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A black and white promotional poster for the movie 'Jason Bourne'. Matt Damon is the central figure, wearing a black t-shirt and holding a handgun in his left hand. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting his face and the texture of his shirt. The background is dark and textured.

M A T T
D A M O N
J E
J A S O N
B O U R N E

LÉTO
2016

The English version of the *Film a doba* quarterly journal changed its form and graphic layout in 2016 and is being prepared by new writers, but the meaning behind the Special English Issue remains unchanged – to bring to our international readers an annual summary of information about what is happening in Czech cinema and to present its current critical evaluation. The extensive opening article, “From Forest to Forest, Escape and Loneliness”, is an analysis of Czech films made in 2015 by one of the leading Czech critics and teachers Jaromír Blažejovský, wherein the author opines that Czech film critics’ long wait for a new era is starting to bear fruit. The reasons for this belief are several promising debuts presented in various sections of last year’s 50th Karlovy Vary International Film Festival. It is very probable that this ascending trend in Czech cinema will be confirmed by this year’s 51st edition of the Czech Republic’s biggest international film festival, the results of which we will inform you about in our next issue. What readers will already find in the present issue are reviews of several Czech films from the most recent period, which were given a chance to rate their merits against titles in domestic distribution as well as those in international festivals. These include, above all, Tomáš Weinreb’s and Petr Kazda’s debut *I, Olga Hepnarová* which was screened to acclaim at this year’s Berlinale in its Panorama section, while Petr Oukropec’s *In Your Dreams* was similarly successful in the Generation section. Readers will surely find an interesting complement in an interview with the latter filmmaker, which is also included in the present issue. *Family Film*, by young Slovenian director Olmo Omerzu, even managed to collect a prize in Tokyo, while Helena Třeštková’s documentary *Doomed Beauty*, which follows

the tragic fortunes of a Czech star actress of the 1940s who compromised herself through a relationship with a high-ranking Nazi politician, has already collected awards at a number of European festivals. 2015’s most successful film on the domestic scene was *The Snake Brothers*, which won six of the highest Czech awards for filmmaking, the Czech Lion Awards. It won not only in the category of best Czech film, but its director Jan Prušinovský also won the award for best director. Included in this issue is an interview with this young Czech filmmaker who has already aroused interest with his previous films.

While the Czech new wave of the 21st century continues to take its first steps, one of the major figures of the 1960s Czech New Wave, Jan Němec, passed away at the age of seventy-nine in March 2016. This most active and original of Czech filmmakers luckily managed to leave behind his last film, *The Wolf from Royal Vineyard Street*, whose the last few yards of footage was completed by his close co-worker and friends, and which will be presented in the competition section of the upcoming 51st Karlovy Vary IFF (1–9 July, 2016). Jan Němec’s opinions on film and his own work were already included in last year’s Special English Issue, which contained an extensive excerpt from the first part of Jan Bernard’s book *Jan Němec: Enfant Terrible of the Czech New Wave*. A similar excerpt, this time from the second part of this massive book, concludes the present issue. I can recommend it as an educational yet also extraordinarily captivating read.

✉ Eva Zaoralová

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MINISTERSTVO
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Schmitke (dir. Štěpán Altrichter, 2014)

From Forest to Forest, Escape and Loneliness

Jaromír Blažejovský

Czech films failing to find a way out of their own confinement

The state of Czech cinema is reminiscent of anecdotes involving good news and bad news. Last year, thirteen million people bought a cinema ticket, the highest number for the last five years. The share of domestic films in the total nevertheless sunk from twenty-three percent in 2013 to seventeen percent last year. In the top fifty box office titles, there are fourteen Czech films. The most successful of these is *Life is Life* (*Život je život*, d. Martin Cieslar) which nevertheless only reached number twelve. There were a dozen genre films made. The majority of them bombed at the box office. The State Cinematography Fund provided one hundred and twenty million CZK for film production in 2014. The largest amount was granted to the controversial project *Devil's Mistress* (*Lída Baarová*, d. Filip Renč), which resulted in a clash of opinions on the Fund's board. There were around ten ambitious debuts. Cinemas however refused to play many of them, and subsequently hardly anyone actually saw them. The good news is that at least the critics if not the audiences had something to think about.

The practice of distribution does not favor domestic production. Unless the film is a potential hit that can be played in multiplexes or fit within the art cinema mainstream, exposure is usually dismal; it is only shown by daring cinema owners in smaller towns who do not belong to any of the major chains. As an example let us take Jakub Šmíd's debut *Laputa*: a relationship drama with the frequently cast and perhaps even popular Tereza Voříšková had only the very lowest number of screenings even though it did not lack media support.

Czech cinema is in a state like light ripples on the surface which have so far failed to reach the moviegoer shore. Critics have been on the lookout for a new wave for decades.

It has been a very long time since the new wave seemed as close as at last year's Karlovy Vary International Film Festival, where its various sections included several domestic debuts.

Waiting for the wave

The most accessible among these debuts appeared to be Slávek Horák's *Home Care* (*Domácí péče*, 2015). The story of a home care nurse trying to cope with a serious illness offers a traditional kind-hearted combination of moving moments, humor, sadness, and the so-called human touch, which used to be popular with domestic audiences. The main role of the home care nurse Vlasta is played by Alena Mihulová, whom moviegoers remember as the rookie nurse from Karel Kachyňa's feel good comedy *Nurses* (*Sestřičky*, 1983, two million tickets sold); the role of the good-natured if boorish husband is played by the popular Bolek Polívka. The story takes place in the Moravian countryside, complete with slivovitz, cimbalom music, vineyards, and fashionable trends of alternative medicine. The Karlovy Vary IFF competition made it look like *Home Care* signaled a return of the tasteful mainstream and that this bittersweet comedy could not miss with audiences of all generations. The festival palace ovations nevertheless failed to translate to regular movie theaters. The film premiered in the middle of a hot July and competed against last year's great blockbuster, the American computer animated production *Minions* (d. Kyle Balda and Pierre Coffin, 2015); it ended up with less than one hundred thousand tickets sold.

America (*Amerika*, 2015) is a personal work, a seventy minute essay on the Czech tramping movement. The filmmaker Jan Foukal treks through a forest, from cabin to cabin and settlement to settlement, with a young Canadian of Czech origin, Bára, playing guitar and singing his songs in



Home Care (dir. Slavek Horák, 2015)

English for her by a campfire. Czechs are presented as eccentric wood-dwelling folk who shy away from reality in favor of an alternative environment: they dress up as cowboys, gather by campfires, observe what they believe to be frontiersman rituals and believe that in the process, they gain freedom. Czech dreams of the Wild West are nevertheless something the film touches on only lightly; a more immediate topic is that of a friendship between a man and a woman soaked in the smell of resin and sweaty shirts.

In his debut *Schmitke* (a German co-production), Štěpán Altrichter used a Czech forest as a backdrop for a variation on an archetypal story of the type that Franz Kafka could tell best. A stranger arrives in a strange, hushed world. In Kafka's *The Castle*, the outsider was a land surveyor; in this case he is a wind turbine engineer. The film makes effective use of how photogenic the monstrous white devices are, as well as of the landscapes of Krušné hory. In order to see in it a substantial new philosophical testimony of the backwardness and unapproachability of Eastern Europe, as the critic Kamil Fila opined, *Schmitke* would appear to be a far too artificial, anachronistic construct. At one time, similarly cryptic parables used to appear from Krušné hory to the Caucasus, and it will be a long time before someone is able to top Pavel Juráček's *Case for a Rookie Hangman* (*Případ pro začínajícího kata*, 1969).

Even less connection to the real world can be found in Tomasz Mielnik's railroad movie *Journey to Rome* (*Cesta do Říma*, 2015), a string of neat études and minor gems of spiritual wisdom, which could have been both shorter and longer. The monotonous rhythm makes it hard for the spectator to estimate how much longer it will take for the film to end.

Both of these attempts are surpassed by Andy Fehu's *The Greedy Tiffany* (*Nenasytá Tiffany*, 2015) which builds on the by now fairly tired genre of found footage horror movies. Fehu nevertheless managed to exploit it in such a smart and entertaining way that the result ended up being a remarkable social anecdote filled with the everyday reality of down-and-out people. Beside inspirations taken from surrealism and the work of Jan Švankmajer, the film made successful use of nearly neorealist methods. Thus the most fantastic work of the year paradoxically came up with a believable reflection of the present.

The modest, even if greedy, Tiffany ended up making a better impression than the ambitious horror *The Noonday Witch* (*Polednice*, 2016) created by the debuting filmmaker Jiří Sadek over the hot summer of 2015. Michal Samir's screenplay is based on the ballad of the same name

by the romantic poet Karel Jaromír Erben, whose 1853 collection *A Bouquet* (*Kytice*) is required reading in Czech schools, but also a classic of literary horror. *The Noonday Witch* embodies the hopes and weaknesses of young Czech film: a promising idea, an excellent choice of actors, breathtaking landscape compositions by the cinematographer Alexander Škabraha, but also a barely existing relation to reality, implausible psychology, and an inability to tell a story in a way that has any logic, remains credible, and yet does not become boring. The creators lost control of their own game with gradual reveals of information, could not work well with silence and rhythm, and tried to compensate for the deficit of suspense with disturbing noises and the far too thunderous music of Ben Corrigan.

After the films *Touchless* (*Bez doteku*, d. Matěj Chlupáček, 2013) and *Hany* (d. Michal Samir, 2014), *The Noonday Witch* is the third opus from the Barletta production company established by Matěj Chlupáček and Michal Samir, hence we already know the associations that come with this creative team: powerful imagination, familiarity with international productions including popular genre films, a sense for defamiliarization, complex narration, solid craft, but also short-lived, episodic thinking, focused on the immediate effect combined with a weaker grasp on more complex epic wholes, in the sense of both thought and technique, as well as in its relation to the social context.

The names of modern masters (Michelangelo Antonioni, Robert Bresson, Carl Theodor Dreyer, et al.) were frequently mentioned in relation to Vít Zapletal's debut *Dust of the Ground* (*Prach*, 2015). The plot is simple, with a general human appeal: an older man falls into a coma, his family arrives at his sickbed. In its understanding of time as waiting for a crucial event, *Dust of the Ground* intentionally closes on the spiritual film genre and the transcendent style. It nevertheless does not make the impression of a portrait of real people but rather of its author's internal dialog, which he separated into several voices speaking in his head. The question remains whether Vít Zapletal had enough experience at the age of twenty-eight to handle a multi-generational family drama. Let us remember that Yausjiro Ozu made his *Tokyo Story* (*Tōkyō monogatari*, 1953) at the age of fifty-three.

Jan Těšitel's debut *David* (2015) does have believable life experience behind it. We follow the journey of an autistic young man who leaves home and wanders around a metropolis until he is rescued. Its creator managed to transfer to the audience feelings of compassion and fear for the defenseless, vulnerable soul, as well as relief felt once the protagon-



Family Film (dir. Olmo Omerzu, 2015)

nist is found, with the remaining characters finding their own souls in the process. Apart from the up-and-coming Patrik Holubář, Těšitel opted for a cast of seasoned professionals, with Igor Bareš in the role of a fast food restaurant manager giving a forceful performance that makes him stand out from the rest of the film.

Schmitke, *America*, *Dust of the Ground* and *David* are introverted, minimalist works which attempt to communicate through pauses and silence. In contrast, Jakub Šmíd's *Laputa* (2015) involves a lot of talking. It follows up on a series of purported generational testimonies (Matěj Chupáček's *Touchless*, Michal Samir's *Hany*) which are marked by a lack of effort in reflecting the young generation of the concrete, historical, present day period, but rather the essence of youth as such. We follow the bartender Johanka through a network of relationships of the sort young women have always had. Johanka is in love with a young man, dates another regular customer, has casual sex with yet another slacker, and maintains a friendship with an older married man. She is however no femme fatale, does not provoke men or take advantage of them and cannot even be seen as a pleasant companion. All the bohemians mentioned above look as if they have not left the implausibly smoky pub since the 1970s. The only contemporary element about the story is perhaps the fact that the protagonist does not go through her questioning period at the age of seventeen but rather at twenty-five, and that she can own a business.

We have already written several times about the inability of young Czech filmmakers to name their works. They label the results of their efforts with unattractive single-word titles: *Dvojka* (*Twosome*), *Hany*, *Pouta* (*Walking Too Fast*), *Místa* (*Places*), *David*, *Prach* (*Dust of the Ground*), *Schmitke*, *Amerika*, etc. This strikes me as laziness or even a form of disrespect for the audience. It is bizarre to learn that the unimaginative creators are in fact willing to fight producers and distributors precisely to have their way when it comes to these nondescript names. The title that aroused most doubt was actually *Family Film* (*Rodinný film*, 2015), which is not the worst of the lot, although it is certainly not good, either. It was shot as the second feature film of the Slovenian FAMU graduate Olmo Omerzu, whose feature debut *A Night Too Young* (*Přiliš mladá noc*, 2013) broke through to international film festivals, received favorable reviews, but had next to no screenings in Czech movie theaters.



Amerika (dir. Jan Foukal, 2015)

The premiere of *Family Film* (Czech Republic – Germany – Slovenia – France – Slovakia) was postponed several times and the film was eventually put into distribution only in February 2016, when it had already been shown at the competitions in San Sebastian and received awards in Tokyo and Cottbus. It is the work of a very strong, perhaps even forceful, gesture on the part of its creator. Lukáš Milota's cinematography has unpleasantly grayish blue tones, which holds not only for Prague in winter and the confined apartment, but also for scenes from the Pacific Islands. This can be explained by the fact that the protagonist of all the scenes is a dog and scientists believe dogs to be colorblind. The characters are unlikable and hard to read. This allows the creator to manipulate the feelings of the audience in a sophisticated manner: by telling the story in short segments and by withholding certain information, he prevents us from identifying with one of the characters and transfers the emotions to the dog. In this way, he brings to life the pun of dog spelling god when read backwards. Human life in *Family Film* appears to be a chain of accidents and transgressions in which we are in the hands of god, that is to say, the hands of the dog: the border collie named Otto disappears when a relationship crisis looms on the horizon and reappears once the crisis is over in order to bring the family back together. The uncertainty felt by the audience is heightened by the film's unclear genre placement: we burst into laughter at scenes taking place in front of the operating room.

Watching *Family Film* is not a pleasant experience. To be completely honest, I do not believe a single bark it has to say, but its scenes are impossible to forget. Olmo Omerzu did not actually venture that far from the Czech film mainstream as it is represented for instance by the more recent and ambitious works of Petr Jarchovský and Jan Hřebejk (*Kawasaki's Rose*, *Innocence*, *Honeymoon*). We are once again faced with the anatomy of the upper middle class with skeletons in their closets, and surprising plot twists. In *Family Film* however, we are to an even greater degree subject to what the characters, and thus we, are intended to go through by the author. Or god. Or a dog. It is not a psychological or a sociological study; the categories of representation, typicality, or probability play no role here. The protagonist is the creator Olmo Omerzu himself, his story, and his courage to tell it in a way that contradicts moviegoer expectations. *Family Film* failed to win over audiences beyond the art film niche.

What is typical for the contemporary ripples spreading through Czech cinema? The up-and-coming authors act in a thoughtful manner: their talent is nevertheless learned rather than intuitive. They do not know a lot about the lives of their fellow citizens, but they did read the books and know what a contemporary festival film is supposed to be like. They are introverted, engulfed in their own visions. They do not give much thought to audiences, they do not care or even look down on screenings in movie theaters. The two-year-old collective project *Gottland* (d. Viera Čákanyová / Petr Hátle / Rozálie Kohoutová / Lukáš Kokeš / Klára Tasovská, 2014) was even self-prohibited from being screened in movie theaters. They underestimate marketing. These shortcomings should be balanced out by the producers, but they often – with all due respect to their courage, energy, and international savvy – belong to the same group in terms of age and opinions, even if they are not creators themselves. We experience a different situation than the one we remember from when the previous “waves” broke in the 1990s, when the role of patron to the beginning filmmakers was played by Czech Television's seasoned program director Čestmír Kopecký.

The drying swamp of entertainment

The contemporary ripples proved a good match for Kopecký's old discovery, Petr Zelenka, who after seven years filled with theater and television work made the feature comedy *Lost in Munich* (*Ztraceni v Mnichově*, 2015), a work of similarly self-assured authorial gesture and ego. It is based on an essayistic study by the historian Jan Tesař, *Mnichovský komplex* (*The Munich Complex*), written at the end of the

1980s. The core of the book is formed by the idea that the Munich Agreement of 1938, with participation from allied France, meant that the ceding of Czech lands to Nazi Germany was not a Czech defeat but rather a masterful diplomatic move by the president Edvard Beneš, who was in this manner able to avoid direct confrontation which our country was not prepared for and Czechoslovakia could thus ultimately take its place in the victors' camp when the war was over. The film was acclaimed by critics who liked the form of movie within a movie, wherein we at first watch a comedy about a parrot to later find out in the second part how this first, bad, unfinished film was made.

The work discusses the purported Czech distrust of the French, and it is difficult to shake the suspicion that Zelenka uses this to compensate for his disappointment at having none of his works accepted by the Cannes Film Festival so far. He nevertheless conceived of his opus as an invitation to a broad discussion on national complexes; on one occasion the opinions of Jan Tesař are presented directly to the audience, which is a bold move. In the end, no nationwide discussion occurred. The long-awaited new film sold only around thirty thousand tickets, that is to say, one seventh of the number achieved by Zelenka's comedy *Wrong Side Up (Příběhy obyčejného šílenství, 2005)* ten years ago. This is a symptom of the crisis of trust which several years ago took hold of not only the film business but rather Czech society as a whole. The public ceased to believe that members of the elite – journalists and politicians, but also intellectuals and artists – have anything reasonable to say to them.

In times of distrust, the criminal genre may prosper, provided that it plays to a widespread belief that society is wicked and corrupt, and that it takes inspiration from cases made famous by the media. *The Velvet Murderers (Sametoví vrazi, 2005)* with brilliant direction by Jiří Svoboda did not enjoy much of a massive success yet, but Petr Jakl's *Kajíněk (2010)* was a huge summer hit and Petr Nikolaev's *The Godfather's Story (Příběh kmotra, 2013)* had people flooding into movie theaters hoping to learn something substantial about the connection between politics and organized crime. Jan Pachl's duology *Gangster Ka (2015)* and *Gangster Ka: African (Gangster Ka: Afričan, 2015)*, shot in a manner similar to *The Godfather's Story*, based on the books by investigative journalist Jaroslav Kmenta, is the most sophisticated of these films: it has interesting actors, a complex narrative structure, and attractive locations. Its inspiration by the real case of international adventurer Radovan Krejčíř is both its strength and its weakness: most people know who Krejčíř is, but few admire him. The criminal intrigue is moreover so complex that the spectator is barely able to follow it; a lot of the information is hastily provided by one of the characters, who take turns in the role of narrator.

There are one third less young moviegoers in the Czech Republic than there were twenty years ago. This is why filmmakers strive to connect with older audiences. Relationship comedies about the lives of men and women going through pre-retirement age crises are usually successful, the way they are made by Marie Poledňáková (*You Kiss Like a God/Libáš jako Bůh, 2009*; *You Kiss Like the Devil/Libáš jako ďábel, 2012*) and her follower Jiří Vejdělek (*Women in Temptation/Ženy v pokušení, 2010*; *Men in Hope/Muži v naději, 2011*). This trend is mocked by the directorial debut of actor Vojtěch Kotek, *Fifty (Padesátka, 2015)*, based on the play by Petr Kolečko. The film's protagonist is a young man whose obsessive passion is to please married women aged fifty and above, ideally in a snow-covered forest and during a cross-country skiing competition. Kolečko and Kotek brought some fresh mountain wind into the settled patterns of Czech comedies that take place in kitchens and living rooms, and their cynical winter comedy about a serial lady-killer became the most successful domestic premiere of 2015.

It nevertheless premiered on Christmas Eve and therefore could not endanger the statistical victory of screenwriter Martin Horský and director Milan Cieslar's family comedy with the empty title *Life is Life (Život je život, 2015)*, proba-



The Greedy Tiffany (dir. Andy Fehu, 2015)

bly intended as a reference to the previous film by the same creators, 2012's *Love is Love (Láska je láska)*. The film injects itself with attractions in the most primitive manner: the settled policeman and family man (Ondřej Vetchý) reads a book and imagines himself in the shoes of James Bond. This allows the creators to feature exotic locations, action sequences and seductive women.

How this humorless little thing could attract ten times as many moviegoers as the similarly desperate *Celebrity Ltd. (Celebrity s.r.o., 2015)* is beyond comprehension. The latter film was directed by Miloslav Šmídmajer based on a comedic play by Antonín Procházka. The screenplay was co-written by the starring actor, the omnipresent Jiří Mádrl. Since the film tries to pass for a satire of the media industry, and takes place during shooting of an endless daytime TV serial, it is able to present its sponsors' products as products placed in the fictional TV show.

The fifth film in the *Kameňák* series, based on anecdotes turned into movies, was handled by František A. Brabec, who might not be an excellent director but is in fact a good cinematographer. This makes his *Christmas Kameňák (Vánoční Kameňák, 2015)* more pleasant to watch than its predecessor, *Kameňák 4 (2013)*. *Christmas Kameňák* was best enjoyed by people who went to the movies freshly glowing from Christmas punch, because apart from the canned sitcom laughter it has nothing funny to offer at all, with the possible exception of an old Jaroslav Hutka song "Ježíšek", presented here in a rock arrangement. *Christmas Kameňák* also attempted to satirize the president of the Czech Republic, not an easy task given that Miloš Zeman is a comedian himself and the creators failed to move beyond the level of his own jokes.

Juraj Šajmovič's comedy about inter-generational tension, *Victoria Angel (Andlěk na nervy, 2015)*, proved insufferable because its protagonist, the fourteen-year-old fashion blogger Viktorka, is intentionally and terribly obnoxious for the majority of film. The movie leads toward a depiction of a harmonic village the way it can only be imagined by filmmakers completely detached from actual life.

The screenwriter Marek Epstein and director Tomáš Mašín suffered a bad failure with their period comedy *Wilson City (Wilsonov, 2015)* based on the Slovak author Michal Hvorecký's suspenseful novella. Their intention was to produce a fabulous period piece in the vein of *Dinner for Adele (Adéla ještě nevečeřela, 1977)*, but they bit off more



Gangster Ka African (dir. Jan Pachl, 2015)

than they could chew when trying to deal with Slovak-Jewish-Hungarian-Czech relations. *Wilson City* is stiff rather than funny due to the way everyone in it tries so hard for humor and black comedy.

The Czech market consumes a lot of classic fairy tale films; a new one is ordered each year not only by the public broadcaster Czech Television (which actually premieres several such titles each Christmas) but also by the commercial stations Nova and Prima. Two new films from last season attempted to liven up the genre with elements of slapstick and caricature. Alice Nellis directed *Seven Ravens (Sedměrkavců, 2015)* based on her own screenplay. It has a dark forest, some enchanting scenery, a rapid pace, rough humor, a good witch played by Zuzana Bydžovská, and a bad queen played by Sabina Remundová. For the protagonist role of adolescent Bohdanka, who has to free her brothers from the curse that turned them into birds without speaking a single word, the director made the risky decision of casting Martha Issová “against type”, since she is best known for playing obnoxious, selfish young women, as well as from Petr Zelinka’s offensive anti-socialist campaign spot *Přemluv bábu!* (based on Sarah Silverman’s video *The Great Schlep, 2010*). This time, Alice Nellis had her play the role of a young girl with elements of pantomime and clown performance. Martha Issová was cast at the same age at which Gulietta Masina played Gelsomina in Fellini’s *The Road (La strada, 1954)*. However, the grandparents and their grandchildren who filled sold out theaters the year before to see Jan Svěrák’s *Three Brothers (Tři bratři, 2014)* failed to show up for *Seven Ravens*. Close to one hundred thousand tickets sold is a good box office result for a social drama like *The Snake Brothers (Kobry a užovky, 2015)*, but hardly for a fairy tale.

The perfect craft of Alice Nellis’s film was eventually undeservedly overtaken at the box office by the semi-amateur *Crazy Kingdom (Řachanda, 2016)* made by Marta Ferencová from a screenplay by Daniel Minařovský: a morally blurry, bumbling story of two thieves and a princess reformed by their stay in an enchanted forest. In place of functional slapstick elements it has only silly grimaces: the creators were left so exhausted by the creation of their fictional world with its dryads, trolls, and other forest creatures that they lost any control they ever may have had over the characters and narration.

A Czech constant is persistent nostalgia for favorite films from the communist era. *The Musical, or the Ways to Happiness (Muzikál aneb Cesty ke štěstí, 2016)*, directed by Slobodanka Radun, recycles the immortal “first Czech film musical” *Hop Pickers (Starci na chmelu, 1964)* in the form of a backstage musical involving conservatory students who take part in a summer camp where they rehearse the aforementioned classic. The film lacks everything a genre piece should have: likable characters, exciting and easy-to-follow plot, chemistry between the protagonists, erotic charge, rhythm, or tempo. The scene where one of the drunk protagonists throws up nevertheless turned out quite well.

Jaroslav Soukup’s duology of films with Michal David’s songs *Disco Story (Discopříběh, 1987)* and *Disco Story 2 (Discopříběh 2, 1991)* was loosely followed by *Decibels of Love (Decibely lásky, 2016)*, the feature screenwriting and directing debut of composer Miloslav Halík (born 1955), with Michal David himself taking part in production. The film was created based on the “we’ll throw in whatever we can think of, regardless of whether it makes any sense or not” method. Retired soccer player Pavel Horváth plays the role of a waste collector, and Iva Janžurová is cast as an elderly lady who once fell in love with a famous singer, who the title sequence hints would turn out to be Karel Gott. He eventually even appears in person and sings a song before the film ends. This is a classic vanity project like those typically made by self-indulgent celebrities. The audience is supposed to guess which character has, had, or will have a love or family relationship with some other character, and to recognize celebrities in cameo roles.

We could certainly think of a hundred reasons why the long awaited biographical film *Devil’s Mistress (Lída Baar-*

ová, 2016) failed to turn out well. One of them is the illusions shared by some film critics that the life story of the Czech actress had the dimensions of a classical tragedy. Her affair with the Nazi Minister of Propaganda was nevertheless more of an embarrassing career misstep than a manifestation of noble character. And, as we know, there is no tragedy without a certain moral high ground. The creators did not really think through whether they want to present the protagonist as a great artist, a silly goose, a victim of her mother, a victim of the devil incarnate, a victim of Nazism, a victim of communism, a victim of petty Czech envy, or a liar who made up her past. All of these possibilities are hinted at by the film, which however does not stick to any of them and lacks a unifying idea. It pretends to evoke strong emotions which however have nowhere to come from in Lída Baarová’s story. There is no melodrama to be built on a romance with Joseph Goebbels or a flirt with Adolf Hitler. In places where emotions are lacking, director Filip Renč resorts to music-video editing solutions, which is something he has favored right from the beginning of his directing career. He thinks in banal shortcuts, focusing on an effect that lasts a few seconds while the dramatic arch tumbles in the background.

Renč’s film came into distribution at the same time as, and mutually strengthened the market results of, the documentary *Doomed Beauty (Zkáza krásou, 2016)* made about Lída Baarová by Helena Třeštková in collaboration with film editor Jakub Hejna. The film is based on the director’s 1995 interview with Baarová in Vienna. An ironic counterpoint to the actress’s version of her own story is formed by period film and documentary footage. We have not had a film showing such smart thinking in its editing work in a long time.

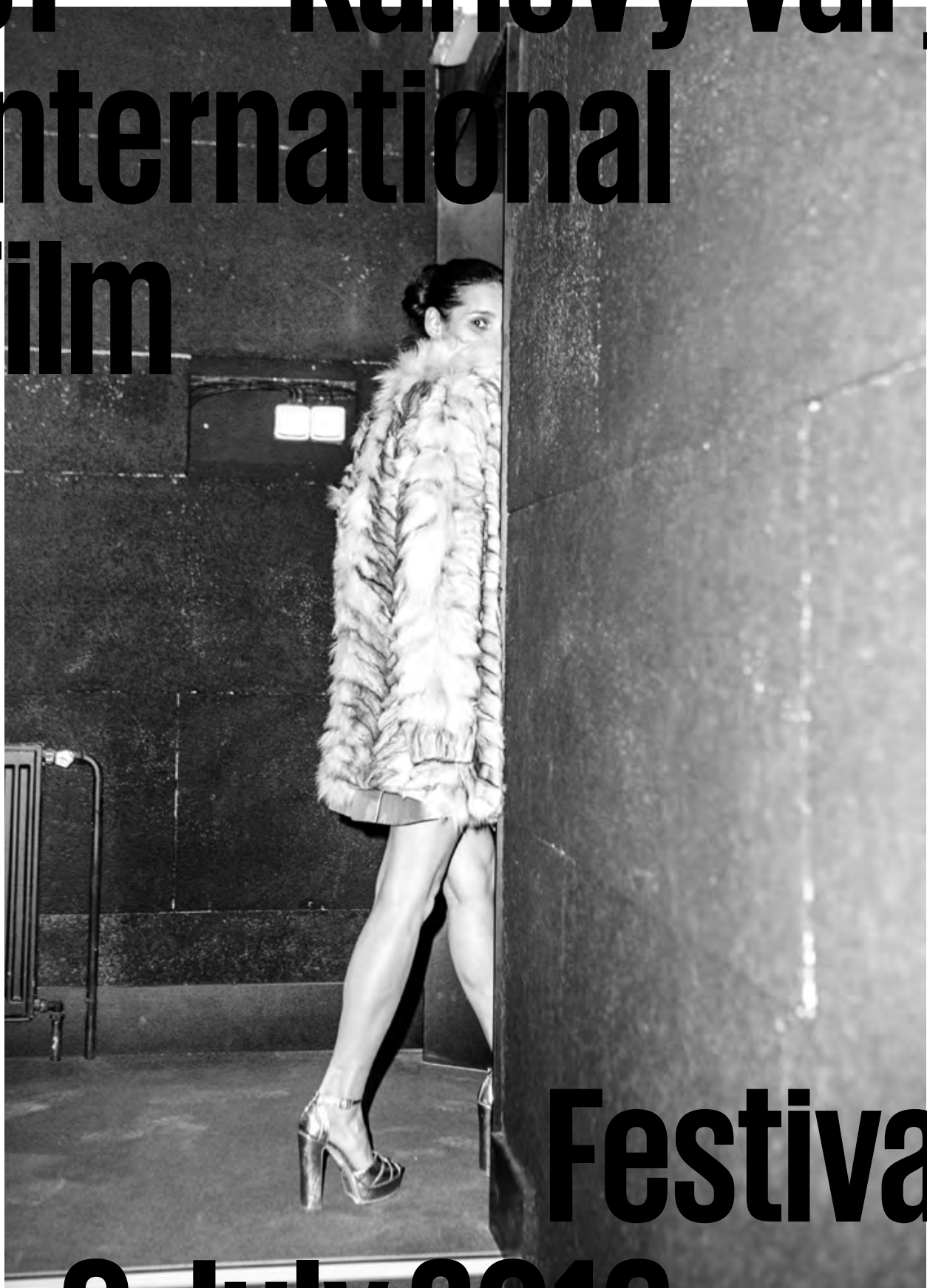
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We can see that Czech film production flows into several bodies of water. There is the glittering surface of art films, which finally manage to start breaking through to festivals but barely communicate with domestic audiences and are shunned by movie theaters. A strong river is represented by made-for-television crime series, which deserve a chapter of their own and attract a significant portion of creators’ capacities. Next to them is the stale swamp of comedies which moviegoers do not like and usually depart movie theaters after a short run. The audience for domestic (but not international) films is slowly dwindling. While ten years ago quality mainstream films nominated for the Czech Lion awards reached on average two hundred thousand spectators, today the number is less than half.

There was a lively polemic over a study on the development of Czech feature films that was ordered by the State Cinematography Fund and produced by a Masaryk University team led by Petr Szczepanik. Apart from the conclusion that the weakness of Czech cinema lies precisely in its development, that is to say, in lacking funds when it comes to screenplays, so that most of the actual screenplays produced are eventually turned into films, the study uncovered, based on interviews with industry professionals, a strong sense of isolationism and unapproachability in the Czech audiovisual environment and a lack of mutual communication between individual filmmaking professions.

This isolation and unapproachability is not merely a symptom of present day film production, it is its main topic: the characters and creators of Czech films take refuge in their inner selves, in solitude, nostalgia, traveling abroad, in drugs and, most often, in the woods. The topos of the forest in the films of the 1960s and 1990s was recently investigated by Jan Bernard in his essays. The most recent works produced more forest fruits, across the genre spectrum: woods appear in comedies, fairy tales, and art films; it is through a wood that Lída Baarová escapes to Austria, and it is a forest clearing where the Greedy Tiffany lurks.

51st Karlovy Vary International Film



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No film is the match of a lifetime to me

An interview with director Jan Prušínovský

Petr Koubek



Jan Prušínovský studied screen-writing at Film and TV School (FAMU) in Prague, graduating in his third year with the script for the film *Frankie is a Womanizer* (*František je děvkař*, 2008) which ended up being his directing debut as well. Since then he has made two TV series, the comedy *Sunday League – Pepík Hnatek's Final Match* (*Okresní přebor – Poslední zápas Pepíka Hnátka*) and the made-for-TV family fantasy film *If There Were Fish* (*Kdyby byly ryby*, 2014). This year, his first film made from a script written by someone else entered movie theaters: *The Snake Brothers* (*Kobry a užovky*, 2015).

You have grown more serious with *The Snake Brothers*. Is this intentional or a natural development?

I do not look at it this way at all. It's simply a question of when there's a topic, I deal with it and try my best to serve the work as a whole. When I and Jaroslav Žáček started working on *The Snake Brothers*, I had finished shooting *Pepík Hnatek's Final Match* and was about to start work on [the TV comedy series] *Čtvrtá hvězda (The Fourth Star, 2014)*. I did the most important screenwriting, a preproduction work between working on two comedies, therefore you can hardly say I've grown more serious. It's something that just happens, the topic requires it. Moreover, I don't think the film is all that serious.

What was it like, switching between genres? Are you aware of a borderline between comedy and drama?

Not when it comes to directing I am not. I basically work with the actors the same way all the time. I never tell them "we're making a comedy now". The only time when I tried for more significant stylization in terms of acting was the fairy tale *If There Were Fish*. Other than that, I believe that acting always has the same basis.

You yourself nevertheless spoke of the craft of comedy before. In that case, what makes the craft of drama?

In drama, the rules of timing are not quite as necessary. Directing a drama is therefore simpler for me, it's less mentally and physically demanding. When shooting a comedy I need to watch the timing and rhythm all the time. This is because of how important phrasing is for dialog in a comedy. To exaggerate a little, it is almost like rap or poetry. The words need to have a good flow. Drama is looser in this respect. *Sunday League*, on the other hand, required a lot of concentration. Also, each scene needs to have some sort of punch line which is supposed to make people laugh. You therefore need to look out all the time to make sure the actor does not say their line a little too soon or too late, in a slightly different tone. Everything needs to be just right, because the line itself often does not make for a joke and what actually makes people laugh is the intonation or when and how the actor says it. As a director, I'm in charge of all of this. It is very intuitive work that takes concentration. In a drama, the overall rhythm is more important, that is to say, the way the script is composed. All you do then is set up the characters who speak in a certain way. Humor, whether a scene has it or not, is not that important here.

You wrote most of your own films yourself. Is all of the above already present in the script? I mean the rhythm, phrasing.

You should be able to tell how the humor works from the text. I write the script with some sort of intonation in my head, then I read it aloud using the same intonation and try to have others read it that way, too. The text is usually pretty sparse, bare dialog with the occasional note. For instance, I'd write down "pause", because the humor does not come from the line itself but rather from the reaction to it, which is something you already need to consider in the script. To have the rhythm.

So far, we have been talking about dialog, but your films also make use of situational comedy, gags. Can those be written down as well?

They can, but on paper they're usually not funny at all. A gag is something that simply needs to be done on site and situational gags based on movement only ever start to be funny in the editing room. I usually know precisely what I'm after. This is however something I rarely write down in the scripts, because I don't consider it important and cannot really write eloquently enough, either. A script to me is mostly a story, which is then taken over by direction, animated and given a certain stage appearance. I believe that a script should have the form of something like a simple radio play. Then comes the work of the director who reads it and supplies the left



side of the script with action. Czech scripts however tend to have the left side terribly overblown, which leaves no space for a director's interpretation, which can differ completely. This is nevertheless my personal opinion. My abilities being what they are, I simply write stripped-down scripts, for myself as well as for others. With Bohdan Sláma, for instance, who directed one of my scripts, I said to myself I would have done it the same way, give or take a few details. This confirms my belief that even a simple text can get an idea across while also giving liberty to the director.

Most directors say that comedy is the most difficult genre. You started with it and stayed with it for a long time. Why comedy?

First year FAMU students write sketches which are then read aloud in seminars. My texts always had people rolling on the floor laughing and I had no idea why. I thought I was writing serious stuff. Petr Jarchovský who led the workshop explained it to me, he told me what my strong points were and what I should focus on. And, since I listen to authority figures, I started to focus on the things he pointed out to me.

Screenwriters mostly take their material from their environment or work with pure imagination. Which way is it with you?

It is actually a sort of combination of the two. I normally take some sort of real basis, then start making things up. What if this normal, everyday situation suddenly had uncle Vanya in it? That way is the most fun to me. I think about things mostly when I do manual work or while working, that's when my mind works best. Somewhere they reportedly found out that when you walk half a kilometer, your brain starts working on completely different wavelengths. At least for me it works that way. When I'm contemplating a feature film for instance, I walk all the time for like three months. I've got that one idea is stuck on my mind, then it starts collecting others and yet others until the day when I no longer can hold it all inside and need to put it down on paper. What I take from my environment is mostly background, because the world consists of details and you cannot make a work believable without them. With *The Fourth Star* for instance it was necessary to know how keys are distributed in a hotel or what it takes to acquire that fourth star for your hotel rating. You need to know a bit more than the others. Almost





everyone has visited a hotel at one time or another, but hardly anyone knows how the shift changes work. Likewise, pretty much everyone has had breakfast there, but few know how it gets prepared. It is simply quite apparent when you watch *Sunday League* that I've played competitive soccer since I was six years old. This is a sort of added value, which when used correctly makes the work much more interesting and believable for the audience.

***The Snake Brothers* was your first time working from a script written by someone else. What was the experience like?**

It was a huge relief in the first place, because I was free to merely interpret the story. I did not need to actually tell it, which was what the writer Jarda Žváček was doing, and I was able to focus on directing.

Did this change you in some way as an author?

Not really. There was always someone I was working with. I usually write TV series with Petr Kolečko, and there are normally people I work with on my films, too, even though the collaboration tends not to be as close there. My wife is a dramaturge, she helps me with the scripts and corrects them. The essential difference, as I already said, lies in that once a director finds something that is already written down and that he can identify with, it is extremely pleasant, because all they need to do then is focus on the interpretation.

Having said that, how closely is directing linked with screenwriting for you?

If I'm writing the script myself, I try to separate the two strictly. I only ever move to directing once I am absolutely sure that there is nothing more for me to invent. That way, even if something doesn't work out quite perfectly on site, at least the scene itself works. If it does work out, so much the better. It may be pragmatism, but it's what I actually believe. If I am in the position of a mere director who works with a text written by someone else, the advantage lies in that I don't have to bother the writer with minor adjustments, I can do those myself. Of course, I do consult such changes and they need to be approved first. This however still strikes me as more flexible than waiting until the writer has the time.

Do you leave any space for improvisation when making your films, for yourself or the actors?

I do, you need to have some fun doing it after all. I don't do detailed rehearsals for one thing. We read the text thoroughly and go over all the details, but I don't want the actors to memorize it too much. Most of the work is done during costume rehearsal. I talk with them about their characters all the time, and we have them rehearsed without the actors realizing it. I also give them a free hand to quite some extent. Sometimes they come up with things I'd never have thought of. When we're actually shooting there's nothing to hold us back and we just go straight ahead. Of course, the first take rarely works out, but people tend to be more relaxed if you don't direct them all the time.

In most of my films I was more after the characters, the stories. *The Snake Brothers* is your first film that makes use of a certain stylization. It employs film language to quite some degree. Do you see yourself somehow moving ahead as a director?

It's not me moving ahead, it's a consequence of the approach to work which we talked about earlier. This is the first film which I actually only directed. With all the former ones I wrote the script, directed, did it all. When the jobs cumulate I have the tendency to opt for the simplest means of expression, because I just don't have the mental capacity for anything more at the moment. I am also of the opinion that a comedy should be simple, in terms of story but also formally. Comedies focus on situations rather than emotions, and situations are often produced by form. It is nevertheless not quite as simple as it may look. I for instance very often use long lenses. I shoot a discussion at a table and have a 100mm lens on the camera in order to have the characters really stand out from the background. This is not usually used in regular comedies but I feel it is more evocative of the voyeur-style view from a distance. The situation may well be really serious, but it often appears comical when seen from a distance. I say this because the long lenses are harder to focus, which makes my comedies not quite as easy to shoot for certain filmmaking professions. Another thing is that I don't like to move the camera, like zooming in and out, which I do use, but not to accentuate emotions.

You were always interested in the countryside, small towns and various types of micro-worlds. *The Snake Brothers* is, however, the first time you turn to your own micro-world, to your own generation.



That was the most attractive thing about the script for me. One of the reasons was that up until that moment I'd worked mostly with actors who were 20 or so years older than me. Miroslav Krobot is 63. It is of course great when you can direct someone like Krobot, Ondřej Vetchý or David Novotný, but at the same time I had a feeling of debt to myself, for not making films about people my own age. On the other hand it's terribly difficult and it's for the best that I only started doing it later, with at least some sort of confidence in my craft. It bugs me a little that *The Snake Brothers* is not being talked about as a generational film. I do not see it as social drama, the way it is often labeled.

Would you like to go back to the topic someday, or do you feel like you've already said what you wanted to say and want to do something different again?

I cannot really give you an answer right now. I've nevertheless read two similar scripts since then and said to myself, "it's a pity they're offering this to me". Because I already did something of the sort. I feel driven to other things now. This is also the reason why I do not go on with *Sunday League* or *The Fourth Star*. It would probably be possible, but boring, it wouldn't give me fulfillment anymore.

In the world, especially in American productions, directors often proceed from film to television. You are doing it the other way around. Do you see the two worlds as distinct in some way?

Not really, no. Maybe from the practical standpoint I do, in the sense that with film you do not need to think about program scheduling and can get away with more. Nudity, strong language, things like that. The other difference is that making movies is not really something you can make a living from in our country. I probably had an advantage precisely in having a sort of perspective on what goes on in the world. I knew great shows were being made while around here everyone was still looking down on television. That was my motivation for making *Sunday League*. To show that it's possible to make something good for television. I'm not saying I made some sort of cult series, but an intention to disregard the prejudice was certainly involved.

The situation in film distribution is rather strange at the moment. In the USA for instance you either make blockbusters about costumed superheroes with huge money involved,



or independent films for festivals which nevertheless have much smaller budgets. There is nothing in between. No one is making films like Sydney Lumet's *Serpico* anymore. A film by which you mean to say something but is at the same time made for the masses as well. Television took over the function of the quality mainstream. It has the power of attracting audiences yet at the same time produce interesting things. Czech TV channels are slowly waking up to the trend, too, and film distribution is growing broader. *The Snake Brothers* is an example of a film with a very low budget and it sold 80,000 tickets at the box office. Which means it made back its cost.

You studied screenwriting but already started directing while in college. The short comedy *Bubble Bath is the Best* (*Nejlepší je pěňivá*, 2005) had some international success. Did you know from the start you wanted to direct your own scripts?

That came later on. When you study screenwriting, you are sort of secluded, you write something, the teacher reads it, and that's it. I tried to make friends with directors, but it didn't really go that well. I would then go to the studios to help holding the cables and stuff like that, and when I saw the directing students fumbling around, I said to myself, I could do that too. And when I got the chance, I simply tried.

When you were writing the script for *Frankie is a Womanizer* were you already intending to direct it as well?

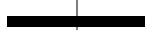
No, the script was my BA thesis project. I did not really have the ambition to make it into a film. I don't want to say I was somehow forced to do it, but the short *Bubble Bath is the Best* was quite successful and my friend Ondřej Zima took the BA thesis script and started showing it to people. Then we suddenly had money in the account and started shooting. It actually only took a few months.

Do you go back to your films? Would you like to change something?

I do not watch them. Sometimes I can't avoid one, however, so that I see the mistakes, the places I'd do differently today, but that's just the way it was meant to be. You eventually accept it. I actually see it as a sport. You take it one match at a time, win one, lose one, sometimes it's a draw. No film is the match of a lifetime to me.



I do not want to make purely realist Films



An interview with director and producer Petr Oukropec

Miloš Kameník



You have been working as a film producer for sixteen years. What made you pick up directing?

The impulse was gradual. As you grow old, you go on an inner search for new challenges. I stay with those related to production, that is to say, looking for and after new talents. This is where I generate a certain amount of people with whom I feel like going on an adventure of several years and all the hard work it entails. That is one level. Another level consists of an amateur theater project where I came to feel that during its 15 years I have cultivated a multi-generational audience which understands the language I put inside the project. These things may seem incommensurable from a distance, but it is a place where I've been able to try out many genres, work with actors, non-actors and children. The feeling of having an audience gave me the self-assurance I needed to make *The Blue Tiger* (*Modrý Tygr*, 2011) where I started out as the producer, then contributed to the script and since I wasn't able to find a director who would realize my idea of the film, I took over direction as well, which was something I had to be persuaded to do by people from the outside, because I'm not the type of creator to open closed doors.

Was the many years of experience as a producer something that helped you in your directing debut? Can it be on the other hand limiting in some respects?

It is impossible to disconnect from the producer's degree of responsibility inside you. The awareness of how things are related to each other is also greater, which on the other hand means the production managers value how prepared I am, since I am aware that I need to be prepared more than is usual.

Can you tell when a film's director is also the producer?

I hope not. With films made for children, this is a bit of a virtue made of necessity, because the limitations of the market and financing have people take up several roles for pragmatic reasons. This is something that is relatively common abroad, where producers also write scripts or direct. You've got to have someone to stop you when you're rushing into something that is not prepared yet, especially when it comes to films for children. We put off shooting *The Blue Tiger* by a year because of some missing funds and I was getting nervous for being worried that the child actors are going to grow too old and ended up pushing the film into the production phase more than I should have at that moment.

You did not study directing and did not do any short films either. What was it like for you to start making feature films? Did you seek anyone's advice when it came to directing? Were you intentionally watching how other people do it during your years as a producer?

All the time. With Saša Gedeon we went all the way from FAMU to the actual practice of filmmaking and I was there for every little step of the way. It was similar with Bohdan Sláma who moreover supervised my directing of *The Blue Tiger*. You learn the craft by watching other people do it, but at the same time realize what your own language is. The choice of your closest co-worker is also something that to a degree determines what kind of pressure you put yourself under, in that they try to get the best out of you. It is through discussions with your cinematographer for instance that your sense of the visual grows.

With your production company Negativ you focused mostly on titles with some artistic ambition. How did you get to films for children and young adults? How important is your own family and children?

Very. I feel the need to be comprehensible for them, to have them understand what I do. I had no ambition of making cinema for grown-ups, to compete with our "own" authors whom we're looking after. I am also searching for the principle of inner purity and freedom of children, the conflicts inherent in growing up, the stories of first wounds, which to me represent the most important moments of a person's for-

mation. I believe that even though the stories are always similar in their essence it makes sense to re-visit them in every age. I have a feeling that I understand child characters. I respect them and want to elevate them to the level of grown-up protagonists.

What is the most difficult part of making a film for children?

This is a cliché, but it's finding the right topic and writing the script. The golden age of Czech films for children went hand in hand with extraordinary books for children. There were more of those then. Contemporary Czech literature is still recognized internationally, but the books that are written are mostly illustrated short stories for the youngest readers. A contemporary dramatic story with more complexity and intended for older children is something that you don't see that often around here. Earlier some authors weren't allowed to write for a grown-up audience, which drove them to children's films. Today the situation is more complex, I'm following contemporary literature and there are few new contemporary stories, unlike in Scandinavia, Germany or France. Those countries and their markets are nevertheless bigger.

How do you choose what films to make? Which topics do you find of substance? What was the impulse behind making *In Your Dreams*?

I always search for a protagonist to catch my attention. They need to be a carrier of something that I find important and which has a certain tension to it. This is the key aspect, then there are dozens of others. It is most difficult for me to choose the right topic. And, paradoxically, with *In Your Dreams*, I and Egon Tobiaš started to develop something where there was no mention of parkour yet, but the sensitive age was already there. I wanted to deal with first love in an internal rather than extroverted manner. I felt that this was my protagonist from *The Blue Tiger* as well. At the same time, there were "fantasy" elements which I thought were interesting for the genre and I realized that they had a strong visual potential. Those are the sort of shards that I put together to create the whole thing. The final version emerges only during the latter phases of writing the script when you're looking for further topics and try to make that first impulse reach beyond its original scope.

The actress who portrayed Laura, the protagonist of *In Your Dreams*, Barbora Štikarová, is a traceuse who had never acted in a film before. How hard was it to find her?

This was a key point and we considered not starting to shoot at all, because we did not have the main actress. Girls in the Czech Republic don't really do parkour that much, they sort of hang out with the boys, put on a tracksuit every now and then to try it out, but they rarely do it with the kind of stubborn dedication that boys have. It looked as though in our script we invented something that was pushing the limits of what's actually realistic. During casting we contemplated using gymnasts, figure skaters or other girls with physical predispositions from other sports and have them start training parkour. Barbora, who previously practiced judo and played soccer – with boys, of course – was discovered by a certain traceur in Jihlava. This was some two months before the end of the definitive casting. There were some other adepts, but even though Barbora is a bit of a sensitive little duckling, she does not assert herself at all costs and is not extroverted, I felt that to a certain degree, she is the character.

Did you discuss the script or the rough edit with a focus group? And if so, what kind of pitfalls did they point out?

We had some traceurs, boys of around twenty years of age, read the script and they corrected mostly when it came to dialog. In the final action scene, for instance, we had people chanting "Parkour! Parkour!" and they pointed out that it's

as if someone went to a soccer match and chanted “Soccer! Soccer!”. To my surprise, there were not that many corrections though. Once the film was edited I invited them to a screening, they watched it, left and then called me after two hours to tell me that they accept it, that they talked about it at length and they considered it to be something meaningful. That was a little moving for me.

While making *In Your Dreams*, did you discover some sort of fundamental difference between the teenagers of today and you when you were fifteen?

The present generation is much more open, absorptive, they speak English. Traceurs are active across Europe, they have friends all over the world. The motif of inner freedom, the determination to do whatever you want. That is, I think, the big difference, because they were growing up in a period of a turning point of sorts, where it was exciting to discover freedom in a different way. They work with it as something that is completely natural. Traceurs on the other hand are not a typical sample of Czech youth. They are more cosmopolitan and parkour is probably the only non-competitive sport. It is free of drugs and similar vices, it stresses friendship and pushing one’s limits, it is not bound by any institutions.

To what degree should a film intentionally reflect the time in which it was created? To what degree do you yourself do it on purpose?

I work with this, because my films are somewhat stylized and we try to have them at least visually function in a sort of timeless way. It nevertheless reflects the inner pulse of the moment which I feel about our times.

You participated on the script for *The Blue Tiger*. To what degree did you work with Egon Dobiáš on his script for *In Your Dreams*?

The Blue Tiger is a book written by Tereza Horváthová and we made it into a script together. We were both learning the craft and maybe it’s apparent from the end result because when you write a script with the author of the original book, you do not tend to make a really radical cut. We tried to replace the mosaic character of the book with dramatization, which worked only partly. In the case of *In Your Dreams*, it was Egon who came up with the original story and then we worked from there together.

The credits list him as the sole screenwriter.

I learned my lesson while working on development studies – it is necessary to elevate screenwriters and put them in the spotlight.

Your two films are linked by the motif of their protagonist’s subjective visions. *The Blue Tiger* represents the imagination of children with playful animation, while *In Your Dreams* has a substantial part of the story take place in a “dream” world. Is this a coincidence or is moving away from strict realism something that is important to you?

I did not want to make purely realistic films. In *The Blue Tiger*, the animation and fantasy serve as a tool of childhood rebellion which compensates for the impossibility of revolt against external conditions, the eviction situation and the fact that there is something not really good happening to the family. With this film it is similar in some respects because Laura experiences a parallel romance in reverse in her dreams without this being markedly apparent in the real world. That’s the way these things go, especially at her age. Much of it happens inside, in the imagination, in desires that are never formulated. I tried to have the audience go through this with her and also to capture her physicality. I wanted every bruised knuckle, every scrape, every drop of sweat or collision to feel real. Only the “drop” in the elevator is slightly exaggerated, but not in a way of some deliberate screenwriting trick or a reason to show off some visual effects. It is a simple metaphor of Laura’s state at the moment. We strove for the





dreams to have their own internal stories which we deliberately do not articulate literally, but it is nevertheless there, so that the visual imagery is not really random.

To what degree do you prepare the visual stylization in advance? Each of the films is conceived of in a different way. Is this your contribution or does it originate mostly with the people you work with? How did you come up with the decision for *In Your Dreams* to use a cool color palette? Do you wait for impulses from your chosen co-authors, or is it more your own idea that is realized?

Even the theater plays I worked on were visual. I do the stage design myself, there is always some sort of scenographic principle around which I base the production. I have a costume designer or someone else who brings some extra visual flair and whom I at the same time direct by giving them a certain assignment. I am nevertheless open to these people bringing some sort of added value of their own. It is similar with the movies, the goal being set from the beginning. The key to *In Your Dreams* lies in the meticulous selection of locations and the cinematography, which we worked on with the architect and the cinematographer for about a year and a half, so that at different moments we gradually narrowed down the selection of options to the style which I was able to adhere to and work with thoroughly on the level of details. With *The Blue Tiger* it was different. The book itself is visual, Juraj Horváth is a genius illustrator and I knew that I needed to move or transport to the film the kind of visual imagery which was already given by the book. We may have gone a bit overboard with the degree of stylization, though.

Do you mean the stylization in terms of acting?

In hindsight I maybe blame myself a little for wanting to have the children be very natural and immediate while keeping the external world in the form of a comic caricature throughout. This works for most audiences of children's films, but for some grown-ups it simply does not add up. Internationally this is not a problem at all, but in our country people are more sensitive about certain types of acting and did not respond well to double stylization within the genre.

Do you alter your films significantly with editing, or is everything already in the script?

With *The Blue Tiger* we had very little time for postproduction, therefore we only cut a few things, but did not really

change the dramatic structure much. For *In Your Dreams* we did a relatively radical loop at the end of the film. The script involves more of a happy ending, which I did not find entirely realistic. Whether or not the protagonist ends up with a boy or not is not really important at that moment. What is essential is that she goes back to her father because the film is to me, among other things, about the absence of fathers in the family system. Nothing of substance really changed, the world did not collapse, her desire was not fulfilled, she "only" learned her lesson, lost something, gained something else. To me it is a gentle summer portrait which expresses this small thing that is nevertheless of massive importance to the person central to the story.

What does the premiere in Berlinale's competition section mean for the film?

It means the world to the film. It is a confirmation of its quality with regard to a huge selection of other movies. Berlin and its section Generation 14+ dedicated to this type of film is about as far as you can get. Its prestige is tremendous, for instance the Cannes festival does not have a section like that. You get reviews, it has an impact on your future and it's a further confirmation of the fact that my films tend to work in German speaking countries. *The Blue Tiger* was in German distribution and did well at the box office, while with *In Your Dreams* we also learned that it works in all Scandinavian countries too. In Malmö I got shortlisted along with eight other films, including for instance a movie by Michel Gondry. These events are not under the spotlight as much as the festivals of art films for "grown-ups", but when it comes to the sections of festivals for children and young adults we are among the cream of the crop. This gives me a certain satisfaction and I believe that the film will gradually find its audience around here as well. My experience with *The Blue Tiger* tells me that the films are timeless in how they have new audiences growing up into them. We don't get hundreds of thousands of spectators but those that are touched by the film are touched by it in a more profound or fundamental way, which is something that is always meaningful to do.

Films for children and young adults are often referred to as something suitable for export. What is the situation with your films in this respect? Can we talk about any sort of long-term financial return on investment?

When it comes to films for children of up to approxi-



mately 12 years old, we can, because there is a market for those, TV stations have their slots for this type of product, etc. As for teenage audiences, unless we are talking about local comedies, the films are internationally more of an art film and festival thing, rather than there being an actual market for them. Czech Television does not have slots specifically for teenage audiences, the *Děčko* show is for viewers of up to 10, maybe 12 years of age. It is similar with the other channels.

The past few years have seen the number of moviegoers drop significantly for Czech films. How do you deal with the problem at *Negativ*? What is the reason behind the phenomenon? Are you considering changes to the distribution strategy for your films?

The beginning of this year does not seem to totally confirm the trend of spectators abandoning movie theaters, the numbers are positive, even with respect to Czech films. What we do see is an even sharper difference between successful films and those that get no audiences at all. The sort of middle ground that would at times be occupied by our films as well has been sort of vacated. In the Czech Republic you have the comedies which work, then there are film-events that involve some sort of controversy in their PR, and that's about it. The apathy towards Czech cinema is, generally speaking, abating a little but as the years go by it is ever more apparent that what people seek to find in movie theaters is primarily entertainment. We used to have good box office results in the past which made people abroad wonder, since they put us in the arthouse category. Those are quality films that nevertheless don't do as well at the box office. In our country this type of film managed to draw in large audiences for a long time, which is still the case for certain titles even today, but the numbers are not what they used to be. Movie theater owners came to the conclusion that the target audience of *In Your Dreams* are people who do not go to their theaters, sadly. This is something we expected but decided to give it a shot with the distributor anyway. We had all the signs that the film is accepted and expected but the generation of YouTubers, who up until the last moment say "yes, I like this and I want to see it", eventually do not get up and go to the movies because they know that there will be a chance to see the film elsewhere, which bothers me even more seeing as the movie is made with some sort of visual and filmmaking care for the big screen. The film, however, has had an unbelievable release

at international festivals, where it has even now already been more successful than *The Blue Tiger*. We don't get turned down by any big festivals focused on films for teenage audiences. In Berlin we sold out four huge screenings in the largest theaters, which is something you can work with. This experience fills you with mild optimism to the effect that it all has some sort of meaning and that Czech movie theaters are merely one possible way of distribution.

A number of filmmakers (Jan Hřebejk, Vladimír Michálek, Petr Zelenka, the producer Vratislav Šlajer and others) work ever more often for television. Do you not feel tempted by this trend?

When it comes to us at *Negativ*, Milan Kuchynka is making the series *Kancelář Blaník* (*The Blaník Office*, 2014) for Stream and we are developing three or four further formats for the Internet, which means we are hopefully not that far behind. To make a TV show is to make a certain number of compromises and to recycle some of the already existing schemes. The demand is, in its way, for international formats adapted to the local market. What we think is important is to find an original domestic format, such as our *Blaník*, which is already being offered abroad, so we'll see how that works out.

Do you intend to only go on directing, or will you still continue to produce works by others?

At *Negativ* we usually work on films as producers in pairs. At the moment, we've got Bohdan Sláma's new film *Bába z ledu* (*The Ice Hag*) in postproduction, which I am working on with Pavel Strnad. I am preparing Michal Hogenauer's debut film *Venku* (*Outside*), a low-key story which is supposed to be shot abroad. As for my own films, I am considering adapting a certain French book, but the copyright issues have not been settled yet. It is something that suits me, something I have been looking for for a long time. It is a big epic story which nevertheless contains attributes of my earlier films.

Brazilský film GABRIELA MASCARA
SVŮDNÁ SMĚS ŽIVOČIŠNOSTI A NEZAPOMENUTELNÉ KRÁSY

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FILMS

Doomed Beauty	(Zkáza krásou, Czech Republic, 2015)
Directors	Helena Třeštíková, Jakub Hejna
Writers	Helena Třeštíková, Jakub Hejna
Cinematography	Martin Kubala, Jan Malíř, Jiří Chod, Jaromír Nekuda
Cast	Lída Baarová (archival footage), Zorka Janů (a.f.), Josef Goebbels (a.f.), Vladimír Borský (a.f.), František Čáp (a.f.), Václav Krška (a.f.), Adolf Hitler (a.f.), Gustav Fröhlich (a.f.), Karel Lamač (a.f.), Svatopluk Beneš (a.f.), Oldřich Nový (a.f.) and others.
Length	90 min.
Distribution CZ	Aerofilms
First screening	7 January 2016

The Baarová Case

Would it be daring to combine in one overview the new film by Helena Třeštíková (a collaboration with Jakub Hejna) *Doomed Beauty* (2015) and the film short story or essay by Peter Hátle *Panenství Lídy Baarové (The Virginity of Lída Baarová)* from the *Gottland* cycle (2014)? What links them is their interest, albeit with different forms and different results, in the selected fortunes of Lída Baarová (1994-2000), seen as a montage of the constituent parts of her life, film work, and the given historical period. Hátle bases his dramatization of Baarová's selected "moments in life" on existing film material from 1995 – an interview between Baarová and the director Otakar Vávra (the original edit was produced for the TV series GEN and Hátle could not use it for copyright reasons) – the story of her life and work thus assumes the character of an interpretative perspective (albeit one that is, let us admit, provocative and subversively ironic with humorous allusions). Třeštíková and Hejna created a "film story of life" which opts for narrative self-restraint, a sense of mutual interconnectedness, and linearity. Both works at the same time put their stakes on the artistic and emotional potential of archive footage which can be "interpretatively" combined into a seemingly compact and unproblematically believable depiction of the dramatic fortunes of the prominent actress. In *Doomed Beauty*, Hátle's commentary is "replaced" with the voice of Baarová herself, or by narration (by Alena Šislerová) of sections from her diaries published as *Útěky (Escapes, co-written by Josef Škvorecký)* and *Života sladké hořkosti (Bittersweet Memories)*. The second book mentioned plays an especially important role in the Baarová case, as it gave the name not only to the older confessional film of Helena Třeštíková (from 1995), becoming the source of Ivan Hubač's script for Filip Renč's film *Lída Baarová* (2015), but it also focuses on the most visible and often discussed parts of the star actress's life. Třeštíková along with Hejna make references to Baarová's film confession and also use sequences from Baarová's interview with Vávra, along with portions of Jiří Velička's 1990 documentary *Vstaň a jdi dál (Get Up and Keep Going)*. Hátle's interpretative perspective, I would venture to claim, does have its justification.

Doomed Beauty is a primarily creator-centered view of the two filmmakers on fragments of the actress's career

in the context of personal and historical events, a manner of handling the topic which is – considering the given format and approach – entirely understandable and logical. There is no doubt that Baarová's work in Berlin, where in 1934 she succeeded at camera tests for the film *Barcarole* (d. Gerhard Lamprecht, 1935), as well as her love affairs with the German movie star Gustav Fröhlich and especially with Joseph Goebbels, are what are at first sight the most interesting and glaring aspects, in the context of the historical events in Europe during the first half of the twentieth century. In this way however, the important – and in my opinion, much more interesting and dramatic – social and cultural context of Czech and European society before the Second World War is lost. The film does have hints of a more general perspective (such as the construction of film studios in Barrandov as a social event, or the collective work of Czech actors after 1948), but it does so – again, due to the creative approach selected – only within the framework of Baarová's personal memories. Her first film role, in Pavel Čamrda's 1931 film *Kariéra (Career, d. Miroslav Josef Krňanský, based on a book by Ignát Herrmann)*, meanwhile works with a motto which applies equally well to the entire film project by the Třeštíková-Hejna creative tandem. "What I felt, I also did", Baarová said about her first role, for which she even learned to lip-sync songs. The personal view of the person discussed, her own memories as a commentary on everything that happens in *Doomed Beauty*, which substantially affects the factual precision of what is being said in the film (this is where the creators' choice to make the film a "life story" rather than a documentary likely has its most serious consequence), all create their own fiction. In other words, it is a narrative about one prominent personality in the art of acting and the period in which she worked and lived. The sporadic calls for objectivity and seriousness in approach to historical events at the same time cannot serve as an argument for critical refusal of this film project (regardless of what kind of category objectivity is for documentary films). Třeštíková and Hejna as creators opted for narration over the facticity and factualness of the story being told, which is in no way changed by the presence of exclusive archival footage (however interesting it is in itself), or even footage from the archives of Eva Braun. What the film can be berated for is the occasional effort to dramatize through montage (fanatical chanting by mobs at speeches by Nazi leaders linked directly



to audience applause in a cabaret), or visual “discrediting” of the film’s narrator (depiction of drunk and mumbling Baarová holding a bottle of Becherovka bitter). While the fact of such “discrediting” itself is not a problem, it hardly corresponds with the chosen approach to the subject matter. Another instance are the excessive efforts to present the relationship between Baarová and Goebbels as something close to a film romance (something Baarová surely believed it to have been).

Lída Baarová’s career naturally offers much to work with: she shot films with prominent Czech directors such as Karel Lamač, Martin Frič, Vladimír Slavínský, Svatopluk Innemann, and Miroslav Cikán, and starred several times alongside Hugo Haas (who is completely absent from *Doomed Beauty*) in *Blackout* (*Okénko*, d. Vladimír Slavínský, 1933), *The Seamstress* (*Švadlenka*, d. Martin Frič, 1936), and *Madla from the Brickworks* (*Madla z cihelny*, d. Vladimír Slavínský, 1933), in which Baarová met her debuting sister Zora, eleven years her junior, whose destiny (which applies to all of her family) could make for its own separate story. This is not a matter of complex facts but rather of interpretative perspective, which in the Czech environment, in relation to the Baarová case, tends to lean either towards purely “personal narrative”, fully anchored within the world of Baarová herself, or towards superficial depictions of Baarová’s relationship to Nazi Germany. The moral, should one even be considered, is at the same time simply empirical: all the gestures manifested in the work of Lída Baarová in the period of peak capitalism and nationalism do not reach beyond the aesthetic reception of the work; this is not some sort of power that changes the world. This is similar to the forms of film life which we usually believe reach beyond the boundaries of the capitalist market and which we so gladly link to the idea of art, while they are firmly tied to both the market and the social structure which underlies it.

The song “Milujem to, co ztrácíme” (“I love that which we lose”), composed for the film *Fiery Summer* (*Ohnivé léto*, d. František Čáp, Václav Krška, 1939), by Jiří Srnka with lyr-

ics by K. M. Walló, is not supposed to be the framework for this approach but rather an object of interest. Therefore the author’s commentary by Peter Hátle in his film short story appears to be a fitting reflection, albeit constructed due to external reasons, on the contemporary relationship between society and the creators of great stories. For the time being, we merely like to listen.

☒ Michal Kříž



Family Film	(Rodinný film, Česká republika – Německo – Slovinsko – Francie – Slovensko 2015)
Director	Olmo Omerzu
Writers	Olmo Omerzu, Nebojša Pop Tasić
Cinematography	Lukáš Milota
Film Editing	Jana Vlčková
Cast	Karel Roden (Igor), Vanda Hybnerová (Irena), Jenováfa Boková (Anna), Daniel Kadlec (Erik), Martin Pechlát (Martin) and others.
Length	95 min.
Distribution CZ	CinemArt
Premiere	18 February 2016

Serious Film

Olmo Omerzu is one of the few people who wrestle the contemporary Czech cinema out of its provincialism and bring it back to the international festival stage. His feature debut *A Night Too Young* (*Přiliš mladá noc*, 2012), with which this young Slovenian director graduated from FAMU in Prague, was in 2012 accepted to the Forum section of the Berlinale. It was subsequently screened, among other places, in Warsaw, Göteborg, and Los Angeles and entered Czech distribution. His next work, *Family Film* (*Rodinný film*) was premiered at last year's San Sebastian Film Festival and has since been quite successfully making the rounds at other festivals (earning, e.g., the Award for Best Artistic Contribution at the 2015 Tokyo Film Festival).

Omerzu can make the type of film which resonates with festival program directors, juries and, audiences alike. He deals with appropriately serious issues (crises of interpersonal relationships), constructs his stories in an unusual manner, and gives his film a distinct visual character which is at the same time idiosyncratic and modern. In case of *Family Film*, he nevertheless appears to have reached the outer limits of his poetic vision, beyond which it is easy to step into the realm of the banal or unintended kitsch.

Omerzu builds his narrative around a rich family from Prague. The family life of the Czech upper middle class can certainly be viewed in many different ways. It would nevertheless seem to offer less material for a seriously intended drama than for a comedy or a farce. All the drab characters of well-to-do materialists can offer are bland emotions or incessantly repeated motifs of estrangement, adultery, and weariness from the excessive consumption.

This is why Omerzu works with what he does best: he strives to deal with traditional motifs in a different, more complex manner, with more significant nuances. In *Family Film* he therefore employs elements which he has already tried in his student projects. From *The Second Act* (*Druhé dějství*, 2009), he takes the storyline of parents who leave for a vacation, the depiction of a slow creeping death of a relationship beneath a seemingly harmonic surface; he also follows up on *A Night Too Young* with the description of a powerful and at the same time destructive desire, developed in the character of the maturing son who stays at home with his older sister.

When it comes to showing something new, in this case the central topic of the film – supposedly the family crisis – Omerzu however appears to lose his former assurance. He often relies on plot twists which evoke the appearance of narrative sophistication: he lets the parents leave on a distant journey in order to introduce the character of the father's brother, who is to take care of the children. The parents then disappear from the story for good (a tragic accident?), the drama peaks (international investigation) and ends up with the son's serious injury. In order for the son to live he needs a functioning kidney, which is in turn provided by his uncle. The parents unexpectedly return. The father wants to make up for his guilt and offers to donate his own kidney. In the hospital, he finds out that he is not a suitable donor. The real father of the child is his brother.

Hence, in order to give expression to his topic, Omerzu builds an overcomplicated narrative which leads up to the most banal of stories. This is where the real "drama" actually begins. Karel Roden tries his hardest to express how his character of the proud bourgeois father "struggles" with the difficulties of life and attempts to save the unity of the family. His typically self-centered wife – played by the excellent Vanda Hybnerová – certainly does not make things easier for him, and on the other hand, his eccentric younger brother (Martin Pechlát) does not prove to be a very tough antagonist. And thus, family happiness returns to the cozy household in Prague's Vinohrady.

A mute member of Omerzu's film family – and at the same time, a somewhat unambiguous symbol of its breakup and subsequent reunion – is the dog Otto. In the film's conclusion, the director uses the dog to provide a transparent critique of his characters. The long, tiresome, excessive scene in which the dog physically suffers on a deserted tropical island distinctly accuses the characters of immoral conduct. However, the subsequent, nearly Hollywood-style happy ending (household pets and children are not supposed to die in movies after all) reestablishes the original status quo value. This lack of clarity is one of the things that makes the film by this otherwise director somewhat perplexing.

☒ Jan Křipač



I, Olga Hepnarová	(Já, Olga Hepnarová, Czech Republic – Poland – France – Slovakia 2016)
Director	Tomáš Weinreb, Petr Kazda
Writers	Petr Kazda, Tomáš Weinreb
Cinematography	Adam Sikora
Cast	Michalina Olszańska, Marika Šoposká, Klára Melišková, Petra Nesvačilová, Jan Novotný, Lukáš Bech, Juraj Nvota, Pavel Neškudla, Gabriela Míčová, Marta Mazurek, Roman Zach, Ondřej Malý, Martin Pechlát and others.
Length	105 min.
Distribution CZ	Bontonfilm CZ
Premiere	24 March 2016

Restrained Hatred

The Olga Hepnarová case, presented through the intentionally subjective view of Hepnarová herself in Tomáš Weinreb and Petr Kazda's film debut *I, Olga Hepnarová* (*Já, Olga Hepnarová*, 2016), is in my opinion primarily a story of hatred felt by a single human being. This hatred is uncompromising, fed for a long time by the feeling of inferiority and belief in one's own suffering in a world which deliberately treads on everything which one considers valuable, close or even pleasant. It is not important whether these imagined wrongs have any counterparts in reality. There are many film works with similar premises; in the present issue of *Film a doba* we can after all refer to René Allio's *I, Pierre Rivière, Having Slaughtered My Mother, Sister and Brother...* (*Moi, Pierre Rivière, ayant égorgé ma mère, ma soeur et mon frère...*, 1976) which is discussed as part of the issue's main topic.

The fact that the event in question gave rise to a film at all can be considered a success, whereas we must not underestimate a certain power of expression which works of this kind often have. The 1970s in Czechoslovakia is still a period which many people view from widely varied standpoints. The actions of Olga Hepnarová, amplified by the fact that she was the last woman to be executed in Czechoslovakia, makes – it would appear – for a functional tool of interpretation, which facilitates capturing the conflicting views when it comes to concrete questions related to the case and its context, as well as the more general level of the whole problem.

The film by Tomáš Weinreb and Petr Kazda is nevertheless not alone in its endeavors. In the past, the Olga Hepnarová case served as inspiration for the typically descriptive made-for-TV documentary *Hrdelní zločiny: Když vraždí ženy* (*Capital Offenses: When Women Commit Murder*, 2001) by directors Zora Cejnková and Eva Kadlčáková, which form one part of the loose trilogy *Hrdelní zločiny* (*Capital Offenses*). Olga Hepnarová, her crime and her subsequent trial served as the basis for a whole book by Roman Cílek, which in turn served as the basis for the film and was in fact published twice, first as *Oprátka za osm mrtvých* (*A Rope for Eight Dead*, 2003), then as *Olga Hepnarová: zabíjela, protože neuměla žít* (*Olga Hepnarová: She Killed Because She Did Not Know How to Live*, 2010). Last but not least, we can mention Tomáš Weinreb's student film *Všechno je sračka* (*Everything is Crap*, 2009) in which Miroslav David (played by the excellent Martin Pechlát, with hints of a fidgety recidivist), the onetime partner of Olga Hepnarová, spits on the world that surrounds him in a vivid gesture.

The two creators deliberately transformed the case into an intimate personal story (with frequent inner monologues) of a fragile girl who descends ever deeper into the abyss of her own hatred. A certain conceptual imbalance, apparent at times even in the cinematographic composition or editing of individual sequences, can be a relatively functional dramatic element which carries in itself the schizophrenic aspect of the whole narrative. The frequent pointing out of differences in interpretation as to what Olga Hepnarová actually did (the





actual action of her deliberately driving a truck into a mob can acquire significantly varying meanings depending on the given perspective), as well as how her trial was conducted, only serves as evidence of the creators' interest in presenting the individual events strictly as seen by Hepnarová herself. The choice to use Polish cinematographer Adam Sikora, who for instance collaborated with Jerzy Skolimowski on his *Essential Killing* (2010), and to cast the Polish Actress Michalina Olszanska (Olga Hepnarová) definitely proved correct. The black-and-white format and dedication of the film to František Vlácil underscore the creators' artistic ambitions. Despite all this, it is difficult to shake a certain feeling of disappointment which in this specific case is more due to the point of view adopted. The demonstrative, premeditated action of Hepnarová offers much subtler possibilities for portraying the results of human hatred towards society, regardless of any given political or social regime. The confessional portrait of Olga Hepnarová is thus in the end only a restrained attempt to finally show something of substance in Czech cinema. The final sequence of the last interrogation before

the execution is once again a mere summary reflection on whether everything that we have seen so far – while the true substance which forms the character of every whipping boy remained hidden from us – was a rational decision or rather the schizophrenic delusion of a gravely ill person. The question of who is actually ill here is once again left open.

☒ Michal Kříž



Eva Nová	(Slovakia – Czech Republic, 2015)
Director and writer	Marko Škop
Cinematography	Ján Meliš
Cast	Emília Vášáryová, Milan Ondřík, Anikó Vargová, Žofia Martišová, Gabriela Dolná, Dušan Jamrich, Ľubomír Gregor and others.
Length	106 min.
Distribution CZ	AČFK
Premiere	24 March 2016

The Intimacy of Old Age

To see Marko Škop's feature debut *Eva Nová* (2015) as a mere depiction of one alcoholic bankrupt actress's road to redemption and realization of her guilt with respect to her loved ones would be a distortion, and one far too easy to make from the spectator's standpoint as well. The traditional scheme that depicts a recovering alcoholic caught in the vicious circle of that ever-recurring last drink certainly does carry weight, but Marko Škop took the model and transformed it into theatrical scenery for the purposes of his film. *Eva Nová* as a character (Emília Vášáryová) does carry her addiction everywhere, especially when it comes to the relationship with her own family, but the film's narrative, significantly supported by visual discipline and restraint, follows much subtler thematic planes. It is no accident that Škop's film received the International Critics' Award at the Toronto International Film Festival, mostly for its cinematic exploration of several serious topics such as humanity, dignity, addiction and redemption. The creator uses an apparently simple naturalistic manner which does not aim to please but rather to uncover the landscape of human aging seen in the example of a person who dedicated her whole life to illusions: the illusion of acting and the illusion of alcohol.

Eva Nová has one definite advantage: its form and overall ambiance partly matches the contemporary idea – distorted and vague though it may be in many respects – of what an art film should be like. The film's imagery primarily corresponds with the idea of reality, and editing slightly dominates the story, which in its minimalist form only hints at certain events that intentionally obscure their own chronological or logical relations. Marko Škop is not the only one in this context; let us remember Jaroslav Vojtek's debut *Děti* (*Children*, 2014) or Ivan Ostrochovský's *Koza* (*Goat*, 2015). All of these films are moreover related due to their creators' past as directors of documentaries.

Eva Nová's documentary aspect is of a specific nature. Using only the sounds of the depicted environment, it builds on the attractive idea of the illusion of one's own life; this illusion is shown in the character of a once successful actress, who in her alcohol-induced blindness lost not only her professional 'face' (none of her colleagues is willing to give her work due to her history of excess) but also her family, especially

her only son Dodo (Milan Ondřík). Their mutual relationship is mirrored in the rest of the social relations that *Eva Nová* attempts to renew, with varying degrees of success. Her stubborn struggle to get back to a place where there is nothing left any more (at least at first sight) is every actress's utopian struggle for the perfect illusion. Her tragicomic journey in a dress suit, with a suitcase on wheels, only serves to reflect the powerlessness of her acting exercises aimed at renewing her social relationships. Alcohol is like clinical death; once awakened, one is often unable to tell actual dreams from washed out memories of the past. The sophistication used in the depiction of the mother-son relationship (which is quite expectedly the film's central topic), which works with the mirroring of this central topic in other topics, is in my opinion the film's most interesting moment. This is, after all, similar to the treatment given to the topic of alcohol. *Eva Nová* looking directly into the camera, the details of her face (excellent work by makeup artists Zuzana Paulini and Juraj Steiner) and dual, stylistically ambivalent cinematography when it comes to the central character (long, narrow close-ups executed by the cinematographer Ján Meliš are rightfully among the film's dominant elements) support the overall impression of the film.

The final sequence, which takes place in a swimming pool, contains the tragic aspect of the whole narrative in condensed form. Heredity and relatedness are not social constructs. In the preceding sequences, which have a hypnotic rhythm and work with the full scale of expression of the protagonist (for instance, the sequence with a recitation staged in a retirement home and the follow-up Q&A session), the intimate question of human aging resonates strongly – not the environment, the institutions or "the others" but rather the individual tragedy of human life. This, I believe, makes Mark Škop's film special. It is, at the same time, hardly a film debut that stands out; what makes *Eva Nová* attractive is rather its sparseness of expression, its honest work with actors and, last but not least, the accent it puts on topics which do not seem attractive to many these days. Addiction dressed up in a movie star costume remains an inability to understand one's own past.

✉ Michal Kříž



We Are Never Alone	(Nikdy nejsme sami, Czech Republic, 2016)
Director and writer	Petr Václav
Cinematography	Štěpán Kučera
Cast	Karel Roden, Lenka Vlasáková, Miroslav Hanuš, Zdeněk Godla, Klaudia Dudová and others.
Length	105 min.
Distribution CZ	Falcon
Premiere	7 April 2016

The Encyclopedia of Abominations

The rawer the reality “cast” by the screenwriter and director Petr Václav in his films, the further away he appears to move from the real world. His recent titles, *The Way Out* (*Cesta ven*, 2014) and the current *We Are Never Alone* (*Nikdy nejsme sami*, 2016), take place in locations of social exclusion with a cast of non-actors and yet they feel like intellectual constructs divorced from actual reality.

In *The Way Out* Václav piled up all the motifs which a spectator is able to associate with a film dealing with the Romani community: unemployment, usury, distraints, drugs, homelessness, prostitution, theft. Yes, all of these features do in fact often accompany the life of the Romani, but once concentrated to this degree they lose their power and the film becomes a list of dictionary entries rather than a testimony on the state of things.

We Are Never Alone applies the exact same method to the lower social strata of Czech society in general: it is an encyclopedia of perversions which can be most often seen in citizens with a lower rate of income and intelligence. Even the journalistic generalization above sounds condescending and elitist but it is something that Václav actually asks for given his choice of topics and characters which with a remarkably relentless drive take the direction towards rock bottom, depression with no way out.

Most of the characters are linked by the downtrodden convenience store clerk in an ugly gray village in Central Bo-

hemia. She uses her meager salary to support her husband and two sons. The woman falls for a Romani pimp who is likely the owner of the local brothel. The man is nevertheless more interested in one of the Gypsy girls from his own “portfolio”, who however waits for her partner and the probable father of her child. Her partner is serving a sentence in the nearby prison, the workplace of the prison guard who lives next to the clerk’s family and is a friend of her husband.

The closed circle of characters and the way they are determined by the script and their social background offers no way out. Václav takes care to stick the knife all the way in and offer none of his anti-heroes any chance of escape or even dignity. If the husband is unemployed, he has to also be a worthless, aggressive and self-pitying hypochondriac. It is not enough for the prison guard to be really disagreeable, he is also a paranoiac with presidential ambitions. If there are children, at least one of them has to be disabled.

The characters act in ways that lack logic or rationality. A grown-up woman simply takes a ride on a motorcycle to tell an unsuspecting pimp that she loves him, naively expecting a positive response. The prison guard terrorizes his own family but treats the unbearably self-pitying neighbor and his son in an inexplicably kind manner.

Yes, all of the above can be seen as an expression of some sort of meaning. Familiarity with Václav’s previous films, the excellent drama that also takes place in the Romani community, *Marian* (1996), or the portrait of an uneven relationship, *Parallel Worlds* (*Paralelní světy*, 2001), makes it





clear that everything in *We Are Never Alone* is the result of a well thought-out intention on part of the author. The road that runs through the village may be a metaphor of barriers in interpersonal relationships. The action of the female protagonist can be seen as a glimpse of hope and purity rather than naivety. The outwardly nonsensical alteration between black-and-white and full color surely has its own internal order, too. Is there however a unifying gesture?

Likely the only way to interpret the lack of logic and absence of dramatic composition in *We Are Never Alone* is to ascribe this to the intentionally over-the-top grotesque stylization. In *The Way Out*, the relentless display of misery and suffering threatened to turn into social porn and unintentional comedy. This is why Václav took the path of intentional comedy this time, much like his peer Bohdan Sláma in his comedic film *Four Suns* (*Čtyři slunce*, 2012). After all, both Václav's and Sláma's latest films feature Karel Roden in the nearly identical role of a fool dressed in rags with a repulsive haircut. This time he is accompanied by, among others, the lukewarm Lenka Vlasáková (*Parallel Worlds*) and the non-ac-

tor Klaudia Dudová (*The Way Out*), stuck in a histrionic pose.

We Are Never Alone can thus be seen as a combination of satire, social criticism and venomous irony with a rich helping of absurd exaggeration: a hypochondriac tests his own feces using several different senses and a story which takes place in a village in Central Bohemia features an important role played by hundred dollar bills. It is nevertheless tempting to understand the work as more of a conceptual creation than a film, as its author's almost arrogant cry of "understand me, I'm making art here".

✉ Vojtěch Rynda



In Your Dreams	(Ani ve snu!, Czech Republic – Slovakia – Bulgaria, 2016)
Director	Petr Oukropec
Writer	Egon Tobiáš
Cinematography	Tomáš Sysel
Cast	Barbora Štikarová, Klára Melíšková, Jan Vondráček, Ivan Martinka, Toman Rychtera, Jáchym Novotný, Adam Mišík, Martina Kavanová and others.
Length	79 min.
Distribution CZ	CinemArt CZ
Premiere	28 April 2016

While the post-revolution reality of Czech cinema made quite a few directors take up the role of producers of their own films (Jan Svěrák, David Ondříček, Ondřej Trojan, Tomáš Vorel, Viktor Tauš, Jan Prušinovský, etc.), Petr Oukropec took the other direction. Since the mid-1990s when he and Pavel Strnad founded the production company Negativ, he has been amongst the most prominent Czech producers. The company drew attention especially thanks to the films of Saša Gedeon, Bohdan Sláma or Marek Najbrt, occasionally producing even documentary or animated movies. All of these are auteur films with artistic ambition, yet to a certain degree accessible to broader audiences. It was therefore something of a surprise when the 44-year-old Oukropec made his debut five years ago with the children's film *The Blue Tiger* (*Modrý Tigr*, 2011). He confirmed this line of endeavor this spring, when his second film *In Your Dreams* (*Ani ve snu!*, 2016) entered distribution.

Oukropec and screenwriter Egon Tobiáš tell a realistic coming-of-age story about a young girl, with the addition of lyrical "dream" sequences. What we see is a mixture of teenage romance about first relationships and a family and sport drama, whereas none of the genres is fully realized.

Laura (Barbora Štikarová) is about sixteen and lives with her mother (Klára Melíšková) in Prague, only seeing her father (Ivan Martinka) during holidays. She inherited a passion for sports from her father, but unlike him she climbs houses, roofs, lightning rods, handrails, ramps and poles rather than mountains and rocks. She hangs out with a crew of traceurs and her motivation is not only the desire to make her name in the overwhelmingly male discipline, but also to be close to one of the group's leaders. The self-assured boy even tries to make out with Laura, which catches her by surprise. The chaos caused by her own desires is made worse by the discovery that her idol is willing to "emotionally" engage elsewhere. Apart from her own emotional roller coaster, Laura is also bothered by her mother's efforts to find a new partner (Jan Vondráček). The reason why the daughter categorically disagrees with the possibility of her mother having a personal life is nevertheless never made clear.

Laura's inner changeability and volatility is symbolized by her anxiety of elevators, through which she sinks into her subjective evocations. This involves no mere dreaming, fantasies or hallucinations but rather being transported into a

surreal space-time, which at the same time mirrors reality; it is not an accident that the two worlds subsequently overlap. Laura usually finds herself next to a lighthouse on the shore where her desires and insecurities take material form. She makes out with the young man she has a crush on. When she then locks him up in the lighthouse because she cannot have him all for herself, he disappears from the "real world" as well. The introspective sequences form a loose continuity with the similar de-familiarization of reality in *The Blue Tiger*, wherein a girl in her imagination composes elements that complement reality and make fun of the grown-ups' pomposity.

While there is a similar tradition of films in Germany or Scandinavia, it is difficult to rate *In Your Dreams* in the domestic context. Before 1989, films for children and young adults were made due to "social demand", but after the Velvet Revolution their market disappeared. Family films are still being made, especially fairy tale fantasies and family comedies, but films made solely for teenage audiences are with very few exceptions escapist genre titles. In the USA, superhero comic books or young-adult novels are adapted, while in the Czech Republic comedies about teenagers are also popular with older filmgoers. The past decade has seen the success of Karel Janák teen comedies *Snowboarders* (*Snowboardáči*, 2004) and *Rafters* (*Raftáči*, 2006) or films like Vorel's *The Can* (*Gympl*, 2007) which nevertheless gave considerable space to adults and satirical elements. These titles, however, do not even remotely resemble Oukropec's films. *In Your Dreams* is more reminiscent of the psychological coming-of-age dramas with female protagonists shot in the early 1960s by Karel Kachyňa from scripts he co-wrote with Jan Procházka: *The Stress of Youth* (*Trápení*, 1961), *Vertigo* (*Závrať*, 1962), and *The High Wall* (*Vysoká zeď*, 1964).

Oukropec thus picks up the broken line of children's films, whose golden era took place between the 1960s and 1980s. This almost begs the question of whether present day audiences, especially those the same age as the film's protagonists, are even interested in such titles, because the box office results were miserable. This lack of interest may also be related to the unclear target audience. At first glance, the film might not appear attractive enough to the young generation. Fans of parkour may have been put off by the fact that parkour serves as a "mere" backdrop for the story. A film



about young people nevertheless does not necessarily need to be aimed at young people, which is documented by the great interest shown by international festivals. This interest is not caused solely by the film's prestigious premiere at the Berlinale. This time, Oukropec managed to appeal to a mostly grown-up audience that wants to see a low-key drama about contemporary urban youth combined with a poetically conceived insight into the inner life of the young protagonist.

The ultimate effect of films with simple narrative premises is largely dependent on their formal aspect. *In Your Dreams* is less striking due to its subdued character but also more stylistically and conceptually compact than *The Blue Tiger*. What also works well is the combination of professional actors and non-actors, with Barbora Štikarová herself being in the latter group. What she lacks in charisma is made up for by how realistically she portrays a girl struggling to overcome her own low self-confidence. The filmmakers managed to do justice to the atmosphere of a bleak housing estate with large concrete surfaces, roofs, pedestrian bridges and handrails without needlessly putting too much stress on its dreariness, which would distract from the story and move the film towards social critique. Apart from the final sequence, the cinematography does not indulge in "cool" shots of tracers in motion. The mise-en-scène is dominated by cool colors which accentuate life among concrete, with an occasional ray of light entering the grayness thanks to cinematographer Tomáš Sysel's shooting into the sun. The occasional, barely noticeable and definitely in no respect wild hand-held shots evoke the slightly fluttering feelings of the protagonist as well as the uncertainty related to movement at great heights. The relatively low depth of field, especially when it comes to close-ups of the protagonist's face, locks us into Laura's view of the world. The very choice of parkour can be understood as an element that creates meaning, as it allows

the characters to move in an elevated perspective, hence Laura has her head in the clouds literally as well as metaphorically. The logical counterpoint is then formed by her phobia of free-hanging ropes, elevators or even places reminiscent of elevator shafts. The girl is longing for self-confidence, and we can thus see parkour in this sense as an expression of her desire to gracefully master the space we live in. Certain metaphors and symbols are a little too straightforward (the lighthouse, a blaring car alarm representing the protagonist's inner turmoil), where in several places the filmmakers merely skim the surface instead of providing an explanation for certain characters' motivations (such as Laura's animosity towards her mother's partner, or the connection between the objective and the subjective world).

In the end, Laura does not start a relationship, nor does she experience a "true" romance, she sticks with her imagination. Parkour is ultimately the only place for her self-realization. There is no big drama, nothing earth shattering happens to anyone, which on the one hand keeps the film appealingly believable, but on the other leaves behind a slight aftertaste of banality. *In Your Dreams* is a skillfully made and sophisticated film, it nevertheless lacks something which would make it stand out from the plethora of other audiovisual works available today.

✉ Miloš Kameník



BOOKS

Jan Němec

(12. 7. 1936 – 18. 3. 2016)



Jan Němec often attracted attention – especially during the time of the Czech New Wave – with his provocative pride and stubborn reluctance to back down, as well as a certain dose of exhibitionism. Even then however, a certain small number of people, among whom I dare count myself, both suspected and knew what he was really like inside. This can after all be seen in his films from the period and it is something of which I was reassured once again when lately, a day after his passing, Czech Television aired an interview with him, originally shot for its Golden Sixties program. This is further confirmed by his first feature film, *Diamonds of the Night* (1964). After all, the artist himself said all there was to say about himself much later in the documentary *Late Night Talks with Mother* (2001), without any traces of the pompous self-righteousness which he was often accused of and criticized for, once he returned to Prague following his involuntary exile and started to ruffle feathers once again. This time it was in an environment where he was no longer prosecuted by the communist regime but where he nonetheless refused to sell out for money and instead chose to shoot films according to his own beliefs and ideas for the purposes of film art. Even during his lifetime – which unfortunately came to a close a couple of months before his eightieth birth-

day – Jan Němec was at any rate considered to be the most original creator in Czech cinema. The interview he promised me at the beginning of the year, once his latest film *The Wolf from Royal Vineyard Street* (2016) would finish shooting, will now never take place, but his memory will live on in scholarly literature in the form of Jan Bernard's extraordinary monograph *Jan Němec: Enfant Terrible of the Czech New Wave*. The 648-page first volume, published in 2014 by the AMU Publishing House in Prague, was reviewed by Jan Svoboda in *Film a doba*, Issue 2-3/2015, p. 175. Here we bring you an excerpt from the second, equally extensive volume of the book, building on the characteristic spirit of the period, analyses of Němec's films and citations from his texts, interviews with him, as well as testimonies from his co-workers and a number of heretofore unpublished period sources. The second volume of Jan Bernard's respectable work will be published this June and officially launched during the 51st annual Karlovy Vary International Film Festival in memory of laureate Jan Němec, who accepted the Karlovy Vary IFF Special Crystal Globe for extraordinary contributions to world cinema at the award ceremony in 2006.

✉ Eva Zaoralová

XIII. EXILE I – FRANCE, WEST GERMANY

On his arrival in Paris, Jan Němec, whose address book was confiscated by State Security, first contacted dentist Jacques Coulon, the husband of physician Jacqueline Coulon (who was to act in *Heart Beat*). However, since the two were going through a divorce at the time, he ended up with no assistance. Producer Jean Pierre Rassam did throw a magnificent welcome party for him, but showed no interest in his further fortunes. Louis Malle gave him financial support for three months and Forman's friend and collaborator Jean-Claude Carrière would sometimes invite him for dinner and provide him with some minor allowance.^{01, 02}

Němec himself remembered this as having bet on the wrong horse. Had he focused on collaboration with Claude Berri, instead of Rassam who at the time had already developed a massive drug habit, the end result may well have been better. He also had a U. S. visa, as he intended to leave for America to work there, but was ultimately talked out of it by Ivan Passer. He therefore attempted to break through in France with an adaptation of Klíma's *The Sufferings of Prince Sternenhoch*, for which there was also reportedly some interest in Germany, where the book had been published with illustrations by Jiří Kolář. He therefore called on Kolář in Paris with the idea of having him participate in the film's visuals in order to facilitate raising money for the project, but was reportedly turned down. Němec then came up with the proposition of selling the film as a collector's edition VHS tape, which Kolář turned down again as he believed that they would be hard pressed to sell more than a couple of pieces of the product.^{03, 04, 05}

Němec attempted to collaborate with Kolář one more time when a physician from Chicago asked him to produce a documentary as part of a project that involved films about Czech expatriates. When Kolář protested that there would be nothing to shoot since all he ever did is sit and cut out pictures for his collages, Němec jokingly suggested in a phone call that the film could have Kolář biting out the pictures and eventually eating the whole collage once it is completed. Kolář got upset and asked Němec not to call him ever again.⁰⁶

At the end of August 1974, Němec presented his *Diamonds of the Night* at a film club in Lausanne, Switzerland and said: "I wanted this film to be an expression of protest against humiliation, against the sentence of isolation, against oppression. I did not opt for the atmosphere of war in order to dissect it, the way it was, but rather because the topic allowed me to show the basic element of humiliating people." The reporting journalist commented on this: "It is strange and saddening at the same time that this film was not shot after the 'Prague Spring' when Soviet forces suppressed efforts to make the regime more democratic." The American Variety magazine wrote, based on an interview with Němec that revolved around his French exile: "The Czech filmmaker Jan Němec arrived on a two-year visa [...] He gave up making films at home having found out that he could not make any under such unfavorable conditions. He tried writing letters to authorities to have them allow him to either leave the country or shoot his films. [...] The director who is negotiating with

the local film industry people intends to leave for the United States in the future [...] there have been no concrete agreements so far. Němec reminds us that it is not easy to make films in the West."^{07, 08}

Having failed to realize any project in France, Němec decided to try his luck in West Germany. Like a number of other Czech expatriates, he chose Munich as his residence, arriving in January 1975 at the invitation of producer Karel Dirka, who had earlier worked in Czechoslovakia as a photographer. For Dirka's OKO Film, Němec shot a 1975 documentary on a performance by cabaret artist, singer, and voice actor Tommi (Thomas) Piper, which aired on Bavarian television. Němec later commented: "With no money, but with enthusiasm and naiveté, I signed a contract for a short film in Munich. To be more precise, what I signed was a piece of paper wherein the producer added a minor clause to the effect that I may not work with anyone else or even leave the area of West Germany. Any breach of the contract could result in a lawsuit and theoretically even a prison sentence. I managed to have the contract annulled but I nevertheless came to see that friendship in the business world would not be so simple." Němec was to then shoot *The Sufferings of Prince Sternenhoch* for Dirka, in whose apartment he lived at first; however, they fell out over money and some sort of contract fraud and the project was eventually canceled. Němec then wrote me that Dirka had the screenplay rewritten by another expatriate, the writer Ota Filip, and even managed to acquire a grant for the project from the West German Ministry of Interior, although he would eventually have to return the money because he failed to secure the rights to Klíma's work in Prague, and in the end could not see the film through.^{09, 10, 11, 12, 13}

Němec was supposed to direct the TV series *Linda und Laura*, but we do not know when exactly this was to happen. Němec comments: "The *Linda und Laura* series was to be shot for a German producer whose name I don't remember and which ultimately ended up going nowhere."¹⁴

07 24 Heures, Lausanne 1. September 1974. Quoted from ČsKZT 1974, Issue 6A, p. 12.

08 Variety, New York 4 September 1974. Quoted from ČsKZT 1974, Issue 6A, p. 11, 12.

09 He served for example as the voice actor for the wizard Rumburak in Vorlíček's TV series *Arabela* (1979).

10 It is not entirely clear whether he shot it at the beginning of 1975 as some sources say, or at the end of the same year, as he wrote to Jan Bernard (e-mail from 27 September 2013). Karel Dirka said to Jan Bernard in a phone call from 12 November 2013 that the film was shot electronically, that he has no information about it, and the footage was lost. Němec said that it was merely a matter of professional work for hire, made more difficult by the fact that Piper spoke only German, which Němec did not speak at all. The film was supposedly called *Kabarettier* or *Komödiant Tommi Piper*. Interview XIII.

11 Motl, Tomáš. *Upřímná soustrast Jana Němce. Scéna*, 1990, Issue 5 (21. March), p. 8.

12 Interview XIII.

13 From e-mails to Jan Bernard on 3 February 2015 and 7 June 2015. Seven years later, Pavel Juráček wrote to Němec about his own difficulties with Karel Dirka's production: "OKO Film has a very bad reputation. I know, you told me so and wrote to me about it right from the start, and I stood up for Karel, which made me and Igor Luther the only ones to do so in the whole of Munich. The only fools, the way I see it today. I haven't seen Dirka for nine months now. We have a lawsuit against him. Daňa [Horáková, JB] wrote a screenplay for him last year, he received a 520,000 DM grant for it. Daňa (along with Tamara Kafková) talked Werner Schroeter into directing, the film was shot in Prague [...] the film is done now and Dirka refuses to pay Daňa the money. [The film discussed was *Tag der Idioten*, JB] He broke off all contact with me, refused to pay me for the synopsis on Kafka which he ordered from me and filed a lawsuit against me – without any warning – due to an ancient debt of some fifteen hundred." Letter from Pavel Juráček to Jan Němec from 19 August 1981. Archive of Pavel Juráček, correspondence from the 1980s, V. Havel Library.

14 From an e-mail to Jan Bernard, 10 June 2015.

01 Němec, Jan. *Nepodávej ruku číšníkovi*. Praha: Torst 2011, p. 172–176, ev. Zvoníček, Petr. *Případ Jana Němce (Návrat českého filmaře)*. Kino, 1990, Issue 5 (13 March), p. 3, 5.

02 J. Němec in an e-mail to J. Bernard, 7 June 2015.

03 Interview XIV.

04 Klíma Ladislav. *Die Leiden des Fürsten Sternenhoch. Mit Collagen von J. Kolar*. Erste deutsche Ausgabe. Hanau, Müller & Kiepenheuer, 1966.

05 Interview IV.

06 Interview IV.

XIII. 1

CZECH CONNECTION

(Gedanken über meinen eigenen Tod)

The newly established program ZDF Kamera Film offered Němec an avant-garde film with complete creative freedom and choice, the only restriction being the limited budget. Thus the 16mm experimental film *Czech Connection* with the subtitle *Gedanken über meinen eigenen Tod*. *Un film Tchécoslovaque de Jan Němec* came into being over the winter and spring of 1976.^{15, 16}

For the project, Němec managed to recruit sound engineer Vladimír Vízner, with whom he shot *Oratorio for Prague* (1968), and who was also living in Munich at the time. The cinematographer was Slovak expatriate Igor Luther, who had worked with Havetta and Jakubisko back home but was not yet well known in Germany at the time, even though he had worked with Jasný on his *Der Leuchtturm* (1972) and with Wajda on *Pilate and Others* (1972), and was working mostly for television. In 1972, Luther had already won the Beste Kamera prize for cinematography for his work on Ulrich Schamoni's *Eins* (1971); he was subsequently awarded the Goldene Kamera prize for Stanislav Barabáš's *Inferno* (1973) and Michael Verhoeven's *Ein unheimlich starker Abgang* (1973). After 1974, Luther started shooting with Schlöndorff, Schamoni, Syberberg, Wicki, and others.¹⁷

The production was handled for Němec by the ex-wife of Pavel Juráček, Veronika Schamoni, whose assistant was Joanne Schimkus. Němec recalls them both stealing the money he was able to save from the project's budget. Since one sequence involved a brain autopsy, the TV announcer introduced the film with a warning about disturbing imagery. Němec then presented the movie at the Telluride Film Festival. Back home, the film was screened only occasionally after the Velvet Revolution, as part of the Summer Film School in Uherské Hradiště and as part of a retrospective on Němec's films at the Prague Ponrepo cinema.¹⁸

It is a completely distinct and unexpected piece of art, which in fact forms the beginning of a line of work with autobiographical moments and reflections of Němec's feelings brought about by his fairly unsuccessful exile. On the one hand he was able to shoot films in West Germany, but on the other his reception there and in France did not correspond with the expectations of someone who, only a few years prior, had been a world-famous artist. Interest from Czechoslovak expatriates had waned, and Němec was moreover under the impression that his chances were being marred by Fassbinder's critique of his *Oratory*, as well as by his denunciation as an American right-winger, which barred him from receiving support from the Young German Film Committee (Kuratorium Junger Deutscher Film). Since 1965, the Committee had provided funding to young German filmmakers, including television, which gave them creative space in programs such as *Das kleine Fernsehspiel* and the *Tatort* film series. The situation changed in 1974, when the films by young authors started receiving more substantial support from the Filmförderungsanstalt (German Federal Film Board),

15 Translated as *Thoughts on My Own Death*.

16 The captions are barely legible, written in colored crayon. Němec also wrote the script in crayon, similarly to the way Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein used to.

17 Vízner, brother of the actor Oldřich Vízner, later died during a family vacation with his brother on the isle of Elba, when a fire broke out as he was trying to start a gas burner at the local campsite.

18 Interview V.

established by the government in 1969 in cooperation with the Film-Fernseh-Abkommen, an association of TV stations (mainly ARD and ZDF).¹⁹

This is why, in the film, Němec appears as himself in the form of a corpse covered by newspapers found in the beginning by the driver of a red Nissan Datsun cabriolet in a garbage dump where he goes to throw away empty bottles. The scene is made more formally interesting by the addition of the sound of voices and applause at a concert by an English singer, and a circle panorama shot from a low-positioned upturned camera. The driver picks up the suitcase in the corpse's hand, and the murder weapon, a dagger, next to it and takes the body away in his car to the sound of music by Francis Lai (who was to compose music for Cannes 1968) for Hiller's *Love Story*. On-screen captions claim that the film stars Robert Redford, Caroline von Monac and Richard M. Nixon. Redford, however, is present only in the form of a vinyl recording of his voice, and the princess of Monaco and Nixon only in photographs. Hence, this is a clear mystification and provocation.^{20, 21}

We then see the corpse protruding from the car while it drives through a triumphal arch of stone. While cars stop at a traffic light, two young hippie girls put some kind of brooch on it; the shot then segues into a flashback of two different young girls kissing back in Bohemia. An upturned camera then follows the car as it drives by police headquarters, while the next shot involves files labeled "Geheime Staatspolizei", "Staatspolizeileitstelle Prag", "Personalien". We see the inverted spires of Munich Old Town from the viewpoint of the corpse in the car, and flash inserts of a photograph of a girl with bared nipples – likely a large Polaroid picture hung on a wall. This is followed by a return to the shot of a dark-haired girl covering Němec's face. The driver drives the car inside some sort of palace, where he drags Němec's corpse through the hall into an office. We see the title page of a Washington Office of Civilian Defense announcement, followed by another shot of the title page of the Prague Gestapo headquarters file, this time with Jan Němec's name. This is followed by a page from an American newspaper with photographs of the Watergate scandal protagonists. The driver goes through the contents of the suitcase found with the body – a 16mm film roll, a newspaper, Polaroid pictures, gold colored children's shoes, a candelabra with five branches, a dagger, a suitcase and a paper lantern. The driver makes a phone call, then starts writing a message. A somewhat contrived montage segues from a shot of the paper lantern hung by the driver on the window curtain with sounds of the typewriter in the

19 Interview I. Elsewhere he said: "I was introduced to the director Fassbinder, who was seen as the most important figure of the new film. He turned back, spit on the ground and said: 'I will not even shake this CIA agent's hand. He's an imperialist and an American swine!' His gang were all leftists. [...] I did not feel good there, even though I had a job." In Sarvaš, Rostislav. *Nevšední setkání*. Praha: Academia, 2003, p. 23. The meeting with Fassbinder is described in more detail in Plavcová, Alena. *Více děbla! Lidové noviny*, 2012 (16 March), *Pátek Lidových novin*, p. 10.

20 "He is played by Jaroslav Hrdlička, an important figure in the Czech bohemian scene. He was the first husband of Kája Chadimová and a very charismatic person. He divorced Kája and she remarried to Jan Tříška. Back in Bohemia, he earned his living by making ladies' shoes, since no French shoes were imported. In Germany, he made a living by growing forest mushrooms in a cellar. This is normally only possible to do with portobello mushrooms, but he somehow managed to pull it off anyway. Apart from that he had an antique shop where he made counterfeit antiques rather than collect real ones. He had a small house somewhere in Bavaria, he lived with some woman, but he was a friend of mine from Prague so I thought the guy would be a good guide through my death." Interview V.

21 Němec commented on this: "I am making fun of the Bavarian politician Franz Josef Strauss and Nixon. I have Princess Caroline of Monaco as the main female protagonist to symbolize an admired woman from the perspective of the dying director, the one he always wanted to have. That is also why the car has a Monaco registration plate. Nixon is used in authentic photographs from the moment he resigned from office. We also wanted to have Redford as the biggest star." Interview V.

background to a similar lantern placed somewhere in an indoor winter garden, where we see Němec in a mirror holding a Bollex-Paillard camera and shooting a company of several men and girls who seem to include Čepková, but also Heiting and Reimannová. These images are accompanied by Nino Rota's music for Coppola's *The Godfather*. A shot of Němec follows, showing him try to cross over barbed wire above the rail of a bridge and jump to his death in the river below. There is another insert of an image from the winter garden, followed by the Watergate newspaper, this time with an original non-immigrant visa issued to Němec by the American embassy and valid for the period from 27 June until 26 December 1974, the visa which Němec ultimately did not use, having decided to stay in France rather than try to find work in the USA. We then return to a different shot of Čepková in the winter garden, followed by a wide shot of horse riders along the river seen through eyes of Němec on the bridge. There are sounds of an interrogation, most likely from some sort of film about Nazis, accompanying shots of the driver placing Němec's belongings and photographs of some general around the office. We see a girl in a Che Guevara T-shirt and a close-up of her breasts while another girl strips, and the same old photographs that the girl in Bohemia was looking at are now standing on a reed organ in Germany. The reed organ is being played by Němec wearing an American striped shirt, shades, and a bowler hat. Němec is then shown strolling among the antique statues of the Munich Kunstareal, coming across the pair of gold-colored children's shoes arranged in a way reminiscent of Van Gogh's famous 1887 painting *Pair of Shoes*. We return to Slapy in Bohemia with Němec's shots of Helena Čepková and her daughter Petra by a lake, still accompanied by wild electrophonic beat sounds from the reed organ and cuts to Němec playing it. As the driver leaves the palace, the sound switches to a pipe organ, and two men lead Němec, with his hands tied and wearing only a white shirt, through gusts of wind to his execution in the garbage dump. We hear a scream behind a waste pile, a bloody clot thrown out to a cat and the blood-stained dagger.^{22, 23, 24, 25}

In this way, Němec continues to construct his identity in the film as an artist unappreciated in exile, whose background was left behind in Czechoslovakia, and imagines his own death by various means as a possible result, as a protest against this situation, and as a metaphor for "the death of the artist and art".

Thus, items of material evidence from both Němec's real and imaginary lives continue to show up in the film, including childhood photographs with parents and siblings, followed by a shot of an image of the Madonna and child, and shots and photographs from Heiting's and Reimannová's wedding in Bohemia. There are also shots of Němec dancing with girls in a club, including Elisabeth, who is black and with whom they appear to be sipping absinthe from a spoon. Other versions of his death include being buried in dead leaves or

22 "The golden shoes are supposed to be mine, but did in fact belong to a child of Pavel Juráček who also acted in the film." Interview V. The child in question is Judita, the daughter of Pavel and Veronika Juráček, born 14 February 1962.

23 In 1966, Che Guevarra lived in Czechoslovakia for almost half a year, in Ládví close to Prague.

24 "That time I went to the Munich Pinakothek, which has some of the mankind's most valuable golden treasures. I wanted to put myself in the same category by the way I'm walking through there, as an embodiment of a threat to the mankind's greatest gems." Interview V.

25 "It was shot in Slapy in 1974. Since this was my first film in exile, all those things have a personal feeling to them. I arrived utterly devastated by the commies, I saw that my career was gone, and once I was given this chance I wanted to make it as personal as possible, including participating with my own body. Helena Čepková was my last love before I left. I dated her in secret because she was the wife of my friend Petr Čeppek, but they were not living together at the time, they were breaking up. The child was his daughter Petra. I wanted to have the Slapy lake as a memory and body of water, at which I actually ended. Abroad I presented them as my child and girlfriend whom I left behind." Interview V.

his corpse with a beeping telephone receiver next to its ear in a Sheraton hotel room. Two symbolic women or girls always assist at the essential events, which include the autopsy of Němec's body, complete with the extraction and weighing of his brain, to Ennio Morricone's music from *Once Upon a Time in the West*. The autopsy cuts to close-up images of the Madonna, Jesus on the cross, and angels reproduced in a book, accompanied by the ringing of bells. The statues from the Kunstareal also make another appearance. The pathologist stuffs the now empty cranium with old newspapers. Preparation of the corpse for the funeral is juxtaposed with preparation of the bride for the wedding, with shots from the preceding life, and Redford's reading of a text on the life of wolves, how they lose their territories and have come to the brink of extinction as a species. The reading goes on as the scene switches to a funeral in some sort of temple, where Juráček's daughter Judita dusts off the catafalque and Morricone's main theme from *Once Upon a Time in the West* plays again, this time in Mireille Mathieu's interpretation ("Un jour tu reviendras"). Němec is dressed in white and sitting by the altar while the driver standing beneath the US flag in the background salutes him with the same gesture seen in the picture of Nixon. The corpse's answer to this is probably the inscription "Kiss your ass goodbye". The ashes from the crematory are handed over to Elisabeth, who dances in a white dress on the road while spiritual and jazz music plays in the background. Judita Juráčková as a golden angel/devil drives the urn around in a baby carriage and sticks her tongue out. The driver smashes the bones of the incinerated corpse in a mortar, he carries the urn through a snow-covered landscape to the sound of Nixon's resignation speech, sprinkles the ashes on the city from the top of Hitler's bunker, and finishes by throwing down the urn itself. Polaroid pictures are washed away by the tide, a black man looks through them on a beach, and a woman throws darts at them.^{26, 27, 28, 29}

The last part of the film has a distancing character, referring to the creation of the work itself. It is introduced by a newspaper headline about Němec taking photographs in Munich and a shot of Němec begging by a church wall (much like Forman in Cannes '68). This is followed by the title page of a contract with the "Zweites Deutsche Fernsehen – Programmredaktion – Fernsehspiel und Film – Das kleine Fernsehspiel" and a shot of the pages of a handwritten script along with a close up of the signed contract for the film and

26 "He wanted to have a record of the wedding, so he lent me the wonderful Paillard Bolex 16mm camera along with some film material. I used it to shoot Čepková in Slapy and the girls that danced there. [...] Heiting then brought the positive and negatives abroad. At ZDF they looked at them and said to use the wedding scenes since I shot them myself. Those are then the leftovers from the wedding, to which the Czech Connection was created as an addition. And, as it usually goes with me in my travels, I lost all the actual edited footage of the wedding, so that Heiting eventually ended up with nothing." Interview V.

27 "The only production problem was finding a corpse for the autopsy. [...] We found the corpse of a homeless person and the police helped us make sure that he had no relatives and I persuaded the boss of the clinic that it would not be a commercial or a porn movie. The doctor agreed to do it even though it was basically borderline illegal. I used the image as a metaphor. What am I supposed to do in this country when all I have instead of brains is the newspaper you stuffed in my head. [...] Once I had it done, in order to make it more dynamic, I used music from the biggest Hollywood blockbusters, which is why the film cannot be screened pretty much anywhere now. Back in the day, ZDF paid a flat fee for all the copyrights." Interview V.

28 "I understood it as a metaphor for filmmakers and Redford taking their side. I wanted to have him as the biggest star of the film and I found the vinyl in a shop, therefore the copyrights were legally covered." Interview V.

29 "The angel of death is played by Elisabeth, a black girl who was an important part of my life, my girlfriend and lover back in Czechoslovakia, where she studied medicine. Her father was the minister of health in Zambia. In Germany [...] we met in secret. [...] During that taking out of the ashes you can feel that she is a cannibal and how much she was enriched by that dark humor of ours." Interview V. Němec also remembered a story with her voodoo magic, and talked about her in his *Late Night Talks with Mother* and in some of his interviews.

a shot of a vase with the inscription “Czech Connection”. The handwritten end titles cut to shots of Němec dressed in white, walking toward the camera down a road from the palace, pursued by two attendants in white suits (reminiscent of Wiene’s *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*), and to shots of Polaroid pictures from the funeral and attendants with a dog covering his corpse with white paper. The female fingers which touched his photograph earlier now open his watch and spin it on the table like a top. We can hear the watch ticking. Němec’s body leans out from the red Nissan and there is a shot of a triangle with the eye of providence in the middle, which had been shown several times earlier, even as a variant with a clock in place of the eye. The creator’s country of origin and some of the shots are also referred to in the previously mentioned caption “a Czechoslovak film by Jan Němec”, which is nevertheless presented in French, in reference to his stay in Paris and his struggle to create in France.³⁰

The title of the film was inspired by the then famous Friedkin film *The French Connection* (whose rapid cuts and use of a hand-held camera may also have influenced Němec), the drug in this case being black comedy. It allows Němec to use considerable hyperbole, but also a certain dose of bitterness in creating a metaphor for his own death as a famous filmmaker “murdered” by the political situation at home and the creative conditions in exile, where domestic creators and the market took precedence. All of this is done in the form of some sort of post-modernist collage, presenting a juxtaposition of the modernist (avant-garde) stylization of imagery from Němec’s childhood, the last moments spent at home before his exile, his “squalor” in exile and his symbolic “murder” with allusions to the political situation of the period, other planes or ways of life (Elisabeth and the black fishermen), and on the sound level by use of music from contemporary commercial “blockbusters” that symbolize “success”. The very title of the film and the manner of Němec’s “murder” through its “criminal” intrigue refer to the successful model of entertainment cinema, albeit degraded by their subversive character. The modernist level of avant-garde experiment, on the other hand, shows the significant influence of Němec’s favorite filmmaker, Luis Buñuel. Němec’s personal world and his values are co-created by the presentation of his personal friends, similarly to his earlier Czech films. The shots of Němec with a reed organ for the first time in his films constitute his “longed-for” alternative identity as a musician at the moment when he semantizes his “death” as a filmmaker. The film reportedly received a “major critical and media response”,^{31, 32}

Němec then tried out “artist death” in the real world when he agreed to create the film *Das Rückendekolleté*, having faith that his professional skills would allow him to create a high quality work of art even under poor production conditions, which apparently did not work out.³³

30 One page of the script reads, for example: “Colors as signs and ... (illegible). Vulgar lovemaking. The stupid enigma of detective stories. The question of what film is and its possibilities. Beautiful love. Real drama.”

31 “In the way I just want to get a rise out of people simply for the sake of it, I came up with *The Czech Connection* in order to piss them all off. The way I thought about it, the Czech connection, the Czech power is not drugs, but fun, black comedy. The Czech drug is fun, dark humor, and cynicism. That’s what I still believe today.” Interview V.

32 Němec in an e-mail to J. Bernard, 7 June 2015.

33 “The film completes my portrait as a megalomaniac. I really believed it would win something like a critics’ prize. I shot Kafka, *The Czech Connection*, Tommi Piper, so I thought I could do anything. The hell I could....” Interview XIII.

XIV. I MENU – CANNIBALS (MUCHA II)

What was to become likely the first of his American projects was something Jan Němec had already started in Germany. Miloš Forman, who at the time was enjoying the fame brought about by his Oscar winner *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, arranged a couple of appointments for him with people who had the final say in greenlighting projects. Němec met the vice-presidents for project development at United Artists (Marsha Nasatti) and Paramount (Nancy Hardin), both of whom admired Forman and were willing to humor him when it came to giving Němec a shot. He recounted the story for them and they asked him for a script. Němec wrote the screenplay in Czech based on the short story *Menu* and had it translated in English by Michael Helm, the respected translator of Czech fiction, in return for 50% of the profits should the script be sold. That was in the summer of 1977. Having read the script, Hardin left it for him at the studio's gate with a note saying that she found the whole thing vile, cynical, and disgusting and even that she did not ever want to meet him again. Nasatti, on the other hand, did meet him in order to say that the script was revolting and she thought he should get out of the USA fast. She did however find the topic itself interesting and went on to say that while Paramount could never produce the film on moral grounds, it could nevertheless distribute it as long as someone else handled the actual production. Němec therefore started raising money but encountered only con men. It was during the same period that he most likely also worked in Los Angeles for Ping Pong Production as a director for hire who was to serve as a front for money laundering done by the Italian Mob. In a nearby sound studio, Orson Welles was recording commentary for documentaries, and thus the two former giants and outsiders of world cinematography sometimes met.^{01, 02}

In retrospect, Němec wrote of the project as a “funny comedy about evil Americans in Vienna or possibly Prague who spend their time in endless feasts and sex parties where the highlight of the evening is not the act of copulation or group sex but rather a feast wherein the prettiest girl is killed and then eaten by the participants.” The script of the film, which survived as a Czech copy of 29 thickly typed pages with the title of *Menu*, is nevertheless about something slightly different and actually forms a first study of sorts for the later projects *Cool Heat* and *Coje y caiate - His Eminence J. M.*, the screenplays about Jiří Mucha. Among other things, Němec prepared for the production by creating collages that evoked the atmosphere of the future film. He commented on the project: “My point of departure was *Jaws* being the greatest success at the time. I told myself, if sharks eat people in that film, the next step would be people eating people. Meanwhile, a number of such films were produced, such as [the] Mexican [film] *Survive!* (1976, d. René Cardona Jr.), about a rugby team whose planes crashes in the Andes and the survivors are only able to make it thanks to eating the others. At that time, however, it was my total lack of experience with marketing – in terms of what it is possible to get away with. It was to be one of those variations on Jiří Mucha.”^{03, 04, 05, 06}

The basic thesis (cannibalistic consumption of parts of a girl's body) might here represent a mere hallucination of the protagonist, Jiří, who lives with his wife and children in

the USA and arrives in his home country to attend his father's funeral; it certainly does serve as a metaphor for the way of life of a decadent Prague society in the timelessness of Czechoslovak normalization, where almost everything lost any meaning. Jiří's identity as a former RAF pilot and inmate of a communist prison camp was adopted from life of Mucha, but otherwise contains a number of biographical elements from Němec himself. It was in fact Němec's sister whose name was Ludmila, and his father who died during his exile (to whom, due to Landovský's insistence, Němec at least managed to say goodbye before his departure). Jiří flies in from Paris on an Air France Caravelle, which Němec actually used when departing for Paris, and learns about the cannibal feast only thanks to the same kind of detention at the airport that Němec himself went through. Thus, in the character of Jiří, Němec puts himself into the position of Mucha's alter ego, as it were, which corresponds with Němec's admiration towards Mucha and the way he saw him as a role model in many respects.⁰⁷

The second protagonist is Mucha himself under the name Jirka, 10 years (in reality 21) Jiří's senior. The script provides several scenes from his life in the medieval palace at Hradčanské Square No. 6, where he was forced to find refuge with his family once the communists evicted him from his father's villa in Bubeneč. Marta Kadlečiková, his “friend, lover, secretary, partner, maid, cook” and love of many years is described as “unwashed, greasy, tousled, dressed in Jirka's father gown”, someone who founded and manages a “kindergarten” of his girls for sexual games. He also introduces the dark-haired girl (actress Dana Smutná) who “talks eruditely about spying”, a “bed spy” who among others slept with Fidel Castro. The female protagonist is the initiate Schoolgirl who will only be allowed into the “kindergarten” once she is initiated and who is presented in the beginning as being wounded and bloodstained due to Jirka's driver Béda colliding with a doe. Jirka also immediately exposes the meat hook with the doe: “We'll put Schoolgirl on the one right next to it”. Further hints of cannibalism appear throughout the script – the bloodstained clothes belonging to a man that hang on another hook, Jiří's blood in a meat grinder in Jirka's kitchen, Jirka's blood-based “elixir of life”, the “six finger” specialty in the Vodičkova Street Chinese restaurant that Jirka visits in order to bring special spices to the chef, the body of a girl with six fingers on her hands, “blood on fried onions” in the morgue of Jirka's friend, an alcoholic surgeon, presently a pathologist, who used to do even the “most difficult heart surgeries”, and the body of a huntsman in the freezer of the village butcher/innkeeper, who observes girl body parts with delight. This storyline also involves stories narrated within it, such as one about Schoolgirl's ear being bitten off, about Saudi Arabian athletes from a crashed plane being eaten, and a 15-year-old girl's young partner falling into a meat grinder. Jirka's comment to the effect that the shaking bottoms of young girls cause so much misfortune that it would be preferable to “stuff them into wieners and sell them at fairs” can also be subsumed under this category. The climax of this storyline is the projection of an “x-ray” film by a pathologist, with shots of two fetuses in a mother's womb, wherein one devours the other and becomes a two-headed monster. This sequence can be understood as a metaphor for the relationship between Jiří and Jirka, as well as a part of the film's

01 Cf. Interview XIII and Němec, Jan. *Nepodávej ruku číšníkovi*. Praha: Torst, 2011, p. 195-200.

02 Sarvaš, Rostislav. *Nevšední setkání*. Praha: Academia 2003, p. 20

03 Němec, Jan. *Nepodávej ruku číšníkovi*. Praha: Torst, 2011, p. 195–196.

04 Many thanks are due to Hana Jarošová for lending me the script from her private archive. Němec told me that it is most likely the version he wrote at Manhattan Beach in the summer of 1977 (Interview XIII).

05 Some of them were printed in *Reflex*, 1990, Issue 3 (17 April), p. 11, and Issue 4 (24 April), p. 27.

06 Interview XIII

07 Němec, Jan. *Late Night Talks with Mother*. Facets Multi-Media, Chicago, Illinois 2005, DVD.

main metaphor, whereby Mucha's house and his society are presented as a place "where everyone eats everyone else in the spiritual sense".^{08, 09}

The script also contains allusions to Mucha's counterfeiting of paintings and posters of his father, Jiří's encounter with the aged lover of his father, because of whom his mother committed suicide, the fact that the father's funeral may have taken place a day sooner than Jiří arrived, and Jiří's working for Jirka smuggling out Mucha's paintings or forgeries, thinking that in time he could maybe take over the business. There are also allusions to Jirka giving him Schoolgirl for his pleasure, as well as in order to have him protect her from her cruel fate. Jiří eventually refuses to do this and decides to fly back to the USA via Paris. At Prague airport he is arrested for smuggling a lithograph by Alfons Mucha, and finds himself in a timeless no-man's land, and the fact that Jirka drives him to a dinner in a Chinese restaurant might be "reality", but equally well a mere dream or hallucination derived precisely from the previous signals which he interprets as cannibalism. The main course is a girl's hand with six fingers and "just like in the beginning", Béda brings in blood-stained Schoolgirl, the dark-haired spy screams, Marta enters "in her gown, this time completely neat and with perfect make up (...) something like the Eternal Jew or at other times the Eternal Feminine, the same initials (in Czech), entering like the Eternal Reproach, where is my youth and my efforts and my endeavors and my vagina." The pathologist sends in "his boys" and the police, the chef "quickly and precisely" cuts out Schoolgirl's heart and liver, "delicacies for the kitchen" and announces "young liver a la Kuo Mo Zho" for the next day. In the snow with gas burning lamps, two former comrades Jirka and Jiří throw snowballs at each other and "Jiří's whole organism" is permeated with the "definitive knowledge that he would never again break free from this place, these people and their menu."

All of this is steeped in the atmosphere of some sort of strange dream wherein the touches of reality, such as the phone calls with his sister in Brno or his wife in the USA and maybe the flight departure itself, are merely loose anchor points in Jiří's mind during his fall into another reality, reminiscent of Kafkaesque visions or the protagonist's condition in the screenplay *Pravděpodobná tvář* (*The Probable Face*), of which *Menu* is most reminiscent in structure. This is, however, a level of interpretation that was hardly legible for the Hollywood producers, much like the level of critical but at the same time nostalgic view of Mucha's society circle. There are moreover (albeit distant) allusions to Němec's older works – "schoolgirls" ("školkyňky") and "hitchhikers" ("fabričky – Bouchalky") are reminiscent of Chytilová's *Daisies* in their behavior, dialogs, and opinions, which were already used intertextually in *Martyrs of Love*; the pair of girls who assist in taking away Schoolgirl's liver may be a reference to the pair of girl corpses in Němec's *The Czech Connection*; whereas the pathologist's story about his attendant who "used to be a head scout, a tailor, a barber" but was fired from all of these positions "for having perverted tastes" and is now "obsessed with the idea of raping corpses" is inspired by something Němec actually experienced with a barber in the morgue while shooting *Imposters*.

The American writer Philip Roth used a similarly hallucinatory manner of describing his experiences in Prague from 1972–76 for his book *The Prague Orgy* (1985), wherein the actual model for the character of the director Klenka was Jiří Mucha. In the book, Roth narrates his (Nathan Zuckerman's) visit to Prague and his experiences in the Mucha household. If it wasn't for his being deported by the police, Zuckerman too

would have trouble breaking free from this suggestively decadent environment replete with sex, conspiracy, State Security agents, and wiretaps. He introduces it to the American reader in remarkably acute detail: "I imagine Styron washing glasses in a Penn Station barroom, Susan Sontag wrapping buns at a Broadway bakery, Gore Vidal bicycling salamis to school lunchrooms in Queens – I look at the filthy floor and see myself sweeping it."¹⁰

Mucha and the atmosphere in which he lived was also depicted by Arthur Miller in his 1977 play *The Archbishop's Ceiling*, after his 1975 visit to Prague. The character of the writer Adrian has certain features from Miller, while the character of Maya, about whom Adrian supposedly writes a book, has some features from Marta Kadlečiková. Adrian says that he depicts Maya in his book as an "agent who screws all the writers and then blackmails them so they'll give up fighting the government". Mucha is presented under the name of Marcus as a "naive man" and a crook, and the character of the dissident writer Sigmund may be in part inspired by certain features of Václav Havel, Pavel Kohout or Ludvík Vaculík. Marcus is apparently, among other things, a tool of State Security, who try to manipulate him with the theft of Sigmund's manuscript and pressure him to emigrate. Adrian sees Prague "like some Jerusalem" and Mucha's apartment is described as a place of orgies, most likely full of wiretaps hidden behind the baroque angels on the ceiling. The whole play constructs an atmosphere of suspicion, lying, and manipulation where nothing is certain. Sigmund says that Czechs have become excellent liars in order to avoid the pitfalls of normalization: "[...] but perhaps it is not exactly lying because we do not expect to deceive anyone; the professor lies to the student, the student to the professor – but each knows the other is lying. We must lie, it is our only freedom. To lie is our slot machine – we know we cannot win, but it gives us the feeling of hope. It is like a serious play which no one really believes, but the technique is admirable. Our country is now a theatre, where no one is permitted to walk out and everyone is obliged to applaud."¹¹

08 For the testimony of M. Kadlečiková and Vladislav Hlavatý on sexual practices in the Muchas's households at the beginning of the 1970s, see Šopová, Jolana. *Jiří Mucha*. Self-published. 2011, p. 219–220.

09 Němec, Jan. *Cool Heat*. Screenplay manuscript, no page numbers. From the author's archives. For a description of the actual "cooking" in the Muchas's household as remembered by Petr Hapka, cf. Šopová, Jolana. *Jiří Mucha*. Self-published. 2011, p. 193

10 From Philip Roth. *The Prague Orgy*. Toronto: Sixty Eight Publishers Corp., January 1988.

11 See Miller, Arthur. *The Archbishop's Ceiling*. Toronto: Sixty Eight Publishers Corp., October 1989. In his afterword, Christopher Bigsby cites the 1983 scandal involving wiretaps for spying on politicians, businessmen, and diplomats discovered in Washington's Mayflower hotel as a typical example of the atmosphere in the USA as well.

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