

Hostel

Eli Roth, 2005

Screenwriter: Eli Roth

Place: United States, Czech Republic

Studios: Next Entertainment, Raw Nerve

Length: 94 minutes

Language: English

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The Horrifyingly Marginalised Slovakian Other

Eli Roth's *Hostel* (2005) is an American horror cult classic depicting the hedonistic escapades of two American university students travelling across Europe. The popular film has played an important role in shaping the landscape of contemporary Western horror cinema. However, Roth's controversial depiction of the East European landscape and its people is profoundly problematic. One year after its release, BBC News reported that Slovak MP, Tomas Galbavy, was 'deeply offended by the film and [he] thinks that all Slovaks' should feel similarly.¹ It comes as no surprise that Slovaks feared tourism to their country would plummet as a result of Roth's heavily biased depiction of their native soil.²

Early in their travels, the film's protagonists, Paxton (Jay Hernandez) and Josh (Derek Richardson), encounter a man — intimated to be Slovak — named Alex (L'ubomír Bukový), who encourages them to visit a hostel in Slovakia known to have 'the best women' in Europe.³ Upon their arrival, Paxton and Josh, as well as an Icelandic man named Óli (Eypór Guðjónsson) whom they befriend during their voyage, encounter two beautiful Slovak women, Natalya (Barbara Nedeljková) and Svetlana (Jana Kaderabkova), who act as hostesses to the tourists, despite also being guests at the lodgings.

The sinister truth soon surfaces that the hostel is an operating facility for the malevolent 'Elite Hunting Group' comprised of wealthy individuals who pay to torture and kill tourists for sport.

¹ BBC News, 'Slovakia angered by horror film' (2006) <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/4754744.stm>> [accessed 29 September 2022] (para. 3 of 13).

² BBC News, para. 6 of 13.

³ *Hostel*, dir. by Eli Roth (Lions Gate Films, 2006), 00.11:23-00.11:35.

Óli mysteriously disappears from the hostel with a Slovak woman and Josh vanishes after he and Paxton are drugged by Natalya and Svetlana. Paxton eventually discovers that the town's corrupt police are collaborators with this sinister group for whom the hostel's women act as pawns to lure unwitting tourists into the death trap. Upon learning that his friends have been tortured and killed, Paxton is also captured, but ultimately fares a better fate upon his successful escape by the film's end.

The idea of Western Europe's cultural supremacy dominates the film which is replete with xenophobic assumptions about Eastern Europe. Roth sustains a deep sense of unreconcilable cultural division by depicting the Americans accustomed to a 'progressive' and 'civilised' home culture shaken upon their arrival in a hellish netherworld of human civilisation. The depressing Slovak landscape shown on screen is a vast wasteland populated with dilapidated buildings and little else. On their way to the hostel, Josh jokes with his friends, 'we could visit some factories',⁴ since the desolate albeit industrialised terrain is devoid of the usual entertainments which the young men enjoy in their home country. A similar technique of 'othering' non-American life is employed in William Friedkin's classic *The Exorcist* (1973). The Iraqi demon named Pazuzu in the film's prologue represents the purportedly terroristic Arab 'other.' Pazuzu infiltrates American society and victimises a young girl, her mother and several priests who try to expel the demon. As film scholar Tim Jon Semmerling argues, this technique reinforces the 'certainty of America's image as modern, righteous and secure'.⁵

Throughout *Hostel*, Slovaks are demonised as extensions of their hellish soil to an absurd degree, while the American tourists are depicted as helpless victims who fall prey to a native group of sadists with homicidal proclivities. In reality, the economically disadvantaged Slovaks are the real victims since their country is exploited for capitalist gain by a wealthy elite who use the land as a playground for their brutal games. The film's treatment of Slovak women is especially problematic: its dehumanising male gaze⁶ exoticizes and hypersexualises these women whose naked bodies are readily available for the tourists' sexual gratification.

Hostel undoubtedly perpetuates xenophobic and sexist notions with its harmful stereotypes about the Slovak landscape and its people. However, Roth employs this fiercely

⁴ *Hostel*, 00.16.47.

⁵ Tim Jon Semmerling, 'The Exorcist Assault on American Confidence (1973)', in *"Evil" Arabs in American Popular Film: Orientalist Fear* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), pp. 30-59 (p. 41).

⁶ Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, 16.3 (1975), 6-8 (pp. 6-7) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6>>

unenlightened perspective as an instrument to provoke self-reflection in its American audience. In Roth's words, his film is not 'a geographical work but aims to show Americans' ignorance of the world around them'.⁷ The director self-consciously adopts this parochial perspective of the east European 'other' as a play on the techniques of his filmic predecessors and on the American horror genre as a whole. Regardless of Roth's intentions, it is undeniable that *Hostel* leaves a negative mark on impressionable minds and a bitter vision in all eyes: Slovaks are condemned as evil and sadistic, Slovak women as barbaric seductresses, and the landscape as unfit for civilised life.

⁷ BBC News, para. 9 of 13.

Bibliography

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