

Returning Folklore to the People: On the Paradox of Publicizing Folklore in Post-Communist Slovakia

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This paper follows a contemporary Slovak movement to “return folklore to the people,” since people have allegedly forgotten what authentic folklore is like due to the popularity of “stylized” folklore-inspired spectacles under Communist rule. The paper argues that folklore revival movements can be understood as attempts to bring something intimate (belonging to a localized “folk”) into public (where it risks being perceived as inauthentic), and the paper follows a fundamental transformation in the way this intimacy-publicity tension has been addressed, between the Communist era and today.

Bringing Folklore Down Off the Stage

On April 30, 2012, toward the end of my period of fieldwork, an argument took place on the Facebook page of Košice’s Club of Authentic Folklore Lovers (Klub milovníkov autentického folklóru, or KMAF). At issue was a poster which had been proposed for publicizing an upcoming “dance house” (*tanečný dom*) organized by the KMAF. On the poster were two dancers, ornately dressed in immaculately clean folk dress (or what generally passes for folk dress), spinning on an otherwise-empty stage. The young man was looking down, thus showing off two dandy feathers in an unwrinkled felt hat; the young woman was looking out at an invisible audience, her heavy makeup highlighting the paleness of her face and the redness of her lips, which were curled in an evidently well-rehearsed smile. (“Figure 1”) A mistake had been made.

For a day after the poster was proposed, discussion about the event continued without any objections raised regarding the poster. But then Vlado Michalko, a leading organizer of the KMAF and an influential



Figure 1

Unused flier for a dance house organized by the Club of Authentic Folklore Lovers (KMAF).

figure in a nationwide movement for authentic folklore, posted a comment:

How can we advertise a dance house with a picture of people in folk dress .. ?

After a brief pause he posted a second comment:

and on stage? When the idea behind dance houses is to bring folk dance down off the stage and return it to ordinary people.

The dancers in the picture, Vlado also pointed out, were members of the semi-professional ensemble *Lúčnica*, and it turned out that their

picture had made its way to the poster designer more or less by accident. As for their folk dress, in the photograph it clearly functioned as stage costume, very likely made to order for staged performance, and no one was expected to come dressed like that to the dance house, where typical outfits included T-shirts and casual, light-fabric skirts or pants.

It turned out that the individual responsible for the poster was not himself an active participant in the folklore movement but was merely lending a hand to friends. He was forgiven for being unaware of the distinct symbolisms of different folklore events, but it is worth noting how easy it was for him to make the mistake, overlooking the difference between an elaborately orchestrated performance and an event that invites everyone to attend, regardless of skill-level or experience. For the so-called “broad public” of people not active in the folklore movement, staged performance provides the primary lens through which folklore is perceived. Yet it was precisely for this reason that Vlado saw a problem: if the broad public keeps thinking of folklore as staged performance, it will be inclined to leave folklore performance to experts more experienced than they.

Moreover, the same perspective on folklore, seen primarily through the lens of performance, seems to be shared by most of the authentic folklore “lovers” (as members of the KMAF affectionately call themselves), who voiced no objection to using the image of staged performance in a poster meant to attract public participation. After all, almost all members of the KMAF, including those most dedicated to bringing folk dance “down off the stage,” are themselves participants in one or another folklore performance ensemble. They believe deeply in the project of de-staging folk dance, but their own ideas and feelings about folklore are still shaped largely by goals and values of the stage.

The Paradox of Publicizing Folklore and the Eclipse of Performative-Representative Publicity

Most people in the modern world come into contact with folklore (that is, with something they understand to be “folklore”) in the public sphere. They observe it discussed in debates on cultural politics. They read it in published books. They view it performed on stage. As “lovers” of authentic folklore in Slovakia have come to realize, however,

this publicity presents folklore's advocates with a problem. In Slovakia as elsewhere, authentic folklore is understood to be an intimate affair. Real folklore is not transmitted through mass media to an anonymous reading or viewing or listening public; it is passed down from person to person, face to face. It is not represented on stage; it is enacted in people's ordinary lives. It is not undertaken for the benefit of an audience (in Slovak, a "*publikum*" — a public); it should be done "*pre vlastné potešenie*" — "for one's own pleasure." It is not discussed, interpreted, and manipulated by activists and consumers; it exists for itself, without being self-aware.

It logically follows from this widely held conception that folklore ceases to be real the moment it is brought into public and is beheld and objectified by the public gaze. But neither did folklore have any clearly definable existence before this moment; it was not yet noticed, discussed, interpreted, or recognized. Folklore, in this sense, comes into existence through a process of self-destruction: what is represented to the public is never quite the real thing. Moreover, it arouses suspicion that the real thing is gone or will soon be gone, thanks in part to the fact that the public is at that very moment a modern, super-intimate subject beholding folklore as an object torn from intimacy. And yet somehow authentic folklore, from its separate, non-public sphere, continues to transmit its image into public. That is to say, it continues to be revived. The discourse of folklore is thus, to borrow Marilyn Ivy's term, a "discourse of the vanishing," that is, a discourse of a thing that is always on the *verge* of going away, and which keeps on going without ever (yet) being gone.¹

This paradox of publicizing folklore, of course, has been at the center of debates over the proper place of "public folklore" or folklore "in public,"² and it has been less directly addressed in discussions of (more

1 Marilyn Ivy: *Discourses of the Vanishing*. Chicago 1995.

2 Robert Baron, Nicholas R. Spitzer (eds.): *Public Folklore*. Washington, D.C. 1992; Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett: *Folklorists in Public: Reflections on Cultural Brokerage in the United States and Germany*. In: *Journal of Folklore Research* 1, 37, 2000, pp. 1–21; M. D. Muthukumarawamy, Molly Kaushal (eds.): *Folklore, Public Sphere, and Civil Society*. New Dehli 2004.

intimate) “folklore” versus (more public) “folklorism”³ and “fakelore”.⁴ Insofar as performance implies publicity, the issue of publicity has also been raised by the performance school of North American folkloristics⁵ although, as Bendix notes, performance-oriented folklorists have a tendency to present performed folklore as more authentic than unperformed folklore,⁶ as a result of which these scholars do not look closely at the tension between (more public) performativity and (more intimate) authenticity.⁷ In Communist-led Europe, for its part, the problem of publicizing folklore was prominently discussed, though it was translated more often into terms of tradition vs. modernity, with participants in debates proposing various means of integrating the more intimately conceptualized folk communities of the past into the large and progressive societies of the present.⁸ And in the post-Communist

- 3 Walter Wiora: *Der Untergang des Volkliedes und sein Zweites Dasein*. In: *Musikalische Zeitfragen* 7, 1959, pp. 9–25; Hermann Bausinger: *Volkskultur in der technischen Welt*. Stuttgart 1961; Hans Moser: *Vom Folklorismus in unserer Zeit*. In: *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* 58, 1962, pp. 177–209; Hans Moser: *Der Folklorismus als Forschungsproblem der Volkskunde*. In: *Hessische Blätter für Volkskunde* 55, 1964, pp. 9–57.
- 4 Richard M. Dorson: *Folklore and Fakelore: Essays Toward a Discipline of Folk Studies*. Cambridge, Mass. 1976.
- 5 E.g. Dell Hymes: *Breakthrough into Performance*. In: Dan Ben-Amos, Kenneth S. Goldstein (eds.): *Folklore: Performance and Communication*. The Hague 1975, pp. 11–74; Richard Bauman: *Verbal Art as Performance*. Rowley, Mass. 1978.
- 6 Regina Bendix: *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies*. Madison 1997, pp. 203–205.
- 7 Turino, however, does note the contrast between more public “presentational” performance and more intimate “participatory” performance; even if he does not discuss at length on the tension between the two. See Thomas Turino: *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation*. Chicago 2008.
- 8 In English see e.g. Kirill V. Čistov: *Folkloristics and the Present Day*. In: Felix J. Oinas, Stephen Soudakoff (eds.): *The Study of Russian Folklore*. The Hague 1975, pp. 303–318; or see the projects described, albeit unsympathetically, by Frank J. Miller: *Folklore for Stalin: Russian Folklore and Pseudofolklore of the Stalin Era*. Armonk, N.Y. 1990. In Slovak and Czech there appeared a number of relevant edited volumes, including Kliment Ondrejka (ed.): *Zborník štúdií a úvah o tanečnej a súborovej problematike [A Collection of Studies and Reflections on the Question of Dance and Ensembles]*. Bratislava 1973; Václav Frolec, Miroslav Krejčí (eds.): *Tradice lidové kultury v životě socialistické společnosti [Traditional Folk Culture in the Life of Socialist Society]*. Brno 1974; Václav Frolec (ed.): *Lidové umění a dnešek [Folk Art Today]*. Brno 1977; Svetozár Švehlák (ed.): *Folklór a umenie dneška (k štúdiu folklórizmu v súčasnej kultúre)*

world the issue has not lost currency, with professional folklorists continuing to assess the social meaning of folklore's transformation through time and in public,⁹ while new generations of folklore enthusiasts criticize the inauthenticity of Communist-era folklorism as excessively modern and stage-performative.¹⁰

There is nothing new, in other words, in the observation that folklore's position in the modern world is problematic. What I hope to draw attention to is, first, how modern folklore's problematic character relates to a tension between intimacy and publicity, both of which are demanded of folklore in modernity. Second, I'd like to show just how productive this tension between intimacy and publicity can be. And third, I'd like to suggest ways in which attempts to work through

[Folklore and Art Today (Toward the Study of Folklorism in Contemporary Culture)]. Bratislava 1980. In addition, Slovak and Czech folklorists translated and discussed a number of works on modern folklore written in other languages, e.g. Hermann Bausinger: 'Folklorismus' jako mezinárodní jev ['Folklorism' as an International Phenomenon]. In: *Národopisné aktuality* VII, 1970, pp. 217–22; Józef Burszta: O folkloré ako súčasnom spoločensko-kultúrnom jave [On Folklore as a Contemporary Socio-Cultural Phenomenon]. In: *Slovenský národopis* 3, XX, 1972, pp. 361–368; Kirill V. Čistov: Špecifikum folkloru vo svetle teórie informácie [The Specificity of Folklore in Light of Information Theory]. In: *Slovenský národopis* 3, XX, 1972, pp. 345–360; Viktor J. Gusev: Estetika folkloru [The Aesthetics of Folklore]. Trans. Rudolf Lužík. Prague 1978.

- 9 From Slovak and Czech folklore studies, see e.g. Martina Pavlicová and Lucie Uhlíková (eds.): *Od folkloru k folklorismu. Slovník folklorního hnutí na Moravě a ve Slezsku* [From Folklore to Folklorism: A Dictionary of the Folklore Movement in Moravia and Silesia]. Strážnice 1997; Eva Krekovičová (ed.): *Folklor a komunikácia v procesoch globalizácie* [Folklore and Communication in the Processes of Globalization]. Bratislava 2005; Jana Pospíšilová and Eva Krekovičová (eds.): *Od pohádky k fámě* [From Folktale to Urban Legend]. Brno 2005; Jan Blahůšek (ed.): *Současný folklorismus a prezentace folkloru* [Contemporary Folklorism and the Presentation of Folklore]. Strážnice 2006; Marta Toncrová (ed.): *Etnokulturní tradice v současné společnosti* / *Ethnocultural Traditions in Contemporary Society*. Brno 2007; *Národopisná Revue* 4, 2008 (special thematic issue on folklorism); Petr Janeček (ed.): *Folklor atomového věku. Kolektivně sdílené prvky expresivní kultury v soudobé české společnosti* [Folklore of the Atomic Age: Collectively Communicated Aspects of Expressive Culture in Contemporary Czech Society]. Prague 2011.
- 10 In addition to this article, see Jennifer R. Cash: *In Search of an Authentic Nation: Folkloric Ensembles, Ethnography, and Ethnicity in the Republic of Moldova*. Doctoral dis., Bloomington 2004; Laura J. Olson: *Performing Russia: Folk Revival and Russian Identity*. London 2004.

this tension are changing, as illustrated by the current movement for authentic folklore in Slovakia.

Habermas, already in his classic study of the modern (“bourgeois”) public sphere, observed that (bourgeois) publicity is interconnected with (bourgeois) privacy, as the public sphere appears as a “public sphere of private persons.”¹¹ But Berlant¹² and Mazzarella¹³ have gone farther, both showing that private affairs may not only be a precondition of public life, but may also seep into the public and even ground it. Although it may well be characteristic of the specifically bourgeois public sphere to deny the influence of the private on the public, it would seem that the interpenetration of public and private — even while the two poles remain distinct and at odds — is characteristic of alternative (perhaps less bourgeois) tendencies in the modern public sphere.¹⁴ This publicization of intimacy, in Berlant’s account, relies on a paradoxical logic in which personal experience seems to be compromised through generalization and yet can be continually renewed, constituting a vital public sphere. The secret, in a sense, is that when intimate experience is consumed in public by individuals who identify with it, it is felt to be shared. And if this is true in Berlant’s account of women’s literature and proximal genres, it may be all the more true of folklore, a central claim of which is that it addresses a public that sees itself in the intimate, pre-public expressive world that folklore represents.

My approach is not to propose redefining folklore¹⁵ or the public sphere¹⁶ in hopes of eliminating the conundrums of intimate authen-

11 Jürgen Habermas: *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence. Cambridge, Mass 1989.

12 *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*. Durham, N.C. 2008.

13 *Censorium: Cinema and the Open Edge of Mass Publicity*. Durham, N.C. 2013.

14 Cf. also Joan Landes: *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution*. Ithaca, N.Y. 1988; Mary P. Ryan: *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825–1880*. Baltimore 1990; Nancy Fraser: *Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy*. In: *Social Text* 25/26, 1990, pp. 56–80; Susan Gal: *A Semiotics of the Public/Private Distinction*. In: *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 1, 13, 2002, pp. 77–95; Michael Warner: *Publics and Counterpublics*. New York 2002.

15 Cf. Bendix (as in *fnnt.* 6).

16 Cf. Jürgen Habermas: *The Theory of Communicative Action*. Trans. Thomas McCarthy. Boston 1984.

ticity and inauthentic publicity. Rather, I would like to point to ways in which these conundrums can drive folklore enthusiasts to extraordinary activity. And I would like to suggest that this activity is all the more significant because it is not limited in scope to folklore. If the tension between authentic folklore and inauthentic folklorism has proven so difficult to overcome, this may be because it is deeply rooted in the structure of modern consciousness, which is shaped by a public sphere that appears as overarching, superorganic, and alienating, and beyond which modern consciousness repeatedly looks for something more intimate and real. This productive tension within modern consciousness, though widely recognized by theorists of alienation, anomie, inorganic community, and the like, has not been adequately addressed by dominant (e.g. Habermasian) theories of the public sphere, and it is on this point that the uses of authentic folklore can shed light on general problems of modern public life.

The tension between authentic intimacy and inauthentic publicity is a general feature of modern consciousness, but attempts to work through the tension are specific. One kind of attempt was made in Communist-led Czechoslovakia's self-described "folklore movement," which presented folklorism as a process of mediation between the broad public and authentic folk communities, which could theoretically be unified and reconciled in the new "people" of socialist society.¹⁷ A different kind of attempt is made by advocates of authentic folklore in Slovakia today. Folklore, in each case, becomes a site for competing forces pulling it toward competing loci of social situatedness, toward what might be called competing "folks." Or, to put the question differently: if folklore is to be "returned to the people," to what kind of people should it be returned?

The current movement's idea of "returning folklore to the people" provides a general indication of this shift. For one thing, this slogan suggests that, in spite of the celebration of folklore in Communist-led society, folklore was in fact *taken away* from the people, to whom it should now be returned. In the view of authenticity advocates, peo-

17 This reconstruction of the Communist conception of folklore is based on a close reading of Communist-era folklore theory in Czechoslovakia, the details of which, however, have had to be cut from this paper. My usage of the term "folklorism" follows the folklore movement's own usage (past and present) to describe its own activity, as distinguished from what it considers to be authentic "folklore."

ple were provided with “stylized” substitutes for folklore, while they became unfamiliar with the real thing. On top of this, these stylized substitutes were presented by expert performers on stage, with the result that many people only experienced folklore as spectators, without imagining that they might be capable of participating in folklore themselves. Although the Communist ideal of folklore presented spectators as participants in a unified social order, the subordinate position of spectators in the hierarchical structure of participation could be understood by critics as a form of exclusion. So the movement for authentic folklore has aimed to “return” folklore to these spectators through the dual project of performing folklore authentically for them, so that they might *learn* about what had been taken away from them, but also of encouraging them to *enact* this authentic folklore themselves at participatory events like the so-called dance houses.

The idea of “returning folklore to the people,” however, also includes a second implicit criticism of the Communist folklore ideal. This criticism revolves around the word used for “people.” In Slovak Communist discourse, “the people” was *ľud*, the traditional term for the singular subject of popular politics and shared lore, “the folk/the people.” Today’s advocates of authentic folklore also use this term, but only in a more restricted sense. The word *ľud*, in their discourse, is reserved almost exclusively for the entity that bears traditional, authentic folklore, but which includes neither the masses of modern political subjects, nor the conscious, active members of the folklore movement. The *ľud* may address and inspire a modern public of folklore enthusiasts, but it remains itself beyond the reach of participatory inclusion or public address. By contrast, “the people” to whom authentic folklore should be returned is something else. The word used is *ľudia*, “people” in the plural, an indefinite number of persons. It is not a corporate entity that might collectively act or create. It is a loose collection of people who come and go, whose attentions and affections are won and lost, who might or might not allow themselves to be taken in by folklore. It is an audience (*publikum*) that is addressed and a public (*verejnosť*) that is invited to participate.

The resulting shift in terms has relieved the authentic folklore movement of certain problems that had been faced by the Communist-era folklore movement. Because the authentic “people” is now limited to a pre-modern world, there is no question of attempting to fully reconcile the authentic and inauthentic through radical transformation,

a project which exposed Communist folklorism to criticism when it failed to achieve that goal. Radical transformation is rejected, along with any politicization of folklore at all.¹⁸ And in accordance with this rejection of politicization, most participants in the authentic folklore movement no longer consider “the people” to be a legitimate political figure; they delegate to the people the apparently less ambitious task of bearing its old folklore, and they admit that their own reenactments of old folklore can never achieve the authentic ideal, much less bring authenticity to society as a whole.

Nevertheless, the authentic folklore movement’s reformulation of terms has raised problems of its own. On the one hand, the movement for authentic folklore has called for more public participation, not in hopes of abolishing the distinction between the public and the folk (as was sometimes hoped for by Communist-influenced folklorists), but in order to involve larger numbers of people in the process of *working through* the tension, even if the tension cannot be overcome. On the other hand, by enshrining folklore’s authenticity beyond the reach of participation, the authentic folklore movement has limited the public’s ability to influence or transform the folklore that it observes and in some sense shares.

It is in this renunciation of politicized overcoming that we can observe what I have called an eclipse of performative-representative publicity, in favor of public mediation of a different kind. In the regime of folklorism established in Communist-led Czechoslovakia, the privileged site for publicizing authentic folklore was the stage. Although people also experienced folklore in other ways (e.g., by attending folklore-themed parties, by attending rehearsals of folklore performance ensembles, by playing folk music informally among friends), the revival of folklore coalesced symbolically around staged performances, at which the public was supposed to observe itself, identified as “the people,” expertly, grandly, and beautifully represented.¹⁹ There is

18 On the general depoliticization of social life in the neoliberal world cf. Jacques Rancière: *Disagreement*. Trans. Julie Rose. Minneapolis 1999; Chantal Mouffe: *On the Political*. London 2005.

19 Cf. Habermas (as in fn. 11), pp. 5–14, on “representative publicity” in the pre-modern age.

therefore a certain truth to those many studies of “performing the...”²⁰ — insofar as the performative mode of conveying public meaning has at certain times been dominant, especially in countries under Communist Party rule. In the Slovak movement for authentic folklore, however, performative publicity is no longer dominant. Grandiose performance is associated with politicized folklore, and the movement has shifted emphasis toward another kind of publicity, mediated less by the staging of images than by the inclusion of participants in shared activity, sustained less by the circulation of texts²¹ than by continued attendance at structured events, experienced less through performed signs than by embodied feelings, generating less in the way of collective representations, and more in the way of collective effervescence.

And here, in a certain imperative to effervescence, one can see a unifying factor in post-political attempts to work through the dialectic of authenticity in Slovak folklore. In the authentic folklore movement it is frequently suggested that one should engage in folklore “for one’s own pleasure,” that “the most important thing is to have fun,” that a performer should not fake pleasure on stage but should *really* have fun while performing. An attempt is made to bridge the gap between performance and participation, not through political transcendence but through apolitical embodiment, through a generalized sharing of pleasure, not in hopes of a permanently reconciled future, but in fleeting moments when the excitement and intoxication of the event can make irreconcilable tensions be forgotten.

20 On performing the nation, see e.g. Jörgen Hellman: *Performing the Nation: Cultural Politics in New Order Indonesia*. Copenhagen 2003; Olson (as in ftnt. 10); Alaina Lemon: *Between Two Fires: Gypsy Performance and Romani Memory from Pushkin to Postsocialism*. Durham, N.C. 2000; Ana Ramos-Zayas: *Performances: Politics of Class, Race, & Space in Puerto Rican Chicago*. Chicago 2003. On performing the state, see Anthony Shay: *Choreographic Politics: State Folk Dance Companies, Representation, and Power*. Middletown, Conn. 2002; David Guss: *The Festive State: Race, Ethnicity, and Nationalism as Cultural Performance*. Berkeley 2000. On performing democracy, see Susan C. Haedicke and Tobin Nellhaus (eds.): *Performing Democracy: International Perspectives on Urban Community-Based Performance*. Ann Arbor 2001; Donna Buchanan: *Performing Democracy: Bulgarian Music and Musicians in Transition*. Chicago 2006).

21 Which was emphasized by Habermas (as in ftnt. 11) and still more so by Warner (as in ftnt. 14), p. 66.

The ethnographic work here discussed took place primarily between December 2010 and March 2011, when I was beginning a year and a half of research in Slovakia. I arrived in the field intending to study the ways in which the contemporary movement for authentic folklore attempts to “return folklore to the people,” that is, to those people whom participants in the movement refer to as the “broad public,” people who are not active members of the movement, but whom the movement hopes to address. I was based in the city of Košice — a center of activity for the authentic folklore movement — but traveled throughout Slovakia as important events arose; I studied the movement’s publicity materials (websites, billboards, occasional TV ads); I watched recorded shows; I attended performances as a member of the audience; I came to participatory events as an outsider who in the beginning knew personally only a couple of the people involved in organizing the events. I spoke with people who were active in the movement, but I also spoke with members of their audience and with potential members of their audience — people whom the authentic folklore movement would like to have at their events but who for various reasons chose not to attend. I sought to understand this position of the outsider looking in. From this perspective, I traced the hopes and challenges of a movement that looks outward, seeking a new way of connecting folklore to a new kind of people/public. And I tried very hard to have fun. This article traces just how hard that was and, more importantly, what this difficulty reveals about the difficulty of making authentic folklore into a part of public (or “the public’s,” or “the people’s”) life.

Re-presenting Folklore: Folk Cool and Folklore to Fall in Love With

The movement for authentic folklore in Slovakia sharply distinguishes the modern public from the authentic people, but it aims to present the people to the public in terms that the public understands. Rather than attracting the modern public with grand spectacle based on transformed folklore, performers attempt to show spectators that folklore has *always* been something they can appreciate, something similar to what they already like, something eternally cool. Authentic folk music is played by small folk bands, which happen to be about the size of a typical alternative rock band. Often, music is selected that

defies conventions of classic harmonization and major-minor scales, thus conveying a sense of modernist aesthetic non-conformity. Dances are presented as spontaneous and fun, analogous to what one might find in an urban dance club. Colorful folk outfits are often replaced by black suits and white shirts, revealing a side of folk dress not so different from what people might wear to a celebration today. Men wear their hats askance, nearly falling off, showing that the insubordinate ostentation of village youth of the past was not so different from the hip-hop aesthetic of today. An agonistic side of folklore is emphasized on stage, a counterweight to the lyrical side that became dominant in the optimistic period after the War: dancers show off to one another, steal partners, stamp brusquely as they jerkily move, alternate gloating smiles with intense sneers. The intended message (as was explained repeatedly to me) is that folklore is *not* the kitsch you thought it was. It is cool. Or, as it was put in the title of a recent show by the professional Slovak Folk Artistic Collective (Slovenský umelecký ľudový kolektív, or SLUK, once the flagship of spectacular folklorism, founded in 1949 and enthusiastically promoted by the Communist government, but now run by supporters of the authentic folklore movement), authentic folklore is "*Folkcool*."

In addition to choosing from among competing authenticities, however, authenticity advocates would also sometimes incorporate overtly inauthentic elements into their performances. Their choice of inauthentic stylization, however, was meant to contrast sharply with the stylizations of earlier folklorism. Folklore would not be elevated by incorporating elements of ballet and symphonic composition; it would be made eclectic with elements taken from popular world music and dance. On one occasion, for example, Vlado Michalko (whom we saw at the beginning of this article) helped produce an ad in which folklore's claim to coolness is especially evident. This ad was for a dance camp, to be held in a popular water park called Tatrallandia, where Slovak folk dance would be taught alongside flamenco, tango, and capoeira. The dance instructors appear in the video in a mix of traditional folk dress, contemporary fashion, and silly masquerade. They are shown in quickly alternating shots that present folk dance as carefree, fun, and rebellious: they dance wildly under a sign that says "Follow the rules"; they dance around water slides and swimming pools, and they leap into the water; the ad concludes with an extended shot of one instructor performing elegant flamenco while the others hastily remove lawn

chairs from her path. They are accompanied by a Romani brass band which sounds jazzy and modern, unlike stereotypical Slovak folk music yet still laying claim to certain authentic traditions, and not subsumed by the styles of consumerist pop.²²

Coolness is something quite new in the history of Slovak folklorism. Previous generations may have made folklore popular, but they never made it cool. Something popular is liked by and shared by large numbers of people. Consciousness of this sharing leads often to consciousness of shared identity, collectivity, fate, and even agency. The popular, in this sense, implies a people. But the cool does not. Coolness is not achieved by a quantity of people liking and sharing something. On the contrary, coolness demands a distanciation from the tastes (or former tastes) of the masses. Many people may simultaneously be cool in the same way, but coolness does not encourage people to acknowledge this simultaneity. People may go wild over cool things, but coolness encourages them to do so *coolly*, maintaining those things at a distance. Important things may be made cool, but coolness does not demand that they be treated earnestly as important things. Ideas about the people can be made cool, but coolness does not construct the people as an idea.

This tension was expressed in another ad produced by the folklore movement, this time for the 2011 Východná folk festival, the largest annual folklore festival in Slovakia and, like the Slovak Folk Artistic Collective, another key national folklore institution that has recently come under the direction of young authentic folklore advocates. In addition to cool, carefree eclecticism, this ad presented folklore as something important and special. It begins with shots of wild fans at rock music festivals, but these images are soon overlain with a multitude of shots from performances of folklore, and the electric guitar soundtrack of the first few seconds is replaced by a folk violin. It is not just any folk violin, however. It plays an atypical folk song that is likely to surprise viewers who might expect regular rhythms and smooth harmonies. The lead violin plays a mix of pizzicato and fast bowed adornment, in irregular rhythmic lines, employing a virtuoso technique developed by certain expert musicians. And in the context

22 As of 11 October 2013, the video is available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NWPDAILTOS>.

of the ad, the rough bowing also seems to echo the distorted power chords of the earlier rock song. A voice-over specifies the meaning of the contrasting images we are being shown: "There are lots of festivals you can experience. But there's only one festival with which you'll fall in love." A folk festival is presented as similar to rock festival, cool and worthy of wild abandon. But the folk festival is also different. It is not merely "experienced," which might be a superficial, casual experience (the word used here for "experience," *zažit*, implies as much). It invites you to become intimate with it, to form a relationship, to become one of folklore's "lovers."²³

The public was called upon to become involved with folklore, to fall in love with it. It might begin as an audience of spectators, taking pleasure in authentic folklore from a distance. When it saw, however, that folklore was not merely mainstream and ordinary, but also cool, it would want to join in the fun. And when it further recognized that this was a deeper, more important kind of fun, it would stick with folklore for good. The intimacy of authentic lore, undermined when brought into public and placed on stage, would at the same time draw the public back into its intimate self. In this ideal scenario, the public would become intimate with folklore once more, and the moment of authenticity could be renewed. Nevertheless the question remained: was the public ready for the commitment that intimacy with folklore demands? Because the folklore movement, as it turns out, is not such an easy place for mere casual admirers. Folklore returns itself to the people by renouncing its claims on their politics. But it has not renounced its claims on their hearts, or on their muscles, lungs, and time.

If the People Will not Come to Folklore,
Folklore Must Go to the People: The Dance House

In order not only to make folklore cool, but also to get people intimately involved with it, the authentic folklore movement found it necessary to develop not only new styles of public presentation but also

23 As of 11 October 2013, the video is available online at <http://www.facebook.com/video/video.php?v=1860725233618>.

with new institutions of public participation. The most prominent of such institutions has become the “dance house.”

In September 2002, around the same time that the Club of Authentic Folklore Lovers (KMAF) was beginning to organize the first dance houses in the East Slovak city of Košice, a group of students and graduates in Slovakia’s capital Bratislava, on the other side of the country, founded an organization called “Dragúni” (“Dragoons”) with an almost identical mission: to organizing dance houses and promote authentic folklore. Initially, the two groups were unaware of one another. They both took the idea from the Hungarian folklore movement, which had been having dance houses for several decades (including dance houses organized by the ethnic Hungarian community in Slovakia). But in Slovakia it was not until the early 2000s, after a decade of uncertainty about where the folklore movement should go after the fall of its former Communist patron, that the idea caught on.

In Bratislava, a reporter spoke with the Dragúni organizers after some of their early events. The result was a series of articles, including one entitled “Dance House Wants to Return Dance to People.”²⁴ The author channeled the organizers’ self-presentation as well as what she perceived to be the hopes of a new generation of urbane Bratislavans: that Slovaks would no longer “confuse folklore — the sap which flows from every community, regardless of its way of life — and folklorism, its artificial, often falsely idealized cultivar.” After “Megalomaniacal communist ideology misused the creations of anonymous musicians, turning them into a propaganda tool ... Nowadays we’d rather turn on Serbian or Icelandic ethno music or would rather dance to Spanish [*sic*] salsa.” But maybe, Očenášová suggested, the dance house will revive interest in Slovak folk dance.

In an English-language article a few months later the same author elaborated further:

Twice a month, an eager group of students, office workers, businesspeople, and grandparents gathers in a Bratislava club for a regular event called *Tanečný dom* [*sic*; missing diacritics] (Dance House)...

24 Zuzana Očenášová: Tanečný dom chce vrátiť tanec ľuďom [Dance House Wants to Return Dance to People]. In: SME, 6.6.2003.

Dance House is the brainchild of Draguni, a group of young folk-dancers who aim to take Slovak country dances back where they belong: away from the bright stages of big theaters and folklore festivals to the dance halls and pubs.²⁵

The dance house movement, Očenášová hoped further, would bring folklore “down from the mountain” of staged beauty and forced ideology²⁶; and in a third article she quoted Dragúni organizer Fero Morong decrying “violently forced smiles [...] demands for beautiful faces, straightened backs, well-built frames.”²⁷ The dance houses would make folklore into a living, changing creature of the world today.

This is how the “dance house” was explained by Dragúni themselves:

At present there exist in Slovakia a great number of folklore [...] ensembles devoted to preserving, reworking, and presenting folk dance on stage. But folk dance has many other supporters, and not everyone can be a member of such groups. [...] From this fact came a great need to find another way to make folk dance accessible to absolutely everyone, so that anyone could dance without being a member of an ensemble and attending regular rehearsals and performances. From this need the idea of “dance houses” was born. [...] [The dance house] is a place where there are no performers or spectators, where the rules of the stage do not apply, and where the most important thing is to have fun... In Slovakia there have been many opportunities to watch folk dance and listen to folk music. The dance house [...] gives you the opportunity to experience the excitement of folk dance and the charm of folk song for yourself [...].²⁸

When I spoke to Fero Morong during my fieldwork, he described the time of the movement’s first dance houses as a time filled with excitement and hope. But by the time of our 2011 interview the excitement had worn off. Among the reasons for this is the fact that dance houses, although they have aroused continuing interest within the folklore movement, have still not succeeded in interesting a very broad seg-

25 Zuzana Očenášová: The Slovak Two-Step. In: TOL, 5.11.2003.

26 Ibid.

27 Zuzana Očenášová: Mešfania krepčia po slovensky [Urbanites Dance in Slovak]. In: SME, 4.12.2002.

28 Cited from http://www.tanecnydom.sk/?page_id=22, accessed 13.10.2013.

ment of the public. Dance houses are well attended; they have become regular events in a growing number of towns throughout Slovakia; but they now attract few attendees who are not already members of folklore performance ensembles. And Očenášová, who had taken on the voice of a broad public in search of renovated folklore, has apparently stopped writing on the topic.

My own first experiences with a dance house were somewhat different from what Očenášová described. Admittedly, mine was the experience of an ethnographer, a rather atypical member of the broad public to whom the authentic folklore movement would like to have folklore returned; nevertheless my situation was not so different from that of so many other first-time attendees who come to dance houses by themselves or in small groups, knowing no one else, knowing little about Slovak folk dance, possessing even less skill than knowledge, but who heard or read about the event and were inspired to give it a try.

I attended my first dance house on the very first day of my fieldwork, and I came to the event without personally knowing anyone who would be there (the event was in Bratislava, while most of my field contacts were across the country in Košice). I spent the first half of the evening awkwardly sitting in a corner, writing in my notebook as I watched a hundred or so enthusiastic young people having what looked like a very good time. Finally I ran out of things to write and excuses not to try my feet at dancing, so I joined in the second dance, a lively “*Do vysoká*” (lit. “up high”) from the hills around the town of Brezno. The first dance had not looked too difficult, but now I felt completely lost within a minute after beginning. I struggled on for a while but was soon relieved when we were told that the dance’s authentic form involved groups of three, with two women to every man, which placed me among several men who were left without partners. I tried to hide the embarrassment of my failure as I walked back to my seat. My embarrassment only abated after I spoke with several people there and learned that I was one of very few attendees—I met and heard about no one else—who was not already an experienced dancer from a folklore performance ensemble. Instead of feeling like an exceptionally unskilled dancer, I simply felt like an outsider who had crashed someone else’s party.

In the months to come, when I eventually became a regular attendee of dance houses in Košice and got to know all the other regular attendees, I began to feel at home. But I was also able to observe that there

were never more than a handful of non-members of folklore ensembles who came. Such newcomers were easy to identify. While most of the attendees breezed through the dances, the non-ensemble-members usually struggled to keep up. And when the ensemble members talked and drank and danced with one another, the newcomers generally kept to themselves. The event organizers were often busy with other duties and social obligations and did not always find the time to talk to newcomers, but I made a point of asking them why they had come and encouraging them to return. They gave various reasons for coming (exercise, the pleasure of dancing, interest in Slovak traditions), but very few of them returned for a second or third dance house, and none of them became regular dance house attendees. And when I was able to speak to people who had decided not to come back to subsequent dance houses, their reasons were quite consistent: they found the dancing too difficult, and they felt socially excluded. To use terms elaborated on by Turino in his discussion of “participatory performance,” it might be said that participatory *values* had been developed, but not a participatory *etiquette*.²⁹ It is unlikely I would have persevered myself if it had not been necessary for my research. But it was, and I did.

I attended several dance houses in both Bratislava and Košice, but my dancing skills did not rapidly improve. When dancers paired in couples, my partner was invariably more experienced than I, and I often had trouble telling whether she was happy to help me or disappointed not to be enjoying herself more with a better dancer. On one occasion I was given hints that the instructor had told an experienced dancer to come help me, replacing another who seemed flustered. On other occasions my partners made their frustration quite clear. And it was several more months before I felt that I was not always the worst dancer in the room. Of course, such issues will come up in any situation where couples of various skill levels must dance together, but it is noteworthy that the authentic folklore advocates hardly seemed to notice the problem at this time and made little attempt to address it. On the contrary, the style of instruction tended to make the dances more rather than less difficult for beginners. Many instructors (though not all of them) moved very quickly through teaching the basic motifs and principles of given dances. They spent more time putting together

29 Turino (as in *ftnt.* 7), pp. 33–35.

motif combinations of increasing complexity, asking the dancers to memorize and repeat them back as if they were mini-choreographies, just like what ensemble members practice during rehearsals for staged performance. Dancers were eventually told to improvise, but not until after learning extended combinations of motifs, which they used as the basis for improvisation. And since I could never remember any motif combination, I felt especially lost when time came to improvise; the principles of improvisation were not usually taught as such. Then, during the “open parties” (*volné zábavy*) that followed formal instruction, I felt still more lost, since proper participation demanded that dancers not only improvise effectively but recognize what village’s music was being played, so as to know what dance to improvise. And the instructor was no longer present to call out tips and instructions and encourage people to join in.

On top of the difficulty of keeping up with the dances, during the early period of my research I also felt alone. While on the one hand I was marked for my lack of skill, on the other hand I was also somewhat invisible, as an outsider to the closely knit community of attendees. Although I gradually got to know more people, during those first months I felt generally left out of social interaction. My attempts to strike up conversation were usually abortive, even when I spoke with people who later became my close friends; they were typically rushing to more urgent discussions or preparations. I often did what most newcomers to dance houses couldn’t do: I retreated to my notebook, pretending I had a professional reason for having no one to talk to.

It is not my intent to argue that event organizers should be doing more to attract and retain the interest of the broad public. My intent is to show just how many factors limit the possibilities for a broader public to participate. In fact, toward the end of my time in the field an explicit attempt was made to rectify the situation I have described. Vlado Michalko returned to Košice after several years in Bratislava, and he decided to take an active role in increasing public interest in Košice’s dance houses. As we saw at the beginning of this article, he perceived that many dance house attendees had forgotten that the purpose of dance houses was to “bring folk dance down off the stage and return it to ordinary people.” Too many of them treated dance houses as a chance to improve their performance skills, rather than treating them as places to enjoy folk dance for its own sake, without thinking about the stage. Vlado mobilized some of Košice’s most active authen-

tic folklore advocates to revitalize the Club of Authentic Folklore Lovers (KMAF) as the institutional basis of dance houses. Dance houses would now be actively publicized with posters in public places rather than primarily by word of mouth (as was the case in Košice during most of my time in the field). And instructors were told to set aside certain dance instruction sessions specifically for beginners.

As of the time of my writing, Vlado's experiment is still in its early stages. The experiment may still prove successful, but its first few tries did not yield quick success. The events were not publicized as widely as planned, because most people involved did not make a priority out of contributing to the publicity. Few newcomers attended, with the result that even the dances intended for beginners were attended primarily by more experienced dancers, and instructors were pressured to adapt to the needs of the majority. To use Turino's terms again, the movement has not developed complementary performance roles enabling some to participate at a high skill level simultaneously with others at a low level of skill.³⁰ Instead, one group seems almost always to be frustrated when the other group dominates. Instructors are in a difficult position, because experienced ensemble members generally show little interest in less challenging dances. When a dance is too "easy," they prefer to sit it out. In fact, attendance levels at dance houses tended to correlate with the perceived difficulty (as well as novelty) of the dances scheduled to be taught. So if the dance house were really addressed to beginners, attendance would likely drop, at least until a larger cohort of casual non-ensemble members emerged. Finally Vlado persuaded the KMAF to adopt a new approach, in which the first hour of each dance house would be for beginners, while the second hour would be meant for advanced dancers, after which a dance party would be open to all. It remains to be seen how this will go, whether Vlado's participatory intentions will be again limited by the in-built structure of a folklore movement oriented toward performance, or whether the institutional changes might succeed in attracting a segment of the broad public that regularly attends dance houses, for the first time integrating significant numbers of non-ensemble members into the movement for authentic folklore in Slovakia.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 30.

The Public between Performance and Participation

The authentic folklore movement in Slovakia has introduced a new dimension to the traditional paradox of making folklore public. Authentic folklore has been conceptualized not only as un-publicizable, but specifically as unstageable. At the same time the “reconstruction” of authentic folklore (to use a term current in the authentic folklore movement) demands significant expertise, and this level of expertise effectively excludes authentic folklore from many intimate settings where it might potentially be performed for pleasure. Authentic folklore in principle “belongs to everyone” (another frequently uttered phrase), but its cultivation remains the responsibility of a specialized few who, precisely because folklore belongs to everyone, have all the greater moral duty to “respectfully” and skillfully present authentic folklore to a public that is not yet prepared to cultivate authentic folklore itself. Nevertheless, the essential unstageability of authentic folklore makes these performances necessarily inauthentic. Performance can reconstruct, but it cannot fully revive.

Authentic folklore, in the process of being spared from deformation on stage, is placed in a separate realm and protected from contemporary society with its tendencies toward mass mediation and political use. Folklore can be “returned” to a supra-local public as an object to contemplate, to learn about, to enjoy; folklore is thought to “belong to” the public. But is not a *part* of the public. The public can participate in the reconstruction of authentic folklore, but the movement’s definition of authentic folklore makes any reflective, public activity regarding folklore necessarily inauthentic. Authentic folklore is rescued from the paradox of publicity by being kept out of public, but a public oriented toward authentic folklore becomes all the more deeply embroiled in paradox.

The difficulty of publicizing authentic folklore points to an uneasy fit between two modes of publicity that overlap and compete within the folklore movement. On the one hand, there is a practice of performative-representative publicity, inherited from the spectacular folklorism made popular under Communist rule. On the other hand, there is an ideal of participatory publicity, intended to involve people more intimately in the folklore they observe and reconstruct. Performative publicity emphasizes the practice of representation: a concept of the folk is represented on stage, taking on various externally perceptible

forms, combining various images of people, nation, and class. Participatory publicity, by contrast, eschews or de-values the images represented on stage. These images are not presented as spectacles to behold and ideas to absorb, but as models to enact. The public is called upon to appreciate but also to learn and repeat what it is shown. The representations are taken “down off the stage,” where they are reenacted. The public reassembles in a small, more intimate setting. Instead of watching the folk represented before it, the public finds enjoyment in re-making the people around it, in multiple micro-process, small acts of communication and social interconnection. The folk is taken out of the performative-representative public, but it reappears off stage.

The folk, which is to say the people (*ľud*), is clearly distinguished from the broad public. But so too are the performers. The members of folklore ensembles, as an intimate sphere of performers, serve as mediators between the people and the public. But since their performative-representative activity is de-valued, attention is re-focused on the non-performative side of what they do. They remain performers. But performances are presented as imperfect reconstructions. They involve the interpretation, elaboration, stylization, and artistic reworking of folk traditions, but not their continuation. Performances are excused as the best that can be done in the irredeemable absence of truly authentic folklore, and attention is directed to the long, hard processes of reconstructing a simulated embodiment of the authentic lore of the folk. If, as I suggest, the folklore movement continues to confer a sense of the people, it is not primarily because the people is represented on stage, as it was in the past, but because a simulation of the people is embodied through shared modes of involvement. And if one enjoys oneself enough in the process, one can be forgiven for forgetting that the embodiment is only simulated.³¹

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