

# **University Program of Slovene Language and Culture in Japan: Projects and Visits of Authors Vinko Möderndorfer and Nejc Gazvoda**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper is an overview of the projects carried out as part of the university program of Slovene Language and Culture in Japan since its start in 1997 with focus on the visits by two Slovene authors Vinko Möderndorfer and Nejc Gazvoda. The events are seen as important steps in the promotion of Slovene Studies at Japanese universities and in the building of an interactive relationship between the two countries.*

**Keywords:** Slovene language and culture, projects, Slovene authors, Japan

## **要旨**

本稿は、1997 年から開始した「日本の大学におけるスロベニア言語文化交流プログラム」に含まれるプロジェクトを概観したものである。とりわけスロベニア人作家 ヴィンコ・メデルンドルフェル と ネイツ・ガズヴォダ の来日について紹介する。この来日は日本の大学においてスロベニア研究を推進し、両国間に双方向的な関係を築く重要なステップであると言える。

キーワード：スロベニアの言語と文化、プロジェクト、スロベニア人作家、日本

## **Introduction**

The first university program of Slovene Language and Culture in Japan (SLCJ) was started in 1997 at the Department of Area Studies of the University of Tokyo Komaba Campus as part of a two-year elective course introducing lesser-spoken European languages. From the very beginning, the program received the support of the Center for Slovene as a Second/Foreign Language at the Department of Slovene Studies at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Ljubljana, which provided course books and other materials, such as dictionaries and Slovene newspapers, for the program. In the two years eight students took part in the course, coming from such varied academic backgrounds as Slavic Studies, History, and Film Studies, which contributed to the dynamics of the class. The experience gained in the two years became an invaluable source of inspiration and ideas as we moved on to establish a more permanent program at the Department of Russian and East European Studies of the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies (TUFS) in 1999. The program was conceived as an elective course for junior and senior undergraduates of Slavonic and other languages. It was later expanded to include postgraduate students of TUFS as well as external students from the Tama Universities Consortium, such as Hitotsubashi and the International Christian University. The average number of students in a year stands at ten, which means that in ten years approximately one hundred students have participated in the program, although some students repeated the course. Two years ago, the course was re-introduced at the University of Tokyo Komaba Campus.

Classes are conducted entirely in the Slovene language using the communicative language teaching method, which is learner-centered and emphasizes communication in real-life situations. Besides offering tuition in the basics of the Slovene language and culture, the mandate of this program has been to introduce and promote elements of Slovene culture, such as literature and film, to a larger Japanese audience, including the general public. The present paper gives an overview of the projects initiated by the Slovene Language and Culture Program (SLCJ) and/or the Center for Slovene as a Second/Foreign Language (CSSFL) at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Ljubljana, which have been carried out in the last decade, with a focus on the visits by two Slovene authors and film directors Vinko Möderndorfer and Nejc Gazvoda.

## **Projects promoting Slovene language and culture in Japan**

Besides regular classes, SLCJ initiated and participated in several projects which promoted Slovene language, literature, film and studies in Japan.

The first such event was the Symposium of Slovene Language and Culture at the University of Tokyo Komaba Campus in 2000, on the occasion of the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of the Slovene poet France Prešeren. His life and work were presented by Jelisava Dobovšek Sethna and by the Balkan literature expert and translator Kozue Tanaka who had also translated Prešeren's poem *Magistrale* for the occasion. Other lectures by renowned scholars included presentations on the Slovene woman traveller Alma Karlin, who on her trip around the world visited Japan and lived here for a year and a half, by Frances Fister Stoga (University of Tokyo), Slovene linguistic minorities in Italy by Shinji Yamamoto (TUFS), the art movement NSK (Neue Slowenische Kunst) by Reverend Yasuhiko Oda, and a linguistic presentation on Slovene particles by Andrej Bekeš (University of Ljubljana). The Proceedings of the Symposium were published the following year with a foreword by Nobuhiro Shiba (University of Tokyo) (Yasuda 2001).

In 2004, SLCJ participated in the worldwide Translation Project of Modern Slovene Literature which was organized by CSSFL and involved translations of Slovene poetry, prose and essays into eighteen languages. Students at TUFS translated into Japanese three poems by a contemporary Slovene woman poet Erika Vovk, and Kumiko Kanazashi (TUFS) translated an essay by a leading Slovene essayist Vinko Ošlak. The translations were later included in the publication by CSSFL (Kranjc 2004).

In 2005, on the occasion of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Slovene film, The World Festival of Slovene Films was initiated and organized by CSSFL. Students watched a selection of five outstanding Slovene films, including *Ples v dežju* [Dance in the Rain] by Boštjan Hladnik and *Kajmak in marmelada* [Kajmak Cheese and Jam] by Branko Djurić. For the event, we prepared a Japanese translation of the brochure, which gives an historical overview of Slovene film making.

The following year, in 2006, SLCJ hosted the Slovene poet, writer and film director Vinko Möderndorfer as part of the World Festival of Slovene Literature, also organized by CSSFL. For the occasion, students translated some of the author's poetry and a short story.

The author's film *Predmestje* [Suburb] was shown twice, at the Tokyo University Komaba Campus and at TUFS. A more detailed account of Möderndorfer's visit will be given in the following chapter.

In 2008, Slovenia celebrated the 500th anniversary of the birth of Primož Trubar, the author of the first books printed in the Slovene language. In the first half of the same year, Slovenia also headed the Presidency of the EU. Combining both events, SLCJ initiated and organized, with the assistance of DESK, the Center for German and European Studies, the second symposium of Slovene Language and Culture at the University of Tokyo Komaba Campus. The program included lectures on: The life and work of Primož Trubar and his mentor Peter Bonomo by Shinji Yamamoto (TUFS); Slovenian Hidden Protestants and Japanese Hidden Christians by Tinka Delakorda (University of Tsukuba); The Formation of Slovene and Japanese Languages as National Languages by Luka Culiberg (University of Ljubljana); 10 Years of Slovene Language and Culture Program in Japan by Jelisa Dobovšek Sethna (TUFS); The Slovene Linguist Dr. Rajko Nahtigal in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of his death by Motoki Nomachi (University of Hokkaido); About World Haiku by Ban'ya Natsuishi<sup>1</sup>; The Role and Attitudes of Japan's Diplomatic Mission at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919: A Case of the Adriatic Question by Boštjan Bertalanč (University of Tokyo); and Slovenia in the EU: Budding of the New Europe as seen from the Department of Asian and African Studies at the University of Ljubljana by Andrej Bekeš (University of Ljubljana). The Proceedings of the symposium were published in the following year (Dobovšek-Sethna and Yamamoto 2009).

In 2008 and again in 2009, workshops were organized for the participants of the IFERI project at the University of Tsukuba who were going to take part in the graduate student forum at the University of Ljubljana. The workshop introduced some basic information about Slovenia, the country's symbols and lifestyle, history and language.

Another event that took place in 2008 was the World Festival of Slovene Literature on Film, held both at Komaba and TUFS. We watched three films based on literary works of contemporary Slovene writers. The films shown included Feri Lainšček's *Petelinji zajtrk* [Rooster's Breakfast], which has been the biggest box-office hit of all time in Slovenia, Drago Jančar's *Zvenenje v glavi* [Headnoise] and Miha Mazzini's *Kralj Ropotajočih duhov/Sladke sanje* [Sweet Dreams].

In June 2010, a month of Slovene film was organized at the Komaba Campus. Three films were selected for us by the film expert Kyoko Hirano (Temple University in Japan) which

represented films from different periods of Slovene film history. *Rezervni deli* [Spare Parts] (2002) by Damjan Kozole was introduced by Nobuhiro Shiba, *Splav Meduze* [Medusa's Raft] (1980) by Karpo Godina was presented by Andrej Bekeš and *Kekec* (1951) by Jože Gale was introduced by Jelisava Dobovšek Sethna.

In December 2010, SLCJ hosted the young and up-and-coming Slovene author and film director Nejc Gazvoda as part of the CSSFL project Festival of Contemporary Slovene Literature. A more detailed account of his visit will be given in the following chapter.

### **Vinko Möderndorfer in Tokyo**

Vinko Möderndorfer (b.1958), a poet, writer, playwright, director and essayist, came to Tokyo in November 2006 as part of the project World Festival of Slovene Literature. Möderndorfer majored in theatre directing at the Ljubljana Academy of Theatre, Radio, Film and Television and directing plays has been his main source of income. He has received numerous awards for his work of poetry and prose. In his creative endeavors he favors poetry above all other literary forms as it allows for a more subtle and individualistic expression, but believes that in this time of consumerism and money grabbing, poetry has to give way to a more prosaic deliverance of short stories (Zupan Sosič and Nidorfer Šiškovič 2007).

As part of the project, students at TUFS translated into Japanese the novelette *Skupni spomini* [Common Memories] from the collection *Druga soba* [The Other Room], as well as three poems *Kadar pomislim nate* [When I Think of You], *Ne vem, kako naj te ljubim bolj* [I Don't Know How to Love You More] and *Pred jutrom* [Before Morning].

On November 8, 2006, Möderndorfer presented his first feature film *Predmestje* [Suburbs] at the University of Tokyo Komaba Campus. The film had been shown at the Venice and Montreal Film Festivals the previous year and had been listed in the Top Ten First Time Films of 2005 in *Variety* magazine. Before the screening, the author gave a short introduction on the making and the theme of the film. Although the theme deals with a universal hatred towards foreigners, it is linked to the specific situation after the disintegration of the SFR Yugoslavia. The author explained that the film was rough and naturalistic in its presentation and as such had created strong, diametrical reactions from the audience around the world. The film was well received in France, Spain and the USA, while it did not receive favorable reviews in Germany and the UK.

The story in the film reveals the emptiness of life in suburbia and the xenophobic hatred directed at people who are different. The author passionately believes that xenophobia presents a great danger for Europe and the world as a whole. As he was unraveling his thoughts to the audience through a skillful interpretation by Chikako Shigemori Bučar, Möderndorfer got overexcited, as he later described in his blog:

With the interpreter Chikako we agreed at the beginning that I was going to talk in short sentences so as to make her job easier. However I soon got carried away and started to speak faster and faster... so that the interpreter, in spite of her fluent translation, could not keep pace with me. She gave me a severe look and I slowed down, but not for long. The students were looking at me with such great interest and after each expressed thought they were nodding their heads in kindness, which made me feel extremely important and so I immediately forgot that they actually could not understand me without interpretation.

The audience watched the film with great interest and at the end asked several pertinent questions to the author. He goes on to explain further:

The Japanese students watched the film carefully. After the screening, questions came flooding in. Actually these were not really questions but rather statements and analyses of the film. I was surprised at the maturity of these young students who understood the film as a replica of actual events in the world, which is day by day becoming more intolerant, nationalistic and hateful... They wanted to know everything. How the film was shot, how certain scenes were executed, etc. They remembered everything. They asked me about details for which I was sure they would not remember. They saw everything and more. I realized that Japanese people experience images differently from us. Images mean content to them. Also, they experience time differently. Time does not run on empty. It always has both content and message. The scenes that Europeans understand as a transition to a verbalized thought have additional meaning to the Japanese. For them, images are more powerful than dialog. Words are superficial while images have a deeper meaning.

(All citations are from Möderndorfer 2006, translated into English by the author of this paper.)

Möderndorfer was very pleased with the response of the audience and with Japanese students in particular who he sees as full of “overflowing knowledge” and interested in everything. Clearly, the experience of watching the film *Suburbs* at the University of Tokyo was invaluable to both the students and the author.

On November 9, Vinko Möderndorfer visited TUFs where the Program of Slovene Language and Culture was in its seventh year of running. He first attended a regular class where the students introduced themselves and then asked the author several questions that they had prepared. This led to an interesting discussion about Slovene literature, personal creative endeavors, and the link with literary and art movements in other Slavonic cultures whose languages the students were studying. We learnt, among other things, that Möderndorfer had worked together with the renowned Polish film director Andrzej Wajda and had directed plays by the future Czech president Vaclav Havel during the time he was a political prisoner. In the second part of the class, the author read his novelette *Skupni spomini* [Common Memories] from the collection *Druga soba* [The Other Room], which was followed by a reading by Ken Senda (a student) of his translation of the story into Japanese. The translation was well received by the students and the author, who did not understand Japanese, but sensed that “a lot of love and effort was put into it and should therefore be good” (Zupan Sosič 2007). The author was particularly interested in the translation of certain descriptions he gave special importance to in the story. Then we listened to the chanson renditions of Möderndorfer’s poems which students had translated into Japanese during regular class. After each song, the students read their translations of the poem while the author added some background information about the poem. The atmosphere in the classroom was very pleasant, relaxed and inspiring.

In the evening, we had another screening of the film *Predmestje* with the students, professors and the general public. The author forewarned the audience that, in contrast to the messages of love in the story and the poems students read in class, the contents of the film dealt with destructive feelings of hatred towards people who are different from us. He again expressed his concern that xenophobia is a big threat to the unity of Europe and the world in general.

Besides his lectures at the universities, Möderndorfer visited certain cultural sites in Tokyo, such as Meiji Jingu, Asakusa Kaminari Mon, the National Museum and the Edo Museum. He also attended a Kabuki performance at the Kabuki-za, and met with the owner of the Iwanami Hall cinema with whom he discussed the possibilities of having his, as well as other Slovene films, shown in Japan.

The visit by Vinko Möderndorfer at the University of Tokyo and TUFS proved to be an unqualified success. The students worked on the translations, thus improving their knowledge of the Slovene language, while meeting with the author offered a first-hand insight into his creative endeavors. Through discussions with the author they had a great opportunity to put into practice their knowledge of Slovene and at the same time gain new information about current and past literary trends in Slovenia. The screening of the film *Predmestje* to the students and general public offered an opportunity to acquaint the Japanese with idiosyncrasies of Slovene society and with certain issues Slovenes had to grapple with in the newly established independent state.

For the author himself the experience was invaluable. Besides meeting the students who had translated his works into Japanese and sharing his experiences and knowledge with them, he could also come into contact with and create first-hand impressions of a new and distant country, which Japan is for most Slovenes.

His comments on Kabuki as a seasoned director of Western theater could be of interest to a professional thespian:

In a Kabuki theater everything is “artificial”. The actors speak in a singing voice. Their movements are stylized and pronounced. The actor’s mimicry is also accented. The Japanese do not believe in so-called “natural acting”. For an actor to appear natural on the stage is not sufficient. The art is “artificial” and only as such can it be complete.

He comments favorably on Tokyo city life:

In big cities like New York, people are afraid of each other... Fear rules in big cities but not in Tokyo. You feel at home in Tokyo. Although the Japanese are rather introvert (like the Slovenes), the atmosphere is pleasant. The city itself does not look any different from other world cities, but enjoys a completely different atmosphere... People are patient. If you ask them something, they respond with kindness and try their best to help you.



Finally, his observations on Japanese art reveal an acute eye for other forms of artistic expressions which he believes explain and reflect a society at large:

Japanese art is the art of movement. As if artists were trying to capture and document movement. Even the technique of painting in one uninterrupted line is basically that. Capture the movement, the dynamics! Sculptures follow that trend as well. Wooden figures of gods are set in motion. Raised hands, twisted facial expressions, multiple arms, fighting postures or hands raised in a victorious dance. Everything is in motion. Even seemingly tranquil figures of the sitting Buddha radiate powerful inner movement. Japanese culture is in a state of perpetual motion. After visiting the museum I can understand more clearly why Tokyo is a new city and why there is so much dynamism in it.”

(All citations are from Möderndorfer 2006, translated into English by the author of this paper.)

### **Nejc Gazvoda in Tokyo**

Four years later, in 2010, the Slovene language and culture program at TUFs hosted another Slovene literary personality, this time a young but up-and-coming writer and film director Nejc Gazvoda (b.1985). In spite of his young age, at twenty five Gazvoda boasts several prominent literary awards and has just completed his first feature film. His visit was part of the CSSFL World Festival of Modern Slovene Literature which also prepared and published an anthology of selected texts for this event (see Zupan Sosič, Nidorfer Šiškovič and Huber 2010). The anthology comprises sixty six texts, including poems, prose, dramatic texts and youth literature, created in the last three decades between 1980 and 2010. The anthology was used as the basis for activities and events at over fifty universities worldwide which have established programs of Slovene studies<sup>2</sup>.

Considering the level of Slovene of the students at the universities in Tokyo (mainly beginners and a few repeaters with a more advanced knowledge of the language), and a time limit of six months, we decided to work on Gazvoda’s short story *Čas* [Time] from his collection *Fasunga* [Groceries] which is written in an easy-to-understand style and deals with a theme that is close to young people. It is the story of a university student who

is too indecisive to make a pass at a girl at a bus stop after imagining going through a whole life cycle with her. The story is a concise account of a typical life of a Slovene couple from their dating, marriage, birth of children, work, retirement and death.

In preparation for the author's visit, the students at both the University of Tokyo and TUFS read the story in the original and translated certain parts of it. They also prepared a short self-introduction and several questions for the author in Slovene. Gazvoda visited TUFS on December 2, 2010 where SLCJ organized two events. He first visited a regular class, where students introduced themselves and then invited the guest to talk about himself and his work. After an animated and relaxed exchange of personal information, we moved on to the reading of the story *Čas* both in the original and in the Japanese translation. Using Microsoft Word software, we also created word clouds which allowed us to focus on certain words and phrases in the story, such as *strah* [fear] *strah me je* [I am afraid of], *smeh*, *nasmehnit* [smile], etc. These words were then used for further linguistic practice and exchange of ideas. The students really enjoyed the direct interaction with the young author and loved his story in which they could find a lot of similarities with their own lives and ways of thinking. Gazvoda found the students intelligent, easy to teach and enthusiastic about learning the Slovene language, as well as a lot of fun to be with. He was particularly interested in how words and phrases from his story could be used to learn and practice the Slovene language in a classroom situation, at the same time allowing for students' individual expression.

In the evening, we organized a screening of the film *Osebna prtljaga* [Personal Baggage], for which Gazvoda co-wrote the script. The event was open to the general public and some thirty people gathered in the big lecture hall of TUFS. They included present and former students of Slovene, professors and other academics interested in Slovene Studies, a senior program director from the NHK national TV station, as well as the ambassador of the Republic of Slovenia in Japan. At the beginning, the author introduced the theme of the film and explained historical events the story in the film alludes to. The film is a story of a modern Slovene family; the father is a plastic surgeon, the mother a successful businesswoman, indulgent and pampering towards her only son and disapproving of his girlfriend. The masterfully portrayed characters reveal the inexorable issues, or baggage, they bring with them, and ultimately their own baggage becomes a ruinous physical burden. "Surrounding the entire film is the remote yet haunting presence of the Slovenian forests, which have been slowly yielding up their own gruesome historical baggage, a subtext that director Janez Lapajne uses to excruciatingly ironic effect" (Metcalf 2010)

The audience watched the film subtitled in English with great interest. After the screening, they were invited to offer their comments and ask questions to Gazvoda who responded with great authority and aplomb while offering more insights into the story and the making of the film. The audience were particularly interested in the historical fact of the killings of anti-communists at the end of WWII that the film claimed to be one of the worst massacres in modern European history<sup>3</sup>, and the role that choir music played in the film. The latter reflects the Slovene people's affinity to group singing as a traditional form of social interaction and entertainment. Gazvoda explained that the choir singing in the depth of the woods also has the symbolic meaning of conscience weighing on the film characters after having committed their hideous act, as well as of the collective conscience of the Slovene nation which is still struggling to come to terms with this dark part of its history.

Besides the lectures at the university, Gazvoda had time to explore the haunts of young people in Tokyo, such as the electric city and *otaku* mecca of Akihabara, the animation film studio Ghibli, the shopping and nightlife centres of Shibuya and Roppongi, as well as the traditional tourist spots of Asakusa, Ueno and the Imperial Palace. He found the Japanese capital to be an "incredible mixture of tradition and pop electronic frenzy" which he enjoyed tremendously. He is hoping to return to Japan in the near future and carry out further research among young people in order to write a novel in which Slovene and Japanese characters would be brought together. Let's watch this space.

## **Conclusion**

The program of Slovene language and culture at the University of Tokyo and TUFS has been designed to impart basic knowledge of Slovene language and culture to Japanese university students, which some of them later expand on and nurture further, thus contributing to a better understanding between Japan and Slovenia. Special projects, such as symposia, world festivals of Slovene literature and film, and translation workshops, have been an integral part of the program and a great motivation for Japanese students to further explore Slovenia and its cultural heritage. In addition, some of these events were open to the general public who could thus acquaint themselves with a country which is often bypassed in Japan by the main currents of the media, education and business.

The visits by the two Slovenian authors Vinko Möderndorfer in 2006 and Nejc Gazvoda in 2010 proved to be an unqualified success. Students were greatly encouraged and inspired by their guests who were full of admiration for the students' enthusiasm and determination

to learn the Slovene language. For the authors, the visits provided a unique insight into the life and traditions of their host country. Möderndorfer describes his impressions in detail in his blog, where he discusses Japanese art, the kabuki theater, the Tokyo life style, as well as Japanese university students and other people he came in contact with. For the young Gazvoda, on the other hand, this was clearly just the first of many visits he hopes to make to study and explore the trials and tribulations of Japanese youth who he wants to make the subject matter of his next novel. Consequently, the authors become a part of the bridge that is being built between the two countries.

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- 1 The World Haiku movement was started in the town of Tolmin, Slovenia, in 2000. Ban'ya Natsuishi is one of the founding members.
  - 2 There are Slovene lectureships for language, literature and culture at 54 universities around the world with more than 1,700 students enrolled. At 23 universities in Europe students can obtain a degree in Slovene and continue their study of Slovene at postgraduate level (Slovene at Foreign Universities).
  - 3 The largest spate of killings of anti-communist Home Guards, who collaborated with the German occupant, took place immediately after the war in the summer of 1945. The research by The Institute of Contemporary History puts the number of executed Home Guards at around 12,000. The event fatally divided the Slovenian people and resulted in the immigration of some 15,000 civilians from Slovenia to North and South America and Australia (Luthar 2008: 448-9).

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