermediate step between *Kiruna* and the hybrid post-anthropocentric trilogy by Slovak director Viera Čákanyová. The relative proximity between the director and her protagonist – whom she met already as a student – enabled the capturing of a highly personal narrative, further amplified when the protagonist was tasked with continuing to film her story without the director and crew during the pandemic.

In *The Visitors*, Veronika Lišková draws on the genre of film portraiture. However, the film features a *multiplicity* of perspectives, as well as a shared authorship of the individual film images. It emphasizes the personal, even intimate nature of these perspectives while simultaneously blurring the lines between the perspectives of the protagonist, her interviewees, and the director.

The protagonist of the film is a young Czech social anthropologist, Zdenka Sokolíčková, who moves with her family to the world’s northernmost inhabited city, Longyearbyen in Norway. The town has only 2,500 inhabitants but is home to 52 nationalities, as the absence of visa requirements attracts people from all over the world. As glaciers melt, avalanches occur, and the landscape changes inexorably, so too does the population structure and the authorities’ attitudes to local demographic problems. Sokolíčková arrives in the town to conduct field research in this place of constant and multi-layered environmental, political, and demographic change. The film’s narrative strategy combines photogenic shots of the landscape with scenes of the protagonist at work or leisure with her family. In private moments

with her husband and through diary-like voiceovers, she shares her plans, fears, and feelings in an unusually intimate confession, punctuated by occasional poetic interludes – whether through reading a poem or her own poetic descriptions. Her voice is subdued in these moments, transitioning into whispers with distinct emotionally tinged modulations. It moves from initial optimistic calmness and tenderness to a gradually escalating sense of helplessness, sadness, and disillusionment.

The gradual transformation of the protagonist is captured both in her own statements and in a sequential compilation of her interviews with the inhabitants, which she records as part of her research. In the first part of the film, we primarily see interviews with Norwegian citizens, where the theme of climate threat to their home dominates. However, as the film progresses, interviews with immigrants are introduced, revealing a recurring theme of latent hostility from Norwegians towards these “visitors.”

As the content of the interviews evolves in the director’s cut, so too does Sokolíčková’s approach to her work and mission. Instead of asking routine questions, she begins to share her own experiences and feelings, as if subconsciously trying to soften the hostility of the local population. Additionally, she strives to help immigrants in need. Her scientific objectivity begins to break down, and the *multiple* perspectives of her interviewees inevitably intermingle with her own dual identity: as a researcher at the University of Oslo and as an immigrant who experiences, for the first time, a sense of real home, only to quickly become disillusioned, realizing that she has not been fully accepted by this foreign land.

The dominant theme of the film is, once again (as in *Kiruna*), the topic of home, encompassing both the intimate family circle and the broader context of the host community, the locality, the state with its specific policies, and ultimately the planet. Just as the protagonist herself grapples with her scientific objectivity – allowing the stories of others to intertwine with her own and vice versa – the film’s perspective shifts in a similar manner. Due to the pandemic, the director and her crew can no longer travel to Norway, leading to segments of the film being shot by the protagonist herself and her husband. This results in a blend of professional shots and



1–2. Still from *Návštěvníci* [*The Visitors*]
(Veronika Lišková, 2022). © Cinémotif Film /
Vojtěch Vančura

Kadras iš filmo *Návštěvníci* (*Lankytojai*,
rež. Veronika Lišková, 2022)

amateur footage, primarily captured on cell phones. The director's conception is complemented by the protagonist's choices regarding what to share from her experiences. Conversely, the narrative is punctuated (and the protagonist's intimate statements are often illustrated) by beautifully crafted professional shots of nature, which not only serve a decorative function but also evoke emotional responses and subtly comment on the theme of climate change. For example, Zdenka's husband highlights the hypocrisy of

Norwegian – and particularly local – greenwashing politics, as illustrated by the recurring image of motorized snowmobiles traversing the polar landscape as part of touristic entertainment. The abstract play of ice floes serves as a reminder of global warming. Additionally, some of the visuals of polar landscapes provide an emotional contrast to the protagonist's Central European home environment. Whales calmly swimming in the sea juxtapose the memories of screaming birds from the time of the protagonist's mother's funeral. This contrast finally becomes palpable in the film's conclusion, where the protagonist's return to the Czech Republic is accompanied by images of trees and the sounds of birds – elements that were absent from her temporary home in Norway.

Of course, these images of the nonhuman world are informed by a profound human aesthetic sensitivity and a search for meaning. The metaphorical shots of nature link the ecocritical approach with the director's authorial perspective; however, the personal perspective of the author is relativized. As previously mentioned, the boundaries between the director's perspective and that of her protagonist are blurred. Thus, the personal perspective of Zdenka Sokolíčková *becomes* the perspective of the director and vice versa, while the *multiplicity* of personal perspectives arising from the nature of Sokolíčková's research ultimately compels us to reflect on the necessity of *transcending the personal* as such.

Among the films I have chosen to analyze in this paper, Viera Čákanyová's trilogy (*FREM*, 2019, *Biela na bielej* [*White on White*], 2020, and *Poznámky z Eremocénu* [*Notes from the Eremocene*], 2023) most profoundly engages with the dialogical relationship between the personal and the transpersonal, as well as between the human and the non- or even trans-human.

In the first part of the trilogy, her professional feature debut *FREM*, Čákanyová explores the vanishing Antarctic landscape from the perspective of a fictional artificial intelligence in an essayistic, hybrid form that straddles the boundaries between fiction, documentary, and animation. Most of *FREM*'s footage was shot using drones amidst the Antarctic scenery to simulate this AI perspective. This documentary material, representing the gaze

of a fictional entity, is interwoven with animated images of dinosaurs or asteroids, suggesting a non-human understanding of time and the history of life on Earth. The film opens with analogue footage shot with a handheld camera in New Zealand by the director herself, accompanied by her melancholic voiceover: “I shot these pictures, these beautiful, random pictures, on analogue, as a reminiscence of analogue matter, of biological matter, of us... before it all goes, disappears, becomes something else. I wanted to save it as a sentimental memory of humankind.” This opening establishes a distinction between the human and non-human perspectives – the automatic gaze of AI. Paradoxically, the human experience is still aligned with the photographic and mechanical image, which has traditionally been perceived as relatively independent of human intervention. Yet, the handheld camera and analogue material create an illusion of a deep, indexical connection to the world of biological matter, simultaneously serving as a direct extension of the human body.

In the introduction, Čákanyová employs analogue film to emphasize the physical, almost visceral aspect of the world: the wind in hair, a flock of seagulls, children playing, animals being dissected, sea waves, and even kitschy Christmas decorations, which already hint at her ironic perspective on humanity. While the images, subtitles, and the director’s voiceover present her personal viewpoint, they are quickly blurred, rewound, and digitally disrupted from the outset, suggesting that the ambivalent materiality of the world, along with the author’s personal perspective, is further processed by an artificial entity that finds little meaning in these images and thoughts.

This motif of consuming our human/natural world recurs in the techniques employed in the third film of the trilogy, where the analogue imagery is often interrupted and digitally fragmented into pixels and squares, or otherwise distorted – sometimes accompanied by a sonic reference to a malfunctioning video player and a barely legible subtitle that reads “damaged.” In both films, artificial intelligence emerges as a threat that tends to elude human perspective and experience. However, the director’s attitude to this threat is ambivalent, mirroring her complex attitude towards humanity itself.

In an early reflection on *FREM*, it is noted that the film captures “[t]he cataclysm of vision, the extinction of the human gaze, the field of vision of the machine presented as a harbinger of the end of man.”¹⁴ In contrast, Antony Fredriksson, who considers *FREM* a predecessor to *White on White*, interprets Čákanyová’s films as emphasising “certain aspects of being human” in a phenomenological sense, where “[e]mbodiment and affectivity are at the core of being human.” According to Fredriksson, *FREM* filters out “human traits” so that we can “recognise these traits more pertinently in the follow-up, *White on White*.”¹⁵ He begins his analysis by referencing the history of photographic image: if “photography was a point for certain cultural imaginations about a super-human perspective on the world, [...] this historical context reverberates with the current critical discourse on the Anthropocene. In both cases human involvement is seen as problematic.”¹⁶ Across the trilogy, Čákanyová indeed mounts a profound defence of humanness in the face of her obvious critique of the Anthropocene. Yet, this defence – mostly conveyed through her video diaries or personal voice-overs – is not the sole layer of her films. I argue that Čákanyová, on the contrary, attempts to transcend her human/personal perspective and offers instead an utopian vision of humanizing AI (which appeared unsettlingly dehumanized in the first two parts of the trilogy), and ultimately proposes a transpersonal point of view that explores various forms of post- and trans-human identities.

In *FREM*, a brief suggestion of the director’s personal perspective is quickly subdued, making way for a sequence of long yet fragmentary shots of a decaying continent, emphasizing the impersonal beauty of the artificial gaze. Fredriksson observes that “[t]he superhuman image is used in this way as a rhetorical device to help us imagine a world beyond human experience, but what it presents to us is a void that addresses us with a certain existential dread. The lack of emotion creates a surge of emotions: a sense of grief, as grief consists of missing something.”¹⁷

14 Martin Palúch, “Slovenský dokumentárny film na 23. MFDF Jihlava” [Slovak Documentary Film at the 23rd IDFF Jihlava], *Kino -ikon* 23, no. 2 (2019): 177.

15 Antony Fredriksson, “Nonhuman Images: Environment and Emotion in Two Films by Viera Čákanyová,” *Visual Resources* 40, 18 (2024), published online February 12, 2024, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01973762.2023.2287325?src=exp-la>.

16 Ibid., 3–4.

17 Ibid., 18.

Čákanyová followed her debut project with two more films, now forming a trilogy dedicated to the theme of the impending singularity of AI. In these latter films, the director's personal perspective takes on a more prominent role, while her confrontation with AI's non-human perspective deepens and becomes increasingly explicit in its critique of the pitfalls of the Anthropocene. In the third part of the trilogy, the question of transcending the personal perspective in favour of a supra-personal, transhuman, or transpersonal viewpoint is finally posed.

Čákanyová's posthuman trilogy explores various modes of posthuman and transhuman identities, juxtaposed with the director's own thoughts recorded as video diaries, conceived as more or less evidently autofictional. Each of the trilogy's parts, in its own way, contrasts a nostalgia for vanishing nature, humanity, and analogue film (as an ultimate human invention and tool) with the anxiety surrounding the pitfalls of the Anthropocene and a concern – as well as fascination – with the potential singularity which artificial intelligence may one day achieve. While Čákanyová asserts her right to humanness, across the trilogy she also experiments with different kinds of AI devices and software, examining artificial forms of *creativity* alongside human experience.

Conversely, thanks to its three different approaches to hybrid film that challenge the principles of traditional cinematic narrative, as well as its recurring theme of climate change and the vulnerability of the nonhuman world of animals and plants, Čákanyová's trilogy intuitively aligns with one of the earliest definitions of ecocinema, which, as envisioned by Scott MacDonald, offers "a depiction of the natural world within a cinematic experience that models patience and mindfulness – qualities of consciousness crucial for a deep appreciation of and an ongoing commitment to the natural environment."¹⁸ However, these elements, resembling a transpersonal ego-suppression, are influenced by the disruptions of the images (and sounds) of human and nonhuman nature, steering away from the contemplative "slow cinema" concept that originally informed MacDonald's ideas. The juxtaposition of digital and analogue materials or effects, on the other hand, mirrors MacDonald's assertion about the value of combining digital

18 Scott MacDonald, "The Ecocinema Experience," in *Ecocinema: Theory and Practice*, eds. Stephen Rust – Salma Monani – Sean Cubitt (Routledge, 2013), 19 (a revised version of MacDonald's 2004 article *Toward an Eco-Cinema*).

and analogue mediums, where analogue film, with its material qualities, evokes “a kind of re-animation of plant and animal life.”¹⁹ For Čákanyová, analogue film represents a more human medium, more directly aligned to biological matter, as underscored by her voiceovers in the overture of *FREM* and in the conclusion of the whole trilogy. In the first and the final part of the trilogy, it is the nonhuman AI identity that disrupts both the readability and filmic preservation of natural world. However, in the second part of the trilogy, this disruptive quality softens, allowing space for a fictitious dialogue between the director and AI. In an unexpected shift, Čákanyová also turns to a digital camera for her personal video diaries.²⁰

The second part of trilogy, *White on White*, is comparatively less experimental and remains centred on the director’s video diary, now shot on a digital Sony Alpha camera. Katarína Mišíková identifies it, alongside the third part of the trilogy, as a key work among contemporary Slovak autobiographical documentary films. However, while *Notes from Eremocene* explores the strategy of autofiction, *White on White* leans more towards the structure of a diary.²¹ Yet, this diary is far from ordinary – it presents an interplay between authentic diary-like shots of nature (and the director herself) and a simulated dialogue with an artificial neural network, called *ann_w*.²²

In an interview, Čákanyová states that *ann_w* “uses scientific knowledge without any imagination. But when you’re there [in Antarctica], you

19 Ibid, 18.

20 It is not surprising that, following the release of *Notes on Eremocene*, the final part of the trilogy, Simon Rothöhler writes quite expectedly about “the apologia of the analogue, of the celebration of the organic vitality, unshareability and unavailability of analogue photo-chemical fundamentals and their alleged resilience.” However, he acknowledges that the film “carries the insistently propounded anti-digital rhetoric into aesthetic zones more tolerant of ambiguity. For the focus is ultimately on reading traces, on questions of the legibility of anthropogenic inscription – regardless of whether created via analogue or digital technology.” Simon Rothöhler, “Post-Human Virtual Time Capsules,” in *Arsenal*, <https://www.arsenal-berlin.de/en/forum-forum-expanded/supplement/detailseite-supplement/virtuelle-zeitkapsel-nach-dem-menschen/>.

21 Katarína Mišíková, “Seba-dokumentácia a seba-reprezentácia ako starostlivosť o seba. Stratégie autobiografie, autoportrétu a autofície v slovenskom dokumentárnom filme” [Self-documentation and Self-representation as Self-care. Strategies of Autobiography, Self-portrait and Auto-fiction in Slovak Nonfiction Cinema], *Kino-Ikon* 27, no. 1 (2023): 19–26.

22 This female name understandably evokes the abbreviation “artificial neural network.”

react emotionally to everything.”²³ The second part of the trilogy opens as a defence of human experience against the rigid, data-driven perspective of AI that cannot grasp art or other human activity beyond the framework of the second law of thermodynamics. Beside these mockumentary dialogues with AI (inspired by real conversations with chatbots of that time), Čakányová also begins to challenge her own human – anthropocentric – thinking, questioning the perils of human activity on a larger scale.

On one hand, the film consistently underlines the importance of personal, human perspective, particularly through its soundtrack. The transcription of the fictional conversation between the director and ann_w, presented in subtitles, is acoustically accompanied by the “technical” sounds – message alerts or keyboard tapping – blended with the director’s spontaneous vocal reactions: breathing, mumbling, laughing, or whispering obscure comments. This interplay establishes a contrast between corporeal and non-corporeal existence, between the elemental and the mechanical, human and non-human. The words of director’s video diaries are thus translated into bodily expressions and experiences.

Conversely, the personal viewpoint expands towards a perception of the monumentality of Antarctic nature. Under the extreme filming conditions, Čakányová experiences an existential, highly physical sense of exposure to the natural elements. Initially struggling to sleep because of the relentless wind, she gradually and voluntarily chooses to engage with these wild elements, spending a night outside, sleeping in a snow-dug shelter, walking through the severe wind and sun, unable to capture any readable image (thus enhancing their involuntary experimental quality), and ultimately, in the film’s closing, braving a dip in the freezing waters of the polar ocean. Her courage to coexist with the monumental Antarctic world, however, does not shield her from witnessing its direct extinction. She begins to perceive subtle distinctions in snow and clouds but also captures tourists ridiculously taking pictures of one of the last penguins, narrowly missing a shot of a collapsing iceberg. The film’s irony deepens as she also grows deeply aware of her own, and her film’s, contribution to the carbon footprint resulting from the complicated transportation of necessary supplies.

23 Marta Balaga, “‘White on White’ Helmer Viera Cakanyova is Ready to Explore the ‘Brave New World’ (Exclusive),” *Variety*, October 31, 2020, <https://variety.com/2020/film/global/white-on-white-viera-cakanyova-brave-new-world-1234820471/>

The director's intimate reflections are thus intertwined with her concern for the planet, as well as with a heightened sensitivity to shifts in weather and natural surroundings. Čákanyová cultivates her perception, contrasts it with AI thought processes, and keeps a video diary as a form of psychotherapy during an exhausting stay, one she intended for the making of her debut film, *FREM*. This deeply personal perspective, which was suppressed by AI's fictional gaze in *FREM*, now reclaims its space, becoming an ecological choice that transcends the ego and, ultimately, amplifies her awareness of endangering the planet through virtually any human activity, including science and art.

In the third part of the trilogy, *Notes from Eremocene*, Čákanyová further approaches transpersonality, relativizing the sustainability of humanness even more radically and suggesting that even her own personal perspective might be replaced by a fictional dialogue between two virtual beings from a postapocalyptic future. One character is easily recognizable as an artificial neural network, voiced with a perfectly seductive yet totally emotionless female tone, while the other one speaks in the director's own voice. It is not easy to distinguish between the characters of the film, particularly between the two who speak in the director's voice, already familiar from the earlier parts of the trilogy. One voice represents an already deceased earthly existence, Čákanyová's direct alter ego, while the other is a digital avatar of that existence. The only difference between Čákanyová's human alter ego and its utterly transhuman avatar lies in language: while Čákanyová speaks only Slovak, her avatar, created through a computer program, uses her voice to generate its own statements in English. The melancholic tone, characteristic of the director's real voice across the trilogy, remains present even in these digital utterances, simulating a human perspective. In *Notes from Eremocene*, Čákanyová thus fictionalises herself twice, creating an autofiction where she "dies," in a thematic nod to the artist's "death," as seen in the theatrical collaboration between Robert Wilson and Marina Abramović in *The Life and Death of Marina Abramović* (2011). Yet, she also creates a narrative in which two artificial beings *humanize* each other as they search for the avatar's "original character": with the assistance



3–4. Still from *Návštěvníci* [*The Visitors*]
(Veronika Lišková, 2022). © Cinémotif Film /
Vojtěch Vančura

Kadras iš filmo *Návštěvníci* (*Lankytojai*,
rež. Veronika Lišková, 2022)

of AI's impersonal knowledge, the transhuman avatar strives to understand the human world, eventually becoming depressed upon realizing the original character's death. The emotionless AI, meanwhile, finds herself validating this grief as natural, despite once defining depression as an imbalance of (human) brain chemicals – a biological matter alien to virtual beings.

In *Notes from Eremocene*, personal perspective is relativized, as are the concepts of humanness and artificialness. Čákanyová challenges the

essence of humanity and personal experience in multiple ways. Her deeply intimate diary-type reflections are presented as fiction, voiced through a character belonging to the fictional group of *botomori* people who, disillusioned with the current state of the world – the vicious circle of climate change, capitalism, and the crisis of representative democracy – decide to disappear at sea. The director's personal perspective verges on mockumentary as the omniscient AI voice presents the first *botomori* who disappeared at sea: Satoshi Nakamoto, who in what we consider our real world is a pseudonym for the anonymous creator(s) of Bitcoin, known for vanishing from public view and erasing any traces about their future activities or real identity. In a same humorous vein, Čákanyová creates the fictitious etymology of the word “*botomori*” from the English “boat” and Latin “*mori*” (death), morphologically connecting it to “*hikikomori*,” the Japanese term for extreme social withdrawal.²⁴

In the dictionary prepared for the film's world premiere at Berlinale 2023, Čákanyová explains *botomori* as “a natural person who decides to follow their mortal fate” while leaving “for the sea by boat,” and as someone who “registers their [life story] on analogue film.”²⁵ *Botomori* represent the capacity to distance oneself from the side effects of technological progress, even when one has strongly influenced it. They also embody an ancient human desire to stop time, to record and preserve the world in a truly indexical image,²⁶ and to “make a trace” – a phrase the emotionless AI uses to describe the human desire to capture the world on film.

24 In the version made for Slovak television, the word is associated with the Slovak “more” (the sea).

25 *Press Notes – Notes from Eremocene – Berlinale 2023*, https://www.berlinale.de/en/press/press-material/presskit-download-action.html?file=Forum/Alle_Filme/202301075_en_1_Notes_from_Eremocene.pdf

26 Today, we can likely agree that even a digital image can serve as an index. Silke Panse even illustrates how the indexical nature of digital images can, in some cases, make them a much more powerful medium for creating eco-aesthetical cinema. See Silke Panse, “Ten Skies, 13 Lakes, 15 Pools – Structure, Immanence and Ecoaesthetics in *The Swimmer* and James Benning's *Land Films*,” in *Screening Nature: Cinema beyond the Human*, ed. Anat Pick and Guinevere Narraway (Berghahn Books, 2023), 46–48; Viera Čákanyová's films are truly eco-aesthetic at least in some of their segments. According to Panse, “[t]he term ‘eco-aesthetics’ brings together two separate planes, that of ecological materiality and that of the image. [...] Documentary images are not separated from what is depicted in them; they are part of the world. [...] The image and the filmmaker are parts of ‘the environment’ that is not only around us, but goes through us” (ibid., 44). Čákanyová's

In the first parts of the trilogy, the authorship of analogue images seems quite naturally associated with the director, but in *Notes from Eremocene*, Čákanyová's earthly alter ego, a strongly auto-fictional character "makes a trace" as the sole author of the analogue materials. Here, her images not only capture plants and sea waves, but also, with a strongly ironic undertone, hyper-kitsch Christmas decorations in the U.S. (glimpsed briefly in *FREM*), political rallies in Bratislava, and a pro-climate youth protest in a coal mine in Germany, where young activists, wearing huge plastic vests, leave behind heaps of plastic bottles and dozens of weary police officers.

This analogue material is conceived as a kind of a "message-in-a-bottle" or space probe, going back to the leitmotif of the Golden Record sent into space by the Voyager probe in 1977 (Čákanyová uses snippets of its soundtrack in the earlier parts of the trilogy). Alongside scenes that evoke nature's beauty, the footage, however, also contains images suggesting negative consequences of anthropocentric ideology, deeply affecting even the actions of eco-activists. Meanwhile, both Čákanyová's footage and her voice are not only presented as semi-fictional but also confronted with the perspective of future artificial intelligence(s) that do not (yet try to) understand human messages recorded in form of the analogue images of Nature/Culture.

Instead of using drone footage, Čákanyová represents this perspective through another set of digital tools for generating and manipulating images and sounds, enhancing the film's experimental quality – primarily through techniques like data moshing and LIDAR.²⁷ Paradoxically enough, these digital interventions, scans, or simulations of the materiality of the

relatively free transition from favoured analogue to digital recording in *White on White* highlights the fact that, for her, digital images still can function as indices when connected to the human body, following its (e)motions, or capturing the domination of natural elements over technology (as seen in unreadable images caused by snow or intense light). However, when she employs LIDAR scans of the trees in *Notes from Eremocene*, she also draws attention to the indexical nature of AI-generated digital images of nature. While AI may not understand what it is scanning, the human viewer may experience a deeper spiritual connection to these images than to some of the analogue shots taken by Čákanyová herself. The indexical nature of the digital image does not automatically render it eco-aesthetic: according to Panse, there is no room for transcendence in eco-aesthetics. "Immanence is vital for an eco-aesthetics that links the plane of the world (ecology) with that of the image (aesthetics)" (ibid., 37).

27 Čákanyová is not alone in experimenting with these techniques and software. For example, her use of data moshing was partly inspired by the experiments of visual artist Jacques Perconte, who uses this technique primarily to manipulate landscape and nature motifs

natural world often convey some of the film's most spiritual, transcendent moments. (LIDAR-scanned trees are actually the only smooth images of nature, undisturbed by digital glitches, while the digitally generated images of planets and black holes evoke film cameras, accompanied by a melancholic reminiscence of long-lost human music, Nick Cave's 2013 song *Higgs Boson Blues* whose lyrics can be interpreted as an allusion to the climate apocalypse: "Can't remember anything at all / flamed trees lie in the streets [...] We came upon a crossroad / The night was hot and black.")²⁸

In this confrontation, the director's personal perspective serves as a proxy for humanity, but as we have already seen, it is embedded within a multilayered autofiction, combined with authorial explorations of various post- and trans-human identities simulated through AI and computer software. In this confrontation, Čákanyová's work ultimately questions the universality and ethical impact of personal experience itself, expressing the need to *transcend* it as yet another construct of anthropocentrism.

Čákanyová's emphasis on her personal perspective gradually evolves from nostalgic diary-like reflections on the world in *FREM* and *White on White* to autofiction, where the boundaries between the real director and the computer-generated persona with its own statements become blurred. The personal perspective literally *becomes* transpersonal, rendering the human post-human and vice versa – particularly as Čákanyová's avatar learns, in an *Alphaville*-like manner, what it means to be depressed.

By opting for the term "transpersonal" instead of the more conformist "post/transhuman," I aim to highlight this aspect of the human desire to preserve humanity and infuse it into a fictional transhuman avatar, to envision a transhuman – if not a wholly human – entity learning how

in cinema and gallery works (see <https://www.jacquespe rconte.com/jacques.php?l=en>, accessed April 15, 2023). Other sources of inspiration include Peter Mettler's hybrid films, which combine documentary, often personally motivated material with digital interventions, exploring themes similar to those in Čákanyová's films, such as the end of civilization, the future of humanity, and consciousness (<https://www.petermettler.com/bio>, accessed April 15, 2023). I would like to thank the film's producer, Matej Sotnik, for these insights.

28 As I mentioned in footnote 26, Silke Panse argues that eco-aesthetics leaves no room for transcendence: therein lies the catch. In contrast, Viera Čákanyová demonstrates in her films that transcendence is almost always achieved through the work of AI and is related to humanity's grief over the loss of both the human and non-human natural worlds that it has itself destroyed.

to create, preserve, and transcend its (human-like) ego (as mentioned in the introduction, while the ego remains present, it is superseded by higher development),²⁹ and how to cultivate compassion for the memories of long-extinct humanity and non-human nature.

Conclusion

In conclusion, both Viera Čákanyová's work and Veronika Lišková's latest film inventively intertwine the personal perspectives of their directors with those of their female protagonists (or autofictional projections, as in Čákanyová's case). In contrast, Greta Stocklassa's *Kiruna – A Brave New World* adopts a neutral observational mode, with the director's attitude and personal involvement remaining subdued. In summary, however, all the films analyzed in this paper illustrate the necessity to *transcend* the human, personal perspective towards a certain *multiperspectivity* or even a dialogue between human and imaginary or real post- and transhuman identities. These works also examine the concept of home and the understanding of the planet as home more profoundly, all of them made by female directors. While not all of them link gender and ecological concerns through a conscious ecofeminist lens – Stocklassa and Čákanyová intentionally downplay gender – ecocriticism rather than ecofeminism serves as a broader concept common to all analyzed films.

In the context of these films, a kind of *transpersonal perspective* can be identified at various stages, even in *Kiruna*, which stands for documentary filmmaking devoid of the author's personal perspective. However, a unique transpersonal perspective emerges from an ecological choice – the decision to adopt a personal perspective in order to *transcend* it in a post-anthropocentric fusion between human perspective, nature, and the universe. Veronika Lišková shows how the context of climate threat intertwines with hypocritical governmental policies towards immigrants, revealing the collapse of the concept of “a planet for all” through a series of personal perspectives that sometimes struggle to achieve a *trans*-personal level. Viera Čákanyová, on the other hand, explores various possible interpretations of posthuman and transhuman identities, expressing nostalgia for the

29 Bruce W. Scotton, “Introduction and Definition of Transpersonal Psychiatry.”

diminishing carbon world of Nature/Culture, simultaneously expressing disillusionment with the self-destructive ideology of the Anthropocene. Her strong desire to assert her own intimate perspective through video diaries leads her, in the third part of her trilogy, to a hopeful vision that, after the inevitable end of humanity, AI may emerge as *that* transpersonal identity capable of humanizing itself through fragments of past human messages – expressions of human personal perspectives.

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Santrauka

Asmeninės ir viršasmninės perspektyvos čekų ir slovakų ekokritiniame kine

Jana Dudková

Reikšminiai žodžiai: čekų kinas, slovakų kinas, ekokinas, viršasmniškumas, asmeninė perspektyva.

Straipsnyje nagrinėjami penki čekų ir slovakų moterų režisierių filmai, atspindintys naujos kartos požiūrį į ekokritiką. Veronikos Liškovos filme *Návštevníci* (*Lankytojai*, 2022) pabrėžiama asmeniška, netgi intymi individualios perspektyvos prigimtis, kai ištrinamos ribos tarp protagonistės – socialinės antropologės, jos pašnekovų ir režisierės požiūrių. Čekų ir švedų režisierės Gretos Stocklassos debiutiniame filme *Kiruna – překrásný nový svět* (*Kiruna – šaunus naujas pasaulis*, 2019) taip pat pabrėžiamas poreikis atsižvelgti į įvairias kelių protagonistų perspektyvas, tačiau filme naudojami formalūs vaizdavimo būdai ir kalbantys pašnekovai vengia plačiai atskleisti asmeninius prisipažinimus ar autorinius (t. y. „asmeniiskus“) režisierės ir jos bendrakūrėjų ženklus. Pagaliau slovakų režisierės Vieros Čákanyovos eksperimentinė trilogija apie dirbtinį intelektą ir klimato kaitą, kurią sudaro jos debiutinis *FREM* (2019) ir du vėlesni filmai *Biela na bielej* (*Balta ant balto*, 2020) bei *Poznámky z Eremocénu* (*Užrašai iš Eremoceno*, 2023), pristato dialogišką santykį tarp asmeninės ir viršasmninės, žmogiškos ir nežmogiškos ar netgi viršžmogiškos perspektyvos. Čákanyovos kūryba, kaip ir Liškovos filmas, išradingai sujungia abiejų režisierių asmeninį požiūrį su jų protagonistė (arba, Čákanyovos atveju, jos autofikcinės projekcijos) perspektyva. Tuo tarpu Stocklassos filme *Kiruna – šaunus naujas pasaulis* dominuoja neutralus stebėjimo režimas, o režisierės požiūris ir asmeninis įsitraukimas nėra išryškinami. Nors visuose straipsnyje nagrinėjamuose filmuose pabrėžiamas poreikis *peržengti* žmogišką, asmeninį požiūrį, siekiant *multiaperspektyviškumo*, ir tam tikra *viršasmninė perspektyva* išties pasitaiko atskiruose epizoduose, vis dėlto, straipsnio autorės manymu, unikali viršasmninė perspektyva atsiranda dėl specifinio ekologinės temos pasirinkimo, kuris yra nuosekliausiai išreikštas Čákanyovos filme.

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Personal and Transpersonal Perspectives in Czech and Slovak Ecocritical Cinema