

# THE IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION OF MÓRIC BEŇOVSKÝ IN THE CULTURAL MEMORY OF SLOVAKS

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**ABSTRACT:** Móric Beňovský (1746, Vrbové – 1786, Madagascar, settlement Mauritania) was a soldier, adventurer and traveller whose fate fascinated authors in the 19th and 20th centuries. His intricate destiny became the subject of numerous theatrical plays, novels and poems. His ethnicity is claimed by three Central European nations – Hungarians, Slovaks and Poles. All literary and audiovisual works are based on Beňovský's heavily fictionalized memoirs, published posthumously in 1790. The study focuses on the construction of the identity of this personality in the historical series *Vivat Beňovský* (1975, Czechoslovak-Hungarian co-production).

**KEYWORDS:** Travelogues. Colonisation. Self-fashioning. Memoirs. Historical series.

In the past, the destiny of Móric Beňovský fascinated many literary artists – notably in the 19th, but also in the 20th century. At the beginning of the 19th century – shortly after the publication of his memoirs in 1790 (the French original and the English translation were published simultaneously) – theatre plays and operas started to appear all around Europe, where the thematic subject was mainly based on the episode of his escape from Kamchatka<sup>1</sup>. Literates from the Central European region started to discover Beňovský only in the second half of the 19th century. By means of romanticised fiction, Beňovský's life accessed Polish<sup>2</sup>, but also Slovak and Hungarian literature. Among our southern neighbours, the credit for popularisation goes to Mór Jókai, who – between 1888 and 1891 – published a four-volume book<sup>3</sup> about Beňovský. The first two volumes are constituted by a literarily elaborated biography of Beňovský, the next two volumes by Jókai contain the translation of Beňovský's memoirs (Jókai's Hungarian translation was based on the English version of the memoirs). The Slovak readers discovered Beňovský only in the 1930s thanks to a commercially successful and acknowledged author of historical novels, Jožo Nižnánky, who published his *Dobrodružstvo Mórica Beňovského* in Prague, in the publishing house of Leopold Mazáč, specialised in publication of Slovak literature (1933). Nižnánky's work was very successful thanks to the author's colourful imagination, the suspenseful plot and, last but not least, the clear

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<sup>1</sup> The first playwright who introduces this adventurer to the contemporary audience was the German author August von Kotzebue (1761 – 1819). His drama *Graf Benjowsky oder die Verschwörung auf Kamtschatka* was premiered in Hamburg, in 1794. Its translations (into English, Dutch, Italian, Danish, Russian, Polish, Czech, and Hungarian) circulated all around Europe and the play was performed even in America. E.g. in 1837 it was played in the Strahov Theatre in Prague, in 1842 in the towns of Myjava and Brezová; and then in Turčiansky Sv. Martin in 1861 and 1862, and in Liptovský Sv. Mikuláš in 1862 and 1864. In 1800, the opera named *Béniowski ou les exilés du Kamchatka* was performed in Paris, by the music composer François-Adrien Boieldieu (1775 – 1834); the author of the libretto was Alexandre Vincent Pineux Duval. Soon they introduced it in Liège, Hamburg, Brussels, and Vienna, and in 1817 even in Warsaw. There are also two parodies by French authors that appeared almost immediately after the premiere.

<sup>2</sup> In 1841, the bard of the Polish nation, Juliusz Słowacki, wrote (and later supplemented and revised several times) a poem called *Béniowski*, where Beňovský is presented as a Polish nobleman.

<sup>3</sup> *Gróf Benyovszky Móricz élettrajza, saját emlékiratai*.

distinction between “good” and “evil” characters, which facilitated the reception of the novel by the general reading public. The readership success of this novel is proved by the fact that seven reissues have been published in seventy years in editions ranging from 3,000 to 50,000 copies; which is an astonishing number for the Slovak book market.<sup>4</sup> This first literary fiction about Beňovský presents the count from Vrbové as a Slovak who made Slovakia famous all over the world. The scenarists of the historical television series *Vivat Beňovský* (1975) based their work on Jókai’s and Nižnánský’s publications. The series was produced in 1973 – 1975 as a Hungarian-Slovak co-production. Thanks to this television series, Beňovský entered the cultural memory of the older generation of Slovaks as the “King of Madagascar”; and references to him can also be found in other audiovisual works (for example in the film *Tisícročná včela* by Juraj Jakubisko).

In the introduction to the first volume, the narrator underlines that the works written in the 19th and the 20th centuries created a complex legend of Beňovský’s life, in which it is difficult to distinguish fiction from reality<sup>5</sup>. In the following text, we will therefore try to describe the historical facts that the writers of the series selected or concealed in the plot structure, as well as fictitious motifs that played a significant role in the creation of Beňovský’s character and the story of his life.

Móric August Beňovský was born in 1746 in Vrbové<sup>6</sup> in an old noble family, which derived its origins from the village of Beňov (today part of Bytča) (Lukačka 1997, 80). As for his ethnic origin – apart from some exceptions<sup>7</sup> – in old and current sources he is considered to be Magyar or Hungarian (*Hungarian, Hongrois*), Pole, or even French. With regard to his education and language knowledge, we can only express conjectures on the basis of some facts. In 1759 and 1760, he studied at the Piarist grammar school in Svätý Jur. In 1759, before his name, we record the title of “*praenobilis hungaricus*”. In 1760, we find “*praenobilis Slavus*”, which indicated his

<sup>4</sup> In 1933 (first edition) it was published in 3000 copies; in 1957 10,400 copies; in 1965 30,000 copies; in 1971 50,000 copies; in 1988 50,000 copies; in 2000 8,000 copies. Data according to Benovskiana, 309.

<sup>5</sup> Central European historiography, in particular, has been trying to “untangle” this legend and reality for at least one and a half century. Among Polish authors, we have to mention the historian, writer, and diplomat Edward Kajdański (1925 – 2020); among Hungarians, Vilmos Voigt; among Slovaks, Patrik Kunec, Ján Lukačka, etc. In terms of postcolonial theses, Ian Inkster focused on the story of Beňovský in Formosa (currently Taiwan).

<sup>6</sup> His birthdate remained unclear for a long time. Even Ferenc Tóth, Hungarian historian and expert in Beňovský’s biography, states that he was born in 1741 (Tóth 2015, 124). In Hungary, they declared the year 2016 as the *Year of Móric Beňovský* (presented as the 275th anniversary of Beňovský’s birth). Several cultural events were organised on such an occasion, e.g. a scientific conference in the National Széchényi Library. Actually, it is a mistake, because civil registry documents show that Beňovský’s father (Samuel Beňovský) got married with Rozália Révai in 1743; then, in 1744 their first son Kleofáš was born and Móric only two years later, in 1746 (see table of civil registry extracts, Bosák – Kýška 2021, 54). Hungarian historians and cultural experts based their opinions on Beňovský’s memoirs, in which the Count does not spare fiction (he added five years to his age in order to give weight to his account).

<sup>7</sup> *La Grande Encyclopédie: inventaire raisonné des sciences, des lettres et des arts* from 1886 (Louis Léger, 6th vol., Paris, H. Lamirault et Cie, 1886, 184 – 185) describes Beňovský as follows: “Beniowski, famous Slavic adventurer, was born in Verbovo (Verbo) in 1741 and died on 23 May 1786. They usually consider him a Pole, but in fact he was a Slovak from the Kingdom of Hungary and belonged to a noble family from the Nitra county”. In her doctoral thesis in connection with Beňovský, Noémi Godefroy, a professor of the Paris State Institute for Oriental Languages and Cultures (INALCO), in various places states: “self-proclaimed count of Slovak origin, a Slovak named Móric Benyowsky, a Slovak prisoner” (*Autour de l’Ile d’Ezo: évolution dans les rapports de domination septentrionale et des relations avec l’étranger au Japon, des origines au 19ème siècle. Thèse: Paris, Institut national des langues et des civilisations orientales. Thesis defended, 23. 11. 2013. Thesis supervisor François Macé*).

Slavic origin. This is confirmed also by the fact that he mastered the Slavic languages, or managed to learn them quite fast. We may assume that – when he spoke with the Polish Confederates with whom he later fought alongside – he didn't use the Latin language (i.e. the *lingua franca* of educated people, which he probably learned at the grammar school) but the Polish language. Likewise, when he fell into Russian captivity and wandered for more than a year in Siberia, he learned Russian. Thus, some time after arriving at the fortress of Bolsheretsk, he was able to win the favour of the Governor and his daughter<sup>8</sup> – and at the same time, together with other Russian exiles, he secretly organised the hijacking of a ship and the subsequent escape (spring 1771). Similarly, the memoirs report that when sailing the South Seas, he used a “Slavic” translation of a book by the English seaman Admiral Georges Anson (1697 – 1762) from 1748 *A Voyage Round the World in the Years MDCCXL, I, II, III, IV* (the book was published in Russian in 1751 in Saint Petersburg and – according to the memoirs – Beňovský had received it from the exiles in Bolsheretsk, Kamchatka). The question remains as to his knowledge of French, which must have been excellent; since the Russian governor asked him to become the “language teacher” of his three daughters and son<sup>9</sup> (Beňovský 2006, I, 73 et seq.). Later on, he managed to persuade the French Ministry of Colonies to grant him funds to establish a colony in Madagascar. After an adventurous and troubled journey on a stolen ship, he made his way from Kamchatka to France. In 1772, the French King Louis XV appointed him colonel and commander of a detachment of volunteers and sent him to the Cape of Good Hope. He set sail from the port of Lorient in 1773, with his wife Zuzana. He arrived in Madagascar in February 1774 and he immediately started to build a trading factory called Louisbourg, which became his headquarters until his departure in 1776. Because of the precarious situation, he returned to France in 1776. In 1777, he was paid £50,000 in rents and an indemnity for expenses. With this money he bought property in Beckovská Vieska. In 1778, he went back to Paris, where he was awarded the Cross of St Louis for meritorious service during two and a half years in Madagascar. Let's just note that the Cross of St Louis was normally awarded only to colonels after twenty years of service. Thanks to the intervention of Marie Antoinette, he was promoted to Brigadier-General and the Ministry of Navy paid him the remaining amount of his expenses. Soon after that, he asked to be released from the service of the French royal court. He got involved in the so-called War of the Bavarian Succession (1779). Then, he attempted to start a project to transport goods from the Hungarian hinterland to Rijeka, but the project ended in failure. In 1782, he went to Philadelphia, where he presented a proposal to the Continental Congress for the establishment of the Foreign Legion. After a negative opinion, he went back to Europe, where in June 1783 he submitted a proposal to the French King for the creation of an independent state in Madagascar. Unfortunately, he was unsuccessful; so he submitted the plan to the British government. The proposal was also rejected by the British government. So Beňovský decided to set up a joint-stock company to trade goods from Madagascar. He had to go as far as Baltimore to find company's associates. From there, he sailed straight to Madagascar. He began

<sup>8</sup> Beňovský's knowledge of Russian is attested also by his conversation with Aphanasia Nilovová: “*This dear girl disclosed to me the feelings of her heart with a sincerity and simplicity which would perhaps have seemed very indecorous in the European lands. At that moment the Russian language seemed to me the most gentle and the most harmonious of all world languages*” (Beňovský 2006, I, 74).

<sup>9</sup> In the following pages, he describes how he taught his “first language lesson” and trained children to spell words in Latin, French, and German; he also states that the governor Nilov asked him to found a school in Bolsheretsk where pupils would learn “languages, mathematics, and geography”. The German language was of common usage in his family (his letter correspondence with his brother Emanuel is in German). As a Slav, he probably learned Russian quite fast, as suggested by Samuel Čerňanský, translator of the *Memoirs* into Slovakised Czech: “Beňovský, kterýž, Slovák gsa, Ruským gazykem giž dobre mluwiti uměl [...]” (ibid., 35).

to build a new trading colony in Madagascar and founded the settlement of Mauretania (named after him). Nevertheless, the French colonial administration considered him to be a dangerous competitor; so the governor of Isle de France (present-day Mauritius) sent a punitive expedition against him. Beňovský died of a gunshot wound to the chest in a gunfight on 23 May 1786 at the age of 40<sup>10</sup>.

## BEŇOVSKÝ'S LIFE AS A SUBJECT FOR AUDIOVISUAL PROCESSING

As we can see, Beňovský's life provides rich plot material for a historical series. The Hungarian Television and the Slovak Television began co-producing the series in 1973. At that time, it was the most expensive audiovisual film on Slovak Television. The Hungarian scriptwriter György Lendvai and the Slovak scriptwriter Pavol Sobota worked on Jókai's four-volume publication, but also on Beňovský's journals (Machala 1973, 5). In terms of the storyline, the scriptwriters also had to consider feasibility and production aspects; probably, this is reason why they dropped out of the plot the whole section of the memoirs and the logbook describing the escape, sea cruise through northern seas (Bering Strait, Alaska coasts), stops in the Japanese islands and Macao, sea cruise through Pacific Ocean and around the coasts of Africa towards Europe. At the level of the characters, the script shows a major influence of Nižnánky's popularised literary fiction. The scene presents a fictional (i.e. non-historical) character: Tomáš Omachel, Móric' rival in love, who – in the initial part of Nižnánky's novel and in the first episode of the television series – declares that, as an avenger, he shall pursue Móric at every step. In this way, Nižnánky and the scriptwriters found a reliable persecuting element that ensured constant tension. Tomáš (in the original Nižnánky's novel his name is Juraj, but apparently because of the dubbing he got a new name with almost identical pronunciation in Hungarian and Slovak) is a type of intelligent and clever scoundrel (his wickedness and meanness is emphasised by his black costume). He constantly creates pitfalls and does everything possible to ensure that Beňovský's ventures end unsuccessfully (the uprising in Poland, his attempt to foil the plot and its disclosure to the governor Nilov, withholding of Maria Theresa's pardon). The malicious Omachel "loves Beňovský's troubles; he is his shadow", but he is sometimes darkly mystical, e.g. when he senses the supernatural presence of a dead girl, victim of Beňovský's pride ("*Anna is with us*", episode: *Sergeant*). The fictional character of Tomáš Omachel may have its basis in reality. Indeed, Beňovský's memoirs describe an exile named Stepanov, who – during the Kamchatka stay and during the sea cruise period – has a similar behaviour to Omachel: several attempts to compromise Beňovský and even conspiracy against him. In the memoirs, in Nižnánky's novel, and in the television series, the relationship between Beňovský and Omachel oscillates incomprehensibly between hatred, in psychological terms a pathological addiction (Omachel: "*You cannot die, you are the reason for my life*"), and cooperation (escape preparation). The "me" speaking in Beňovský's memoirs has always generously granted the grace to this bookish negative character; and so does Beňovský in the television series. At the end of the final episode, the scriptwriters attempted a sudden and categorical Omachel's transformation, when he first treacherously leads Beňovský to the fortress where the hostile Frenchmen are hiding, but then tries to restrain him by warning him that it is a trap. Eventually, Omachel and Beňovský died together, and Beňovský wants to heroically protect him from gunfire.

With regard to Beňovský's origin, the scriptwriters followed Nižnánky's models and made him a soldier, albeit of noble birth. They didn't observe what is written in the memoirs, where

<sup>10</sup> All historical information concerning Beňovský's life come from a study by Patrik Kunec *Móric Beňovský – cestovateľ z existenčnej nutnosti alebo podnikavý dobrodruh?*

Beňovský declares that he is a magnate from the Kingdom of Hungary. According to his property, he can be classified as a member of the middle class of the Hungarian nobility<sup>11</sup>; his family tree shows richer members only in the Polish branch. Unlike the memoirs, in the television series Beňovský also declares his Slovak origin<sup>12</sup>. Nižnánsky slovakised and ennobled Beňovský's wife Zuzana Hönschová, daughter of a butcher from Spišská Sobotka: she became the noblewoman Zuzana Hanská who devotedly cares for the wounded Beňovský.

The scriptwriters presented Beňovský also as a moral hero in the manner of an enlightened thinker, upholding justice and equality among nations. When images of a Madagascar beach appear in the introduction of the first episode, the narrator describes Beňovský as “*a man who is almost two whole centuries ahead of his age, thanks to his thoughts and actions, [...] who unwillingly circumnavigated half the globe, and who on that journey discovered the need for a more equitable world order, the need for equality among nations*”. In this statement, it is possible to observe a remote echo of the then-existing narrative of exploiting colonisers, the forerunners of capitalists, who are the antithesis of the moral and fair-minded Beňovský. Such a type of narrative is also reflected in the actions of the characters: the French Minister d'Aiguillon speaks about “*savages to whom the French government shall never pay rent for land*”; similarly, even the French officer (“*After all, they are just savages good only for slavery; we have to take advantage of it*”, episode: *King of Kings*). “The white father” Beňovský becomes *ampansakabé*, i.e. king of all the chiefs of the tribes; and in his series manifesto he declares that “*European origin does not give anyone a reason to enslave people of different colour*” and “*every nation has the right to freedom*”. According to his memoirs, Beňovský did not have such an enlightened position on slavery. He was not directly involved in the slave trade, but used slaves as currency. E.g. on 20 September 1774, he rewarded a rice trader by giving him slaves instead of money (Beňovský 2006, 100). On 24 September 1774, he handed over to the ship captain Postillon “*twenty-five blacks, which he was to deliver to agent Percheron, to be destined to Mr Auger at the Cape of Good Hope in payment for three hundred thousand pounds of rice*” (ibid., 101). When, after his first stay in Madagascar, he looked for support for his ventures on the island, he made a contract with two merchants of European origin in Baltimore for the supply of goods, mainly slaves.

Nor was he the liberator of the Madagascar tribes; according to his memoirs, he took advantage of the tribal strife and sided with one camp to defeat the other (Sakalava tribe). Eventually, the victorious tribe declared him *ampansakabé*.

When Beňovský first arrived to Madagascar, he was at the service of the French King and tried to colonise the island. In his memoirs, he describes this fact with evocative words: “*I informed [the Malagasy people] about His Majesty's intentions to support and protect the inhabitants. The King was led to this purpose by the perception that they [the Malagasy] showed an affection for the French nation. [...] In return for the innumerable benefits with which His Majesty wished to gratify the people, I ask only that three conditions be fulfilled: 1. Stipulation of an agreement of*

<sup>11</sup> When Beňovský returned to his country in 1777, he bought the former Pongráč manor house in Beckovská Vieska, and he also brought six young black women with him. Historians discovered this from the entry in the baptism book at the parish in Beckov, where – in January 1779 they recorded the baptism of *adultes tres puellas maurus*, named Karolína, Rozália, and Jozefa, and three 12-year-old girls named Rozália, Eva, and Karolína. It is not possible to state that he was a magnate; the word “magnate” designed members of very rich aristocratic families in the Kingdom of Hungary who held even high state positions (e.g. Esterházy or Pálffy families). Wealthier members of the Beňovský family can be found in the Polish branch of the family (see Lukačka, 1997 and Segeš, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> In the *Aphanasia* episode, Beňovský speaks with the governor: “*Are you Pole?*” – “*No, I am Slovak*”. “*So you are Viennese?*” – “*No, sir, my family comes from the Kingdom of Hungary, we are an old noble family, our name is written in the Hungarian noble almanac*”.



*alliance and friendship, according to which they will cede to me a territory on which I will be able to establish a settlement. 2. They shall let me build hospitals and warehouses in the inland. 3. They commit themselves to protect the property of the colony*" (ibid., 86). At least, during the first stay in Madagascar, Beňovský cooperated with the French government and conformed to it; so his image of a righteous Enlightenment man of the Rousseauvian type, who is above all racial and civilisational prejudices is strongly fabled<sup>13</sup>.

The scriptwriters improved Beňovský's moral profile, even with regard to his relations with women. In the memoirs, the contemporary reader is struck by Beňovský's perfect capacity for dissimulation and double play, which he openly confesses. In Kamchatka, the governor's daughter Aphanasia falls in love with him. At the insistence of her family, she gets engaged to him; and Beňovský uses this relationship to prepare his escape. Even after Aphanasia discovers that Beňovský has a wife and child in Europe, she continues to support and assist him in his escape; and she even embarks with him on a boat in male clothes<sup>14</sup>. The scriptwriters omitted a curious scene reported in the memoirs: after an evening spent in the company of the governor, Aphanasia's mother, Mrs Nilova, puts Beňovský to bed for the night in her daughter's room, explaining that: *"You need to get used to living together. I believe the best accommodation we can give you is with my daughter"* (Beňovský 2006, I, 97). In the memoirs, the "narrator" is surprised at this action, which is quite contrary to custom; but the two young people spend the night *"in a pleasant dialogue"*. In the series, this scene is replaced by a scene that presents a more relatable version for modern viewer – Aphanasia herself secretly comes to Beňovský's bedroom after the engagement.

The scriptwriters also smoothed the customs prevailing in the society of merchants and in the governor's family. In the series, the governor is portrayed as an educated, elegant, albeit occasionally volatile nobleman, whereas the memoirs describes him as an alcohol-addicted person: *"Mr Nilov is an exceptional man, but, unfortunately, he is an alcoholic, and his excessive drinking makes him a brutal and insupportable man"* (Beňovský 2006, I, 73). The same situation occurs amongst the officers. Mrs Nilova deplors the fate of her two daughters who married officers, and she declares: *"they indulge up to a hideous extreme in the ills of intemperance"* (ibid.). Even Nižnánsky softened this issue. He emphasised to a greater extent the foolishness and infantilism of the governor's character; but he portrays the merchant society and the Cossacks quite consistently with the memoirs.

The series softens – or let's say describes in a more civilised way – even the escape from Kamchatka. In the memoirs, the escape is preceded by chaos and sanguinary fighting, in which even the governor dies. Beňovský blackmails the garrison of Cossacks by imprisoning their wives and children in an Orthodox church, around which he arranges for furniture to be stacked. When

<sup>13</sup> The same applies to Beňovský's "supra-racial" approach to the administration of justice. After two of his soldiers attacked indigenous women, he wants to have an indigenous court sit in judgement, ignoring the officer's objection, according to which: *"it is not possible to deliver members of the white race, the advocates of European civilisation, into the hands of the blacks"* (episode: *King of Kings*).

<sup>14</sup> In the memoirs, Aphanasia's character is portrayed in quite an implausible way; for this reason, some authors specialised in Beňovský have doubted whether her character is another fabrication. The mindlessly in love girl, who confesses her love to Beňovský, suddenly becomes a sensible young lady; e.g. when she reacts to the news of Beňovský's marriage with rationality and begs him that if she cannot be his wife, then at least let her be his daughter. On the boat, Beňovský even convinces her to get engaged with *"young Popov, a handsome man, with a slightly weaker body, but with extraordinary common sense"* (Beňovský 2006, I, 57). Eventually, Aphanasia dies in Macao and Beňovský glosses this event with two sentences: *"The death of my poor Aphanasia broke the ties that bound me to a world of ideals; and I turned my attention to the real side of life. I thought of the peace and rest that awaited me in Europe together with my wife and my son"* (ibid., 58).

he sets the furniture on fire, the Cossacks surrender and let him ransack the fortress and the stores. In the memoirs, Beňovský leaves with the Tsar's treasury, furs, taffeta, and silk. In the series, the deceived Aphanasia bids farewell to Beňovský in quite a civilised and balanced manner, except for one slap. The scriptwriters logically left Aphanasia on the shore, but according to the memoirs, she boarded together with Beňovský. We say logically, because the escape is followed by a cut; and – in the next episode – we see Beňovský in Paris, with his wife Susanne and with his son. If both women were present at this moment, the heroic story would shift to a level where the protagonist would have to reveal an unflattering side of his character, which does not fit into the noble image of a highly moral character. This disturbing fact is also alluded by the reviewers; for Beňovský “lacks many of the traits and qualities that would make him a character in all his complexity. Was he an adventurer and a womaniser? There is no other manner to call the person they presented to us” (Leinerovičová 1975, 6). This “ambiguity of character” reflects the reality of the original source of Beňovský's story. The memoirs described such an imperfect image of Beňovský; actually, according to the memoirs, he was indeed an adventurer and a womaniser.

The launch of the series was preceded by an intensive advertising campaign lasting almost two years. With this modern expression – which, of course, was unknown to the media world of that time – we can describe the two-year publication of news about the filming of the series, mostly in the national daily *Večerník* but also in other magazines such as *Televízia*, *Československá televízie*<sup>15</sup>, *Slovenka*, and *Svet socializmu*. The reader was given a chance to glimpse the unreal world beyond the everyday socialist life and routine: in his reports for the national daily *Večerník* the assistant director Vladimír Macko explains – e.g. – that Ladislav Chudík came to Dubrovnik by “air taxi”, that white actors became black thanks to makeup, or that the Hungarian actor Jácint Juhász (Tomáš Omachel) had a hard time travelling in the same day from Vrátna to Orava, and then to Budapest for an evening performance, and then back to Vrátna<sup>16</sup>. From 1974 to 1975, the magazine *Svet socializmu* published eight full-page materials with photographs from the filming of the series<sup>17</sup>. Therefore, both the audience and the critics had very high expectations. But both critics and public showed an embarrassed reaction to the series. The critics reproached notably a low artistic value and laxity<sup>18</sup>; according to them, the viewer tends to get tired of endless shots of Madagascar nature. For this reason, the originally thirteen-part series was cut into seven parts. In addition, the series shows startling plot breaks that – apparently – do not have their origin in the scripts, but in the additional editing, when some scenes had to be deleted<sup>19</sup>. From the point of view of contemporary percipient, some scenes in Madagascar seem surreal and even grotesque; e.g.: the French soldiers wear bright white uniforms even while crossing the jungle; fight scenes

<sup>15</sup> *Vivat Beňovský*. In: *Československá televízie* 49, 8 – 9; *Jeden z posledných rájů*. In: *Československá televízie* 41, 4 – 5; and finally the summary of the plot of the series in *Československá televízie* 48, 1975, 8 – 9.

<sup>16</sup> Reports written in an informative and feuilleton-like style were published in *Večerník* from May 1973 to April 1974 (16. 5. 1973, 3. 9. 1973, 24. 5. 1973, 21. 9. 1973, 29. 5. 1973, 18. 7. 1973, 20. 7. 1973, 7. 8. 1973, 5. 10. 1973, 3. 8. 1973, 13. 9. 1973, 11. 12. 1973, 17. 4. 1974 and 19. 4. 1974, always page 5 or 6).

<sup>17</sup> The last article was published in 1975 under the title *Vivat Beňovský pripravený na vysielanie [Vivat Beňovský ready for broadcast]* (Nina Litschauerová, *Svet socializmu*, no. 41, 8 – 9).

<sup>18</sup> The laxity of this television series was criticised also by the Hungarian journalist György Mikes. A translation of his satiric opinion about *Vivat Beňovský* was published by the Czech humoristic magazine *Dikobraz*. The satire sounds like “what else could the viewers do in the course of thirteen hours by not watching the series”.

<sup>19</sup> For instance, in the episode: *Sergeant*, the viewer watches Beňovský burying sergeant Cyprus; but then a sudden and illogical editing puts the viewer before a scene of a storm at sea (transfer of exiles from Okhotsk to Kamchatka).

with fleeing background actors look like a parody of the genre; white actors painted with dark cream to play black men.

Critical objections were also raised against the choice of the lead actor Jozef Adamovič, who is regarded as “an unfortunate choice”. His Móric is spontaneous, he is a soulless character, every hint of strong-mindedness dissolves in lengthy sequences; there are no efforts of artistry in his acting” (Andruška 1976, 119 – 120). According to reviewers: “no personality background was elaborated for Beňovský; thus, on the basis of Adamovič’s interpretation, a person was created who is clearly manipulated by circumstances” (Skalský 1975, 6). By the way, in terms of spontaneity and unplanned future, Adamovič loyally interpreted the life attitude of his character. Indeed, Beňovský himself wrote in his memoirs: “*In unfortunate situations, I acted according to one rule: I tried to use all means to avoid further misfortune, overcome present troubles, and not worry too much about the future*”. The physical appearance of the actor is unfaithful to the original. According to the memoirs, Beňovský’s right leg was five inches shorter due to battle injuries (Beňovský 2006, I, 255); so he was probably limping.

Even authors of newspaper articles contributed to the construction of the identity of a hero who helped savage people get closer to civilisation. The magazine *Televízia* describes Beňovský as an industrialist and pioneer of progress in Madagascar: “the great white father industrialised the north-eastern part of the island and the French shot him for this betrayal” (Vopálenská 1974, 4). The effort to create an idealised character was also confirmed by the creators of the series: “We are not so much concerned with capturing the history and the character of Beňovský; we are primarily concerned with Beňovský as a man, with emphasising his respect for the weaker. Each epoch has its noble heroes” (Vopálenská 1973, 7).

However, in addition to laxity and low artistic value, the reviews also noted that huge costs were misspent for the production. The whole effort ended in a costly failure, and the series is a strikingly missed opportunity.

It is possible to agree with the reproaches regarding the laxity of the series and the insufficient artistic level. The general impression was not improved by the digitised version broadcast on Slovak television in 2022. Contemporary spectators have become accustomed to a higher level of action. For them, the endless shots of galloping Beňovský over the Siberians plains are even more tedious than for the viewers in the 1970s. Nevertheless, in its time, the series was an outstanding project filmed in several locations<sup>20</sup>, accessible to the then Czechoslovak only through TV screens. So the audience had “a man of their kind” in front of their eyes. They could look at one of the characters of Slovak history<sup>21</sup>, impersonated by the good-looking actor Jozef Adamovič, who, with his skill and efforts, was able to travel all round the world and confidently move and act in

<sup>20</sup> Filming started on 22 January 1973 in Štefanová, in the Vrátna Valley (7th – 11th episode, the road to Siberia and Kamchatka); then in Liptovská Štiavnica (during his escape, Beňovský hid in Spišská Sobota in the house of the Hanský family); then in Budapest (sequence from Poland and return to Paris, 4th, 5th, and 12th episode); exterior scenes of cold sea in Kamchatka were filmed in the Baltic Sea; the scene in Isle de France (Mauritius) was filmed in Dubrovnik; and the scenes in Madagascar were really shot in Madagascar.

<sup>21</sup> As we have suggested in the introduction of this article, Beňovský is also a famous character of Hungarian history. Of course, even the Hungarian producers took this into account. In the part where he claims to be a Slovak in his dialogue with the governor, the Hungarian version tends to adapt the dialogue to suit the interpretation of Hungarian historiography: “– *Are you Pole?*  
– *No, Mr Governor, I am Hungarian (Magyar).*  
– *Oh, I understand, so you are from Vienna.*  
– *No, sir. In the imperial city, I was only a soldier. My family comes from Hungaria/Hungary (Magyarország)*” (episode: *Aphanasia*).



various exotic environments (Russian captivity, Madagascar, Paris court). The series presented him like a man able to adapt and reverse adverse fate with his tenacity, like a knight without fear or shame who knows how to use his charm and looks just as good sweaty and in bloody clothes as he does in a military uniform and powdered wig. The scriptwriters emphasised the Slovakness of Beňovský even in the final scene, when he walks with a resigned and relaxed step towards the fort in Madagascar where the French set a trap for him; here, his attitude is reminiscent of Jánošík's resignation towards the gallows. Furthermore, since it was a historical topic, the scriptwriters could afford to avoid incorporating the ballast of the state ideology of the epoch. It is mainly thanks to this series that Beňovský was permanently established in the memory of the older generation as the "King of Madagascar". As reminded by the French "villain" d'Aiguillon, when answering what to do with such an inconvenient count: "History shall preserve Beňovský; we can cut his head short, but we shall not take away his immortality."<sup>22</sup>

## SUMMARY

The large and expensive historical television series *Vivat Beňovský*, made in the 1970s, was the first audiovisual work of this type in contemporary Slovak and Hungarian television production. The figure of Móric Beňovský represented a connecting element for Slovak and Hungarian production, as he belongs to the history of both nations. The scriptwriters solved the dilemma of which nation's history Beňovský belongs to by having him in each version, Hungarian and Slovak, confess to the ethnic group that is the target audience. The scriptwriters have flattened the character of Beňovský, this adventurer, traveller, coloniser, who did not hesitate to adapt to the situation and use the circumstances to his advantage, even at the cost of violating the then, but also generally valid, moral principles. In the series, he acts as a fearless fighter for the rights of the colonised people (Malagasy) and as a friend of the Malagasy tribes in their struggle against the hated French. On the other hand, thanks to the historical theme, the creators avoided the obligation to incorporate into the series the ideological narratives of the contemporary regime, which constituted the obligation of any work of fiction produced at the time. Critics, however, received the series with reservations. The first and most common criticism was the lengthiness and static nature of the individual episodes, which was eventually acknowledged by the series' creators, who cut the original thirteen episodes, broadcast in 1975, down to seven. Another criticism from publicists and critics was directed at the portrayal of the character of Beňovský himself, who was accused of a lack of elaboration and of being presented in the series as a man who is controlled by circumstances. Thus, in line with the contemporary approach to a work of fiction that is supposed to present positive role models and teach lessons, critics called for a clearer heroisation of this historical figure by the scriptwriters. While declaratively trying to highlight Beňovský's positive traits (decisiveness, directness, courage), they did not omit his sense of pretence from the plot. They presented to the audience of the time a figure of a man of Slovak and Hungarian history who, through his skill and effort, was able to travel almost the entire world, move and act confidently in various exotic environments, and eventually, according to his own memoirs, become the king of Madagascar. And so he lives on in the cultural memory of Slovaks.

<sup>22</sup> Episode: *King of Kings*.

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