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↳ Barefoot

Let's Not Get Devoured by a Parasite



A Look Back at Czech Films of the Past Season

Jaromír Blažejovský

In his long-anticipated film *Insects* (Hmyz, 2018), which this master of Czech surrealism declared to be his last, Jan Švankmajer presents himself as a director staging the story of a group of amateur actors rehearsing the play *From the Life of Insects* (Ze života hmyzu) by the Čapek brothers. Sluggish amateurism can be seen in the film: some actors have not shown up, the most diligent one lacks talent and the director (excellently portrayed by Jaromír Dulava) humiliates his rival in love. In the end, life finds its way into the play, but it is, in fact, death in disguise as a number of actors do not survive the rehearsal. The winner is a railway man (superbly portrayed by Norbert Lichý) playing the role of a parasite who shouts lines from *King Lear* from his slumber and eventually—in what is a flawless performance—devours a larva as well as the actress portraying it.

Critical reviews dubbed *Insects* the weary opus of an exhausted master. The script dates back, however, to 1971, Švankmajer began working on it in the era of the “golden sixties” and completed it at the beginning of the period of normalization, which thwarted the creativity not only of Švankmajer, but of the entire society. The core of his story, in

which the world of insects permeates the world of humans, remained intact, however, and he added a behind-the-scenes look at his special effects techniques while sprinkling it with some Shakespeare. The result places this self-ironic work among those films portraying the torments of creativity. One might name, for example, Fellini's *8½* (Otto e Mezzo, 1963) and Truffaut's *Day for Night* (La Nuit américaine, 1972). It is the group of amateur actors, however, who have to endure this torment, not Švankmajer's crew who know what to do and are very good at their jobs—a delicacy is, for example, the making of fake vomit for Ivana Uhlířová playing Jitka who takes on the role of the larva. Čapek's metaphor of the human rat race narrows itself to a metaphor of an artistic rat race. A dung ball representing art gradually transforms itself into a monster. In the world of art, Švankmajer's comedy is a parable on the mediocrity which suffocates Czech society. If we remain mediocre and indifferent, someone will devour us; most likely a talented parasite.

While *Insects* and its surviving beetle-people do not sink into mediocrity, the same thing cannot be said for other Czech films from last year. Problems with state



↳ Barefoot

funding are not the issue. The State Cinematography Fund allocates about 350 million Czech crowns each year and the Czech public television broadcaster–Czech Television –and its private competitors Nova and Prima invest heavily in original Czech production. Around fifty Czech feature films, approximately twenty of which were documentaries, premiered in Czech cinemas last year. The artistically most interesting projects were paradoxically not the ones made by Czech authors, but rather films from neighbouring countries made under Czech co-production. The winner of the Golden Bear at this year's Berlinale, Adina Pintilie's *Touch Me Not* (Nu mă atinge-mă, 2018), was made with the help of the Czech production company Pink, and proved once again that the best way for Czech companies to achieve success at an international festival is co-production participation on a Romanian project. Three years ago, Berlinale's Silver Bear was awarded to Radu Jude's "eastern" *Aferim!* (2015) made in co-production with the Czech company Endorfilm.

The Certainties of Totality

The waters of the domestic scene were stirred by two outrages. The first one was sparked after Julius Ševčík's latest film *Masaryk* won twelve Czech Lions–the annual awards of the Czech Film and Television Academy. It was the film's cunning strategy of limited distribution that was condemned. Although the film had its nation-wide premiere in March 2017, seven exclusive previews were shown at Prague's Lucerna Cinema just before the end of 2016, making the film eligible to compete in that year. The film's promo campaign could consequently be built around a dozen awards.

A secondary source of doubt was the fact that these twelve awards were given to a film with demonstrable technical qualities, but with a disputable artistic and social meaning. Much like the Düsseldorf Ripper Peter Kürten in the director's previous film *Normal* (2009), the Czech Foreign Secretary Jan Masaryk is depicted in a sensational and exploitive way: as a psychopathic personality with an emphasis on his obsession with sex and (unsubstantiated) fondness for cocaine. *Masaryk* thus ranks among those films that draw on modern Czech history, but present it in an alternative form targeting contemporary popcorn audiences.

The second fiercely debated issue was the result of the 52nd Karlovy Vary IFF where its grand prize, the Crystal Globe, was awarded to the stylistically pure and minimalist film *Little Crusader* (Křižáček, 2017) by Václav Kadrnka. Only a minority of the critics welcomed this original film with praise. Its summer cinema distribution slot did not attract many viewers and this fact provided ammunition to right-wing journalists that used it to unjustly attack the state system of cinematography support.

About half a million viewers came to see *Barefoot* (Po strništi bos, 2017) by the screenwriter Zdeněk Svěrák and the director Jan Svěrák. This film aimed at following up the success of their *Elementary School* (Obecná škola, 1991) as its prequel set in Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia. The film charmingly depicts the life of a schoolboy forced to spend the Protectorate years in the countryside. The strongest character is the boy's cursed uncle (Oldřich Kaiser). His family views him as a black sheep and calls him Vlk (Wolf), but he is the only one who is actually brave and responsible. He supports the partisans and takes part in the May Uprising of 1945. The father-son duo of Zdeněk and Jan Svěrák once again offered their take on male role models in Czech history. Once again, however, they came to the conclusion that we often fail to appreciate great men; this being the problem of us Czechs. Like little Eda, we are raised in small-mindedness. In what would turn out to be his last film, the deceased Jan Tříska excellently depicted the character of Eda's card gambling grandfather. The scenes with children, however, come across as rather clumsy.

The box office success of *Barefoot* is in contrast with the failure of the trilogy *Garden Store* (Zahradnictví, 2017) by the screenwriter Petr Jarchovský and the director Jan Hřebejk. The project is also a prequel to the nostalgic family story from our modern history, the popular comedy *Cosy Dens* (Pelišky, 1999), which Czech people know by heart and which was made by the same authors. Like the project by the father and son team the Svěráks, *Garden Store* is also inspired by the screenwriter's family history. While, however, Hřebejk and Jarchovský were able to resonate with the sentiments of Czech society at the turn of the century, it seems that now they have failed to understand their contemporary audience. Their trilogy attempts to appear like an extraordinary and wise saga, but the story is slow-paced and shallow and often plunges into pathos. Much like the character of the father in Bergman's *Fanny and Alexander* (Fanny och Alexander, 1982), Jiří, who dies at the end of the first part entitled *Family Friend* (Rodinný přítel, 2017, about the life of a Prague family during the Protectorate and after the liberation by the Red Army), appears as a ghost in the following episodes. At the end of the second episode *Deserter* (Dezertér, 2017, about the Stalinist era), the children pass on their roles to grown up versions of themselves.

The narrative calculates with a soap opera effect when the viewers grow to be fond of the characters and are pleased to see them in the following episodes. This did not occur, however, as only *Family Friend* reached the top 50 highest-grossing films in Czech cinemas with only 118 thousand viewers (34th place). Not even the trilogy's last episode *Suitor* (Nápadník, 2017), composed as a spicy comedy, was able to come any closer to the atmosphere of *Cosy Dens*. The

film innovatively depicts the often ignored second half of the 1950s, which was not as cruel as the Stalinist era, not as free as the 1960s, but also had its own hopes and style. With its obtrusive interest in the beginnings of the sex lives of the film's two young male characters, the narrative fades into rather sticky snooping. Similar to *Barefoot, Garden Store* also explores the difficulties of masculinity: the resistance fighter, anti-communist and proclaimed democrat Jindřich (the role played by Jiří Kodet in *Cosy Dens* is masterfully portrayed by Martin Finger in this film) is the authoritarian of the family.

Films about the eras of Nazism and Socialism have been presented for a number of years as the last of their kind: just allow us to make this story and then we will focus on the present. In this respect, the Czech audio-visual output resembles the 1970s and 1980s when a number of films were made about life in the first Czechoslovak Republic, the anti-fascist resistance and the after-war period. One of the reasons was because it was finally ideologically appropriate and safe and it was also the time when the authors came of age. As during the normalization period, we now believe that ideologized depictions of the past are useful in educating our children.

History undoubtedly has more dramatic stories which films will adapt over the years to come. If the films will indeed search for historical truths, some of them may be useful. When, however, someone approaches history without historical qualification, a problem arises. A deterrent example is David Mrnka's directorial debut *Milada* (2017). Mrnka relates the life story of Milada Horáková, Member of Parliament for the Czechoslovak National Socialist Party, who was imprisoned during the Protectorate, placed on trial during the Stalinist era and sentenced to death on the basis of fabricated charges in 1950, in a very simplified manner, perhaps to make it more accessible to foreign audiences. *Milada* was co-funded and co-distributed by the American internet streaming company Netflix. The film's dialogues are historically inaccurate, being rather modern. When, for example, interrogating Horáková, State Security officers use the contemporary term "communist government" rather than "people's democratic government" (the government at the time was not entirely made up of communists). In the English version of the film, Czechoslovak president Klement Gottwald talks about the resignation of "democratic ministers" which is once again a more modern term. The communists always referred to these ministers as "reactionary" or "bourgeois" and reserved the noble term "democracy" for their own propaganda.

A scene set in 1949, in which a secret agent in a dark room somewhere in Washington, D.C. deciphers a dispatch from Horáková who informs him that "Klement Gottwald is the prime minister", is also quite ridiculous. Klement Gottwald was already the president of Czechoslovakia and the prime minister was Antonín Zápotocký by that time. David

Mrnka is in fact communicating to the audiences that Milada Horáková was indeed the person she was tried as, in other words a spy, but a somewhat disoriented one who sends confused messages containing general knowledge to the US.

Critics have learned to label these films as artistically mediocre, but useful for public education. *Milada* does indeed have ambitions to be screened in schools during history classes. Children should, however, be spared the experience. A film as historically inaccurate as *Milada* has no place in the educational process, unless, of course, the teachers use it in a different manner as an example of the difference between a cinematographic shortcut and scientific history.

Marta Nováková, on the other hand, ingeniously overcomes the obstacles of history in her film *8 Heads of Madness* (8 hlav šílenství, 2017) about the life of the Russian poet Anna Barkova who spent a great part of her life in the gulag. Nováková does not strive for historical accuracy which is unattainable under local production conditions, but instead presents a form of a happening: the poet is portrayed by Aneta Langerová, the film's characters use local dialects and the conditions of life in the USSR are depicted by means of simple animated sequences.

Eternally Desperate Comedies

The sludge of the domestic film production pond is formed by romantic comedies, a genre commercially successful ten years ago, but now all used up and stripped of all humour and eroticism. Two contributions by the director Milan Cieslar were released shortly after one other. *Špindl* (2017) is set in a ski resort and depicts the arduous weekend quest of three female friends on the lookout for men. Cieslar's other film, *Unfaithfully Yours* (Věčně tvá nevěrná, 2018), contains even less sex and humour. This film about the promise of wealth in exchange for unfaithfulness, with a plot like from the 1930s and a television-like style, is not worth the ticket to the cinema. At one point in the film, a school blackboard shows the name of Vladimír Körner, the author of the scripts of Milan Cieslar's most ambitious films. I personally see it as the director's call for help. The cheerless comedy *Desperate Ladies Act Desperately* (Zoufalé ženy dělají zoufalé věci, 2018) has not brought much more in terms of fun. The director Filip Renč adapted the successful book of the same name by Halina Pawłowska and desperately tried to make the film interesting at least in terms of its editing and visual style.

The screenwriter Petr Kolečko also tries to write relationship comedies, but does it in such an ironic manner that his films combining sport and sex come across as parodies of their own genre. His ski-comedy *Chasing 50* (Padesátka, 2015), which was the directorial debut of the actor Vojtěch Kotek, attracted around 500,000 viewers to Czech and Slo-

→ President Blaník



vak cinemas. In this film, Kolečko introduced the character of a mass-seducer of mature women. His latest comedy *Bikers* (Bajkeři, 2017), the first feature film of the television director Martin Kopp, takes place on a biking trip during which boys with an unhealthy addiction to the Internet and social media get to know real girls in the real world. Although this road movie is set in charming locations, its most humorous attractions are dialogues in which a foul-mouthed coach parodies cyclist slang.

Although *Quartette* (Kvarteto, 2017) might be labelled as a relationship comedy, it ranks to a higher-tier. The script was written by the psychologist Lubomír Smékal and the film displays a knowledge of real problems. It explores the bohemian lifestyle of four people in their thirties living through unsatisfactory, expired or shallow “non-relationships.” *Quartette* is a film that make you experience the pain of being a failure. Hackneyed jokes are presented as new ones, literary dialogues do not work and often do not make sense and Miroslav Krobot’s direction is theatrical with awkward pauses for laughs that do not come. The film does, however, provide strong images instead of emotions (it deals with the absence of emotions) and sticks in one’s mind. Credit goes to the location of the university city of Olomouc, the film’s spatial composition and its avant-garde soundtrack. In *Quartette*, Krobot demonstrates a better understanding of his characters than in his directorial debut *Nowhere in Moravia* (Díra u Hanušovic, 2014) where renowned Prague actors pretended to be from Moravia and tried to speak in Hanakian dialect.

The flood of celebrity films made by influential people (who use them to show who they know and what they like—mostly themselves) is fortunately subsiding. One of the last examples is *Musicians* (Muzikanti, 2017). This local generation outburst of rock nostalgia was directed by the professional Slovak hit maker Dušan Rapoš, but the person behind the project is Petr Šiška, a musician from Třinec who wrote the script, produced the film and played one of the leading roles. The Polish actress Michalina Olszańska, renowned in the Czech Republic for her soulful portrayal of a real-life killer in the drama *I, Olga Hepnarová* (Já, Olga Hepnarová, 2016), has surprisingly displayed a bit of cheesy sex-appeal in this film.

For Children and about Children

We also witnessed a considerable effort last year to revive our tradition of films for children or films with child heroes. The aforementioned highest-grossing domestic film *Barefoot* can also be put into this category. The second highest-grossing domestic film with more than 400 thousand cinema-goers was a mediocre family comedy by Jiří Chlumský *Over Water* (Špunti na vodě, 2017) which is built around an old premise taken from Marie Poledňáková’s winter comedy *I Enjoy the World with You* (S tebou mě baví svět, 1982): the

fathers have to take their children rafting, while the mothers set out on a girls’ bicycle trip. *Over Water* was also successful in open-air cinemas and the Czech Civic Democratic Party even used it for its election campaign.

There is no Christmas film tradition in the Czech Republic, with this role having been reserved for classical fairy tales for decades. In the last few years, however, there have been some films with explicitly Christmas themes: Karin Babinská’s *Wings of Christmas* (Křídla Vánoc, 2013), Lenka Kny’s *Little Baby Jesus* (Přijde letos Ježíšek?, 2013) and F. A. Brabec’s *Christmas “Killing Joke”* (Vánoční kameňák, 2015). Czechs tend to stop going to the cinema at the beginning of December and focus on shopping and Christmas preparations. During the holidays, they sit home, eat sweets and watch fairy tales on the television from dusk till dawn. The success of Jiří Strach’s fairy tale *Angel of the Lord 2* (Anděl Páně 2, 2016), which premiered in the first week of December and attracted 1.3 million viewers, can therefore be considered a minor miracle.

A year later, Czech Television’s production *The Third Wish* (Přání k máni, 2017), directed by Vít Karas, premiered in the cinemas, but was not a smash hit. It had all the prerequisites, however: a charming story of young love, a magical fictional world and excellent actors of all generations. The film’s spectacular visual style reminiscent of social realism: red—formerly the colour of revolution, now the colour of Santa Claus—was in every scene. There was also a satirical undertone: a rich man named Bosák, who has bought the entire city and now wants to enter politics, will obviously remind the audiences of someone. The film can boast a number of good ideas but becomes tangled up with redundant motifs (a greedy father). It is also a testament to a shift in ideology: while Zdeněk Zelenka’s fairy tale *The Immortal Woman* (Nesmrtelná teta, 1993) made in the beginnings of the economic transformation of the Czech Republic had the allegorical character of Jealousy as its main villain (to help Czech people come to terms with the coming material inequality), in *The Third Wish* the main villain is a very unsympathetic wealthy businessman, who is in fact the main protagonist of the aforementioned transformation. Even he, however, is eventually drawn into the film’s reconciliation conclusion.

It was perhaps the fact that Czech people do not tend to frequent cinemas in December that made Zdeněk Troška schedule the premiere of his latest fairy tale *Pure Devilry* (Čertoviny, 2018) in January. His film uses images reminiscent of colouring books to cover a lengthy, tedious and ordinary story with no morale. It is apparently not an option for Troška to take a break, find a good screenwriter and focus on a quality project.

After *The Oddsockeaters* (Lichožrouti, 2016) by the writer Pavel Šrut and the graphic artist Galina Miklínová, we

→ President Blaník





↳ Quartette

had the opportunity to see two more long prepared and radical animated projects. In their visually impressive spectacle *Harvie and the Magic Museum* (Hurvínek a kouzelné museum, 2017), Martin Kotík and Inna Jevlannikova took the popular wooden puppet that has, along with his father Spejbl and friend Mánička, been entertaining Czech children since the 1920s and adapted it to the world of digital media. The result is fast and furious.

While *Harvie and the Magic Museum* was screened by multiplexes alongside Hollywood blockbusters and attracted almost 200 thousand people, Aurel Klimt's puppet film *Laika* (Lajka, 2017) did not make it to cinema distribution and ended up with only 6 thousand viewers, as if an artistic experiment. The story of the unfortunate dog who was launched into space on 3 November 1957 is divided into four parts: the most impressive first part depicts the dog's tough life in the icy parts of the Soviet Union, the second part portrays the not-so-humorous pre-flight preparations, the third part follows the flight itself onto which Laika secretly smuggles her puppies, and the film concludes with the settlement of an unknown planet in scenes which sink into lewd humour. The reaction of the audiences to the crude humour in a film, presented as a film for children, was rather indignant.

The once very productive genre of films with troublesome children and youths has recently been picked up by Slovak filmmakers. Since their films are usually made in a Slovak-Czech co-production, they are definitely deserving for inclusion in this recapitulation. A typical feature of these stories is the suffering of their underage heroes and the guilt of a heartless mother who neglects her own daughter or simply does not understand her. In Iveta Grófová's *Little Harbour* (Piata loď, 2017), an emotionally deprived girl steals a stroller and then showers the stolen twins with love she never knew. After her parents break-up, the main protagonist of Juraj Lehotský's *Nina* (2017) has to stay with her reserved mother even though she is much closer to her bohemian father who works as a crane operator.

Tereza Nvotová's *Filthy* (Špina, 2017) tells a hard-to-believe story of a high school girl who is raped by her favourite home teacher. She tries to cut her wrists during a family party and ends up in a mental hospital. While Iveta Grófová lightens the story with elements of magic realism and Juraj Lehotský tries to embellish his narrative by means of editing and a visual style, *Filthy* is a manifestation of darkness. The

↳ Quartette



↳ Quartette

lives of teenagers bring only suffering and depression. Parents and doctors are of no help and the only way out is either suicide or revenge. Tereza Nvotová demonstrates that growing up can be hell. *Filthy* is a forced film which perhaps goes too far in its criticism of the Czech healthcare system, but is truly compelling and received the Czech Film Critics' Award for the Best Film of 2017. *Filthy* is one of the few films which addresses a serious issue and criticizes society.

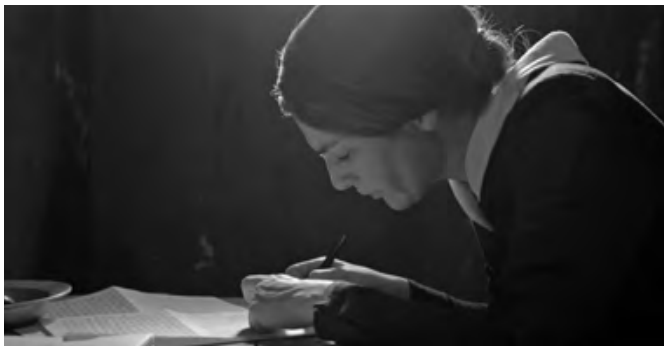
Involvement and Activism

A critical stance was expected from Marek Najbrt and his team. Their *President Blaník* (Prezident Blaník, 2018) is a feature follow-up to their satirical show broadcast online by Stream.cz. It is admirable that the authors made the last changes to their film on the day that the results of the presidential election were announced and premiered the eagerly anticipated film only five days later. *President Blaník* is not a story, however, that projects real-life people into its fictitious characters. The politicians are real and the fictitious lobbyist Tonda Blaník only embodies the words and acts of many of them but in particular of his own. The film, however, was unable to capture what was truly amusing about the presidential campaign, especially in the period between its first and second round. It is therefore not a parody of political life, but rather a pastiche: it is not about laughing at politicians, but about getting closer to them and enjoying the campaign with them. *President Blaník* depicted the presidential election as a national carnival where the results are not that important. You are witness to people wearing the masks of all the candidates at the film's premiere. Perhaps it is more of a joyful unifying vision, a more real image of the political situation than the apocalyptic analyses made by political scientists and journalists who once again envisioned the end of democracy and a divided society.

Robin Kvapil's subversive satire *Everything's Gonna be Fine* (Všechno bude fajn, 2017) was presented as an underground project screened in alternative venues. It did not have a nation-wide context, but was aimed at the city council of Brno. The Brno depression stems from many years of living with the fact that in the Czech Republic's second largest city, everything goes wrong. Its inferiority complex is deeply rooted in history: Brno has always aspired to become the country's second centre, but during the communist era, its ambitions were degraded to the position of an ordinary re-

↳ Quartette





↳ Milada

gional city. The inhabitants of Brno have to swallow very bitter pills in the form of their city's failures such as the black astronomical clock on Freedom Square from which one cannot even tell the time. And not everyone loves the city's annual fireworks festival. Despite these facts, Brno regularly ranks high among European cities offering a high quality of life.

The most successful comedy of recent years—as far as the number of laughs is considered—was Petr Zelenka's twelve-episode-series *Dabing Street* (Dabing Street, 2018), a biting satire on the myth that Czech dubbing is something that the world allegedly envies. Another successful television production was *Maria Theresa* (Marie Terezie, 2017) a Czech-Austrian-Hungarian-Slovak historical miniseries with a humorous script by Mirka Zlatníková and directed by the Romanian-born director Robert Dornhelm. The reviewers scorned the film's romantic-adventurous portrayal of the young Austrian queen as a Central-European Angelique, but it is a pleasure to experience a domestic film with hoofbeats in it after a long period of time. The film's feminist elements and irony prevent it from being tacky. *Maria Theresa* became another holiday fairy tale broadcast on television. It had high ratings in all the co-producers' countries and was unfortunately not distributed to cinemas.

The partly improvised road movie *Skokan* (2017), in which a young Romani boy decides to head to Cannes and confront Italian mobsters who have his girlfriend, can only be accepted when considered as a time-off for its author Petr Václav, a renowned director of films exploring the life of marginalized communities.

Documentary films are expected to be critical. Last year's most debated documentary was the "portrait of a gentle neo-Nazi" from a small Moravian town as served by Vít Klusák in his time-lapse but largely staged documentary *The White World According to Daliborek* (Svět podle Daliborka, 2017). This relatively high-grossing and captivating film was not welcomed as a study of the social roots of neo-Nazism, but rather rejected as a form of manipulation demonstrating the moral superiority of Vít Klusák as a Prague liberal intellectual over a provincial representative of the far-right who was just being used for this film. The film can, however, be seen as a film essay or the director's personal contemplation.

Vít Janeček and Zuzana Piussi took part in the parliamentary election campaign with their pamphlet *Common Sense* (Selský rozum, 2017) attacking the businessman Andrej Babiš

↳ Milada



↳ Milada

who controls a substantial part of Czech agricultural production, media and runs the most successful political party ANO. The winner of the Jihlava International Documentary Film Festival, the television documentary *The Limits of Work* (Hranice práce, 2017) also partly addresses Babiš's poultry farms. The director Apolena Rychlíková follows and secretly films the reporter Saša Uhlová who takes employment at various companies that pay low salaries for hard and unpleasant work. Activist documentaries use a rhetorical strategy that tries to draw attention, not only to social reality, but also portray its authors and their collaborators as the real heroes; they appear in their films with their children or as vegetarians, etc.

The documentary film scene has been taken over by portraits of artists. It is undoubtedly praiseworthy to record their testimonies for the future and audiences have therefore had an opportunity to view portraits of the opera singer Soňa Červená in Olga Sommerová's *Červená* (2017), the popular rocker Vladimír Mišík in Jitka Němcová's humorous fantastic creation *Let Mišík Sing!* (Nechte zpívat Mišíka, 2017) and the sorrows of another popular singer in Miro Remo's *Richard Müller: This is Not Me* (Richard Müller: Nepoznaný, 2017). In his film *Alone* (Sama, 2017), Otakar Falfr depicts the last days in the life of the Czech actress Luba Skořepová and in *Non-replantable* (Nepřesaditelný, 2017), Igor Chaun follows Jiří X. Doležal, a very influential journalist from the Czech magazine Reflex. Miroslav Janek dedicated his collage *Universum Brdečka* (2017) to the memory of the renowned filmmaker and animator Jiří Brdečka. In *H*ART ON* (Vzrušení, 2017), Andrea Culková explores the personality of the graphic artist Zdenek Rykr. Jiří Sádek's documentary *Following* (Nejsledovanější, 2017) focuses on the youngest celebrities: youtubers. The film had a wide cinema distribution, but not many fans bothered to see their idols in cinemas.

In the last year, the Czech media has repeatedly reported how prosperous the Czech economy is and also how each new Czech film has reached a new low. The machine of cinematography works, but the results remain mediocre and poor. The common denominator of many of the films is their dullness and drabness. It is as if their authors knew very well that they had run out of ideas and were not even attempting to conceal it. Two seasons ago it seemed as if a new wave was arising, but this hope has unfortunately been lost.

×

↳ Milada



Activist Documentary as an Interactive Platform

Janis Prášil

This original activist documentary keeps a distance from the image of society as presented by the media while revealing the mechanisms which exercise ideological, political and economic powers. This art category is currently represented in the Czech and Slovak lands by films such as *Empire Builders* (Budovatelé říše, 2018) by Andran Abramjan, *God Forsaken* (Bohu žel, 2018) by Saša Dlouhý, *When the War Comes* (Až přijde válka, 2018) by Jan Gebert or *The White World According to Daliborek* (Svět podle Daliborka, 2017) by Vít Klusák. The process of creation of these works dates back to 2015. They explore the infiltration of extremist thinking into society after Europe began to close its borders and to put up walls. Another group of films, linked by a common topic, includes *Arms Ready* (Do zbraně, 2016) by Barbora Chalupová, *Limits of Work* (Hranice práce, 2017) by Apolena Rychlíková or *Common Sense* (Selský rozum, 2017) by Zuzana Piussi and Vít Janeček. They turn a spotlight on a certain kind of social mechanism, working with examples of the clash between the individual and the system. These strikingly original works provide an alternative picture of society and point out the artificial nature of the world of media, while confessing to a certain level of media artificiality of their own. The sociologist Jiří Bystřický defines “mediality”, i.e. the indirect character of information, not only as a characteristic, but also as a state of things, and therefore an “interactive platform” and an “environment for contact between different worlds.”⁰¹ The same kind of interactive

platform is introduced by documentary films as an opinion base where different worlds interact with one other, and also with the author and the audience.

Depending on the manner the heterogeneous worlds are connected and on the level of the author’s voice explicitness, the film theoretician Bill Nichols distinguishes between six modes of documentary films. The extremities of the range of six modes are represented by the observational works of Sergei Loznitsa on the one hand and the participatory documentaries by Michael Moore on the other. Loznitsa does not enter the events in front of the camera nor does he initiate them; his voice as an author is implicit. This is why his observational documentaries often come across as objective and uneventful. Moore’s participative documentaries, on the other hand, are based on the explicit participation of the author in front of the camera, where the creator becomes one of the characters and one of the action-generating elements. Within the category of participatory documentaries, works can be further described as either manipulative or exhibitionist. Both antipoles have a broad range of means of expression to grasp the reality at their disposal. The analysis following below, examining the extent of representation of different opinion groups and the expression of the author’s voice, shows how creators of Czech activist documentaries approach contemporary reality and try to change the public’s way of thinking.⁰²

01 Jiří Bystřický, *Medialita a problémy zprostředkování*. Available at <<http://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/medialita.pdf>> [cit. 4. 4. 2018].

02 The modes are: observational, participatory, performative, poetic, reflexive, and expository. Bill Nichols, *Úvod do dokumentárního filmu*. Praha: Akademie múzických umění 2010.



↳ Empire Builders

I.

When the War Comes, the full-length documentary debut of the historian, journalist and documentarist Jan Gebert, examines the way a paramilitary group works in the centre of Europe. It follows the character of Peter Švrček, who uses his extreme right-wing views to mobilize men of different age groups and social classes to be ready to fight for their country. Part of the audience at Berlinale, where the film opened the Panorama Dokumente section, was horrified by the fact that the author did not condemn his characters, who were reminiscent of SA troops. Gebert did not distance himself from the ideological beliefs of the recruits, nor did he provide a manual on what approach to take with them. This is not to say that his work lacks a viewpoint. His perspective is strongly voiced on two levels: when Gebert dismantles the character's self-image and when he views him as an archetype. Švrček presents himself as a capable commander, having gone through training with the Cossacks, and as a man who carefully protects his reputation in the media and in front of state authorities. The author disturbs the character's self-image by showing Švrček as a young, financially secure student who lives with his parents, has a girlfriend and wants to become an archaeologist. The contrast between these two sides of his character creates a conflict which grows even stronger in the moments of "revelation", showing Švrček preaching one thing and doing another. These key moments include a scene where the young man confesses that denying his political ambitions to a TV reporter was a lie. It is a flagrant contradiction of the organization's apolitical character, this being a condition of its legal existence.⁰³

The fact that Gebert, throughout the making of the film, did not encounter any signs of public disapproval of the recruits' opinions is a symptom demonstrating society's growing tolerance of extremism. *When the War Comes* is by no means a one-sided film. It does not show a conflict between two rivals, but rather the archetypal ruler-subject relationship. Gebert sees Švrček as a "politician prototype support-

ed in what he does by his entourage."⁰⁴ The entourage is embodied by the recruits as a collective character, allowing themselves voluntarily and deliberately to be controlled in exchange for a share in power under the form of membership in Švrček's community. It is not an example, however, of a parasitical relation between the oppressor and the oppressed but rather a symbiotic ruler-subject relation. The interaction of the two archetypes reveals the mechanisms of totalitarian power, such as the requirement of absolute loyalty, deprivation of all decision-making powers, cancellation of elections or depersonalization of recruits through uniformity, humiliation and addressing them with numbers instead of names.

Gebert's film is not, however, about the recruits in the first place, it is rather about the circumstances that allow for the creation and existence of such a group. A paramilitary group in the centre of Europe is a symptom of social insecurity which, according to the author, is artificially created by political representation. The latter uses populism and fear rhetoric in order to create the need for the rule of a firm hand and shift the norms of the acceptable. Gebert is tearing down a social stereotype by revealing new forms of right-wing extremism and by taking a nonpreachy approach, contrary to the audience's expectations. The conflict he brings about is not on screen but in the audience's minds. He transfers the responsibility of formulating one's own opinion onto the audience, while sparking off a public debate.⁰⁵

II.

Empire Builders directed by Andran Abramjan has a shared approach and message with Gebert's film. This look into the backstage of the right-wing populist political party Blok proti islámu (Block against Islam) shows its leaders Martin Konvička, Petr Hampl and Tomáš Měšťan explaining the ideological background of their party, preparing an election campaign and influencing public opinion. Abramjan, along with Gebert, listen to his characters without physically entering

⁰³ Interview with Jan Gebert for denik.cz. Available at <<https://www.denik.cz/film/rodice-je-povazuji-za-neskodne-skauty-rika-v-berlinale-jan-gebert-20180220.html>> [published on 21 February 2018; cit. 8. 4. 2018].

⁰⁴ Interview with Jan Gebert for East European Film Bulletin, vol. 82, February 2018. Available at <<https://eefb.org/interviews/jan-gebert-on-when-the-war-comes>> [cit. 9. 4. 2018].

⁰⁵ Interview with Jan Gebert for denik.cz. Available at <<https://www.denik.cz/film/rodice-je-povazuji-za-neskodne-skauty-rika-v-berlinale-jan-gebert-20180220.html>> [Published on 21. 2. 2018; cit. 8 April 2018].

their world or commenting on their actions. Although classified as docu-fiction, his film parts from the observational approach and instead works with reflexive features. It contains a number of set-up situations and actively reacts to Měšťan's self-stylization. This does not mean, however, that what we see is a made-up story and that the characters are fictional. The set-up situations and stylized sequences serve to point out the artificial character of the political leaders' image in the media.

Abramjan's approach to Tomáš Měšťan as his character is similar to Vít Klusák's stance towards the protagonist of his *White World According to Daliborek*. Both creators amplify the roles their characters want to play. In *Empire Builders*, we are confronted with role-playing immediately from the introductory cross-cut sequence. It begins by showing Měšťan behind the camera, followed by a view of a refugee camp, then a shot of the anti-immigration political figure Martin Konvička making a promotional video, a look at an anti-immigration protest and finally, a shot of an artillery gun, which is also the leitmotiv of the film. The sequence is closed with another look at Měšťan, stating that he does not want to be a politician but a puppet master. The entire sequence is deliberately cut to show Měšťan as someone who stands aside while initiating and discretely controlling all the processes. Additional symptomatic moments include a seemingly silent scene with Měšťan spending his holiday in a camp, throwing his dog into the water or letting it run behind the car. Although the scene has no connection with the character's political activity, Abramjan uses it to complete the archetype of the "puppet master" as a manipulator without empathy who is merely having fun.

An ideology needs a story and this story is figuratively and literally speaking co-authored by the "puppet master" Měšťan, who is responsible for the promotion of his political movement on the Internet. His task is to communicate a vision of what society should be like to voters and what it should avoid. Abramjan uses the character to show the process of creating a campaign based on fearmongering. Měšťan, Konvička and Hampl fabricate a story of a fight against an enemy called Islam and even adapt history to fit the story, while taking advantage of the symbols of the Czech state. The film named after Boris Vian's absurd play does not primarily examine the political movement, just as Gebert did not make his film exclusively about militias. The "puppet master" character who "wants to move into politics, where corrup-

tion is the only ruler, to restore ideology, no matter if it's left-wing or right-wing" ends up becoming the destructive factor causing the break up between the *Blok proti islámu* and *Úsvit - Národní koalice* movements. The leitmotiv image of an artillery gun, inspiring a feeling of security at the beginning, is shown again at the end of the film with a little bird emerging out of it. This represents the point of the film as well as the author's comment on the events in front of the camera.

III.

God Forsaken, whose subheading reads "This Country Is Not Yours", follows the everyday lives of six asylum seekers in the Czech Republic, showing how refugees from Georgia, Iraq, Nigeria, Syria and Russia deal with life in a different culture. The author made the film not as a political appeal but rather as a sociological study of a historical phenomenon and a way to examine further the subject of uprootedness, to which he already dedicated his previous documentary *Liebe Indigo* (Liebe Indigo, 2013). Dlouhý, similarly to Gebert, tries to understand the characters, keeping his opposing views to the side. Several shots from an anti-immigrant protest show, however, that the refugees are the third party in the dispute, representing its object, which is in fact excluded from the debate. At the end of the day, *God Forsaken* becomes a political film not only due to its capturing the xenophobic atmosphere in society, but also thanks to the fact that it defies the audience's expectations as formed by the mainstream media.

Dlouhý rejects the virtual image of the migration crisis and instead of showing emotionally escalated scenes of suffering, provides a civil study of the refugees' lives. He takes footage of the characters in their new homes or dealing with authorities. He follows the progress of their cases, as well as the manner in which they integrate into society and the transformations in their attitudes towards the atmosphere in the Czech Republic. He does not, however, attempt to create a glorified image of a "model refugee" as a response to the xenophobic moods of part of Czech society. Nor does he try to fit characters with diverging views and different fates into one pattern of "the refugee story". He points out how difficult it is for a European to identify with the drastic experience, hardly imaginable given the cultural context, and warns that traumatic experiences are untransmissible.

The author's voice, implicitly present throughout the film, stands out more prominently when approaching the

↳ Common Sense



symbols of the Czech state and when making references to Czech history. Footage of sculptures of human figures made by Olbram Zoubek as a commemoration of the victims of the Communist era draws a parallel between the victims of totalitarianism and the immigrants. With this visual comment, Dlouhý points out the common features of “our” past and “their” present. His work with the soundtrack, including a quite meaning-loaded citation of Smetana’s *My Country* or repeated use of the Czech national anthem in different contexts, is also characteristic for the film. The *Kde domov můj* anthem bears different values when played at an anti-Islamic demonstration or when adapted as a folk song, referring to the refugees’ fates. *God Forsaken*, along with *Empire Builders*, is meant to contribute to the audience’s media literacy and prevent fearful and extremist moods from spreading, despite the mainstream media.

IV.

White World According to Daliborek, in which Vít Klusák paints a portrait of a neo-Nazi, takes staging events and stylization much further than the docu-fiction of *Empire Builders*. To prove this, one can take as an example a comical performance during which the main protagonist, Dalibor, dances in the middle of a yellow field of blooming rapeseed, while reciting a love poem, or the moment the character uses his mobile phone to make a video of a staged beheading of his own mother. Klusák also underlines the grotesquely scary stylization on other levels of the film starting with the subheading “Documentary Horror”, a reference to a genre of fiction. Another example is the heavy metal music framing a number of the scenes. Klusák follows the character much further into his privacy than Gebert in *When the War Comes*. The picture of Dalibor’s private universe is full of references to normative social categories. We see him as a neo-Nazi, surrounding himself with symbols of power at home, but also as a nearly 40-year old man living still in his child’s room at his mother’s, a worker employed in the same paint shop for 16 years, a solitary man who wants to be part of a community but stays away from neo-Nazi events where he could openly declare his lifelong attitude as a political stance, or as a lonely man longing for a relationship. The portrait is not, however, a self-serving miniature making the character a schematic object of ridicule.

Klusák allows Dalibor to actively take part in the final form of the film, when he uses his promotional videos, per-

formances, poems and songs or when he films staged scenes with him. He creates a richly structured context, intersected by an implicit narrative thread. Little by little, Klusák leads his object out of the safe haven of his home and directs him towards a clash with an institution. During the emotionally escalated visit to Auschwitz, where Dalibor denies the Holocaust in the presence of a survivor, the film completely parts with analysis and focuses on the conflict between the protagonist and the director, who openly expresses his disagreement on camera. A similarly confrontational approach was taken by the documentarist Tomáš Kratochvíl in his *Classmates* (*Spolužáci*, 2017), made as part of the *Czech Journal* (*Český žurnál*) series. In an open dialogue with his former classmate and a neo-Nazi, the author acts as an authority and forces the protagonist to move to the defensive. The use of pressure along with the confrontational approach does not result in a change of mind on the part of the character, but it does show the strength of his ideological beliefs.

The White World According to Daliborek combines features of both participatory and reflexive documentaries. The author steps out from behind the camera, shifting attention from the character towards interaction between the author and the protagonist, or the author and his audience. Klusák stylizes the world of the character and even partly sets situations up, making the artificial mediated character of the depicted universe all the more visible. These are the reasons why *The White World According to Daliborek* is often labelled as manipulative and inauthentic. In reality, however, the film says something similar to the documentaries by Gebert or Abramjan, only with different means. It looks into a certain segment of society adherent to an ideology based on fearmongering.

V.

Another documentary, combining reflexive and participatory features, is Barbora Chalupová’s mid-length student film *Arms Ready*. In the survey part, it examines the reasons why people apply for firearms licences, while in the second part, it goes through the process of legally acquiring a gun. The author’s voice maintains a clear distance from the characters throughout the film. The director’s voiceover comments consist of derisory remarks about the videos found for the purpose of the film on the Internet as well as the protagonists themselves, and it is strong enough to degrade the role of the visual as the main carrier of the message to a mere

→ White World According to Daliborek



illustration. Interviews with protagonists and videos from the Internet are not used as a source of information but are used by the author as material to take a stance in response to, with no effort at understanding.

The participatory level of the film consists of the director's commentary and her stepping out from behind the camera and becoming one of the characters with a storyline of her own. In terms of form, the participatory mode is diversified with certain reflexive elements, creating a film within the film and blurring the lines between the material found on the Internet and the recordings Chalupová collected in the field. Features such as the spectacular revelation of the origin of the materials or the playing with the audience's expectations are introduced as early as in the opening scene. It is only when the image circle narrows to show the Internet interface that surrounds it, it becomes clear that the commented footage from an arms-producing factory was in fact part of a promotional video. In *Arms Ready*, the reflexive, the participatory, and the performative level come together. There is a film within a film, there is the director interfering in the events in front of the camera, there are her feelings and her personal experience. The "plagiaristic political manifesto", as the provocative, semi-anarchistic work is called by the author herself, is less concerned with ideology and more with the system, as it moves along the line between law and the criminal underworld. Similarly to Petra Nesvačilová, who made contact with a mafia member for her *Helena's Law* (Zákon Helena, 2016), Chalupová shows the invisible processes running in the background of the dark side of the system.

VI.

The Limits of Work by Apolena Rychlíková and Saša Uhlová provides an insider report of the worst remunerated working positions and shows yet another dark side of society besides that shown by Chalupová in *Arms Ready*. Uhlová, using a hidden camera to obtain footage of working conditions in a poultry plant, a waste sorting facility or a hospital laundry service, fails, however, to provide new facts or a constructive solution. She merely reveals already universally known information about illegal long working hours, inequality of pay between temporary workers sent by agencies and in-house employees, or illegal hiring of foreign workers. The informational value of the film therefore consists mainly of the suggestive transmission of personal experience through which it is easier to understand some of the more general social processes.

Although the *Limits of Work* is mainly reportage with elements of the participatory mode, its emphasis on subjectivity, emotions and personal experience are in line with the performative documentary concept. It uses the form of a journal and a personal confession to show what it is like to be in a certain situation. Uhlová shares her feelings about looking for a job or attending a job interview and describes her physical and psychological exhaustion and disillusion. Thanks to the method based on experience, she is able to cover a wide range of issues that form the attitudes and lives of part of society. Exhaustion, lack of time for personal life, poor interpersonal relationships and a sense of helplessness and fear reveal the failings of a system which tolerates social injustice and violation of law, while fuelling fear in people. The antagonist is represented by both the employer and the state, whose inaction maintains the status quo. The reporter does not, however, provide evidence in the way Silvie Dymáková did in her *Crooks* (*Šmejdi*, 2013), when she recorded aggressive business practices and initiated a change of legislation. Instead of a political film, Uhlová and Rychlíková created an activist sociological study, activating the audience with experience rather than facts.

VII.

Common Sense, directed by Zuzana Piussi and Vít Janeček, examines the negative impact of economic and political forces on the development of Czech rural areas. This

documentary with a strong authorial voice and a clear stance is based on very meticulous argumentation and revelation of larger contexts. It is primarily created in the expository mode, placing increased stress on the commentary than the rather complementary image. Immediately from the opening scene, we are introduced through a "voice from above", telling us a story about a farmer. The comments by several investigative journalists continue to uncover new facts, supported by statements from experts and witnesses. The dominant oral commentary is illustrated by visual content including statistics, animated segments or images of the Czech countryside, as well as footage showing fields, farms or machinery.

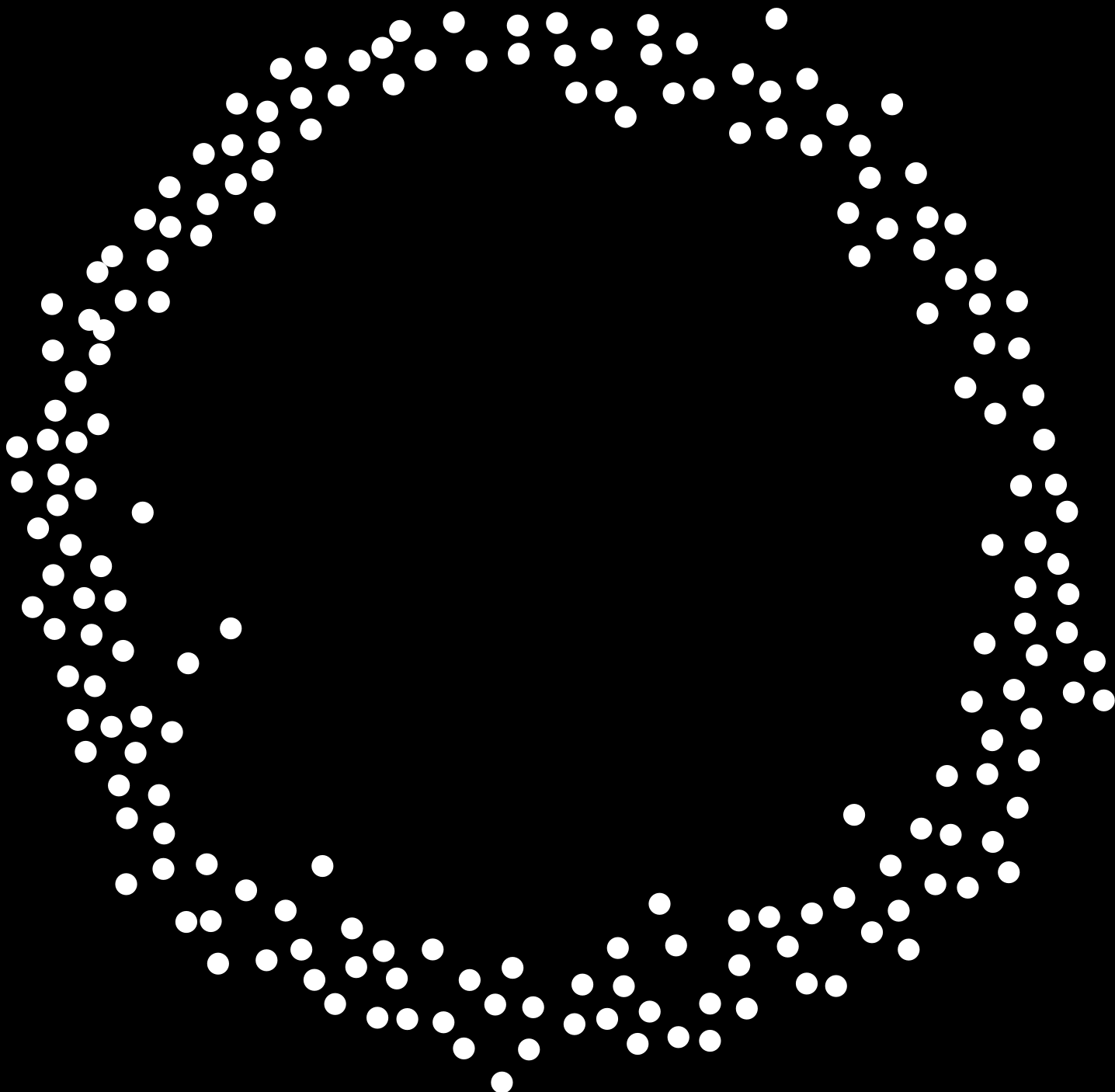
The controversy about the film, examining the way the Czech mogul and politician Andrej Babiš runs his business and impacts the Czech countryside, was triggered by the fact that it does not include the view of the other party. Unlike in Klusák's *Matrix AB* (*Matrix AB*, 2015), from a Czech Journal series, Andrej Babiš refused to take part in the film, which was also the reason *Common Sense* was perceived as part of the election campaign against his prominent political persona. The controversies concerning the unequal representation of both sides escalated when Czech Television postponed the film's premiere after the elections and finally inserted a statement from Babiš's Agrofert company press department into the film's introduction, denouncing the documentary as untruthful. The absence of the opponent, who decided to remain silent, is just as symptomatic as the absence of public dissent with Peter Švrček's activities in *When the War Comes*. Both the subject and the circumstances around the release of *Common Sense* clearly illustrate the political situation pointed out in *Empire Builders*, combining the conflict of interest, power abuse, lack of accountability and mechanisms of fear.

The media landscape of activist documentary is made up of a harmony of diverse authorial voices and their strategies to connect with the audience. Jan Gebert's unconstructive observational approach towards his characters forces the viewers of his *When the War Comes* to form an opinion of their own. In *Empire Builders*, Andran Abramjan uses the figure of the puppet master to uncover the principles of building up a political image in the media. Saša Dlouhý's *God Forsaken* is a response to the artificial and manipulative character of the virtual representation of the migrant crisis. In his *The White World According to Daliborek*, Vít Klusák offers a grotesque, yet scary peek, into the thoughts of a right-wing extremist. Barbora Chalupová's provocative *Arms Ready* shows the dark side of the system. Apolena Rychlíková's socially critical report *The Limits of Work* looks at the general social processes through the protagonist's personal experience. Zuzana Piussi and Vít Janeček's expository *Common Sense* introduces new perspectives and the politicized affair around the postponed premiere of the film is a comment of its own on the functioning of contemporary society. The above described activist documentaries co-create an alternative media landscape, as opposed to the image of society provided by mainstream media. They serve to create an interactive environment, uncovering the social processes and mechanisms of enforcing ideological, political and economic power. They look into the thoughts of a neo-Nazi, a right-wing politician, a militia member or a refugee, showing how ideological power is exercised and how extremism penetrates into the official structures of the system. A farmer or a worker's story can be informative on how economic and political power are intertwined and how the system approaches its land and its citizens. A story of illegal arms trade can uncover another system beyond the law. A similar interactive platform to that created by the documentary can be also formed by the image of the world as presented by the mainstream media. Activist documentaries provide a message about the need to learn how to reach an understanding of this platform, and the need for media literacy which allows us to read and interpret hidden social mechanisms.

25.9.

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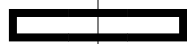
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The Purpose of Art is to Liberate its Creators and Viewers



Interview with Jan Švankmajer

Jan Křipač, Michal Kříž

Why out of all your non-executed screenplays did you choose *Insects* (Hmyz), the original version of which goes as far back as 1971?

I found the subject matter still relevant. Not so much the Brothers Čapek, whose likening of people to insects is rather banal, but the story of the amateur actors. The character of the director primarily seemed topical to me, and also the topic of a rehearsal where all the participants live their lives from cradle to grave. This is an advantage of an imaginative film compared to a realistic one—it usually does not get irrelevant with time, quite the contrary. With the changing circumstances, new meanings pile up. A realistic film, in contrast, becomes a documentary about the period over time.

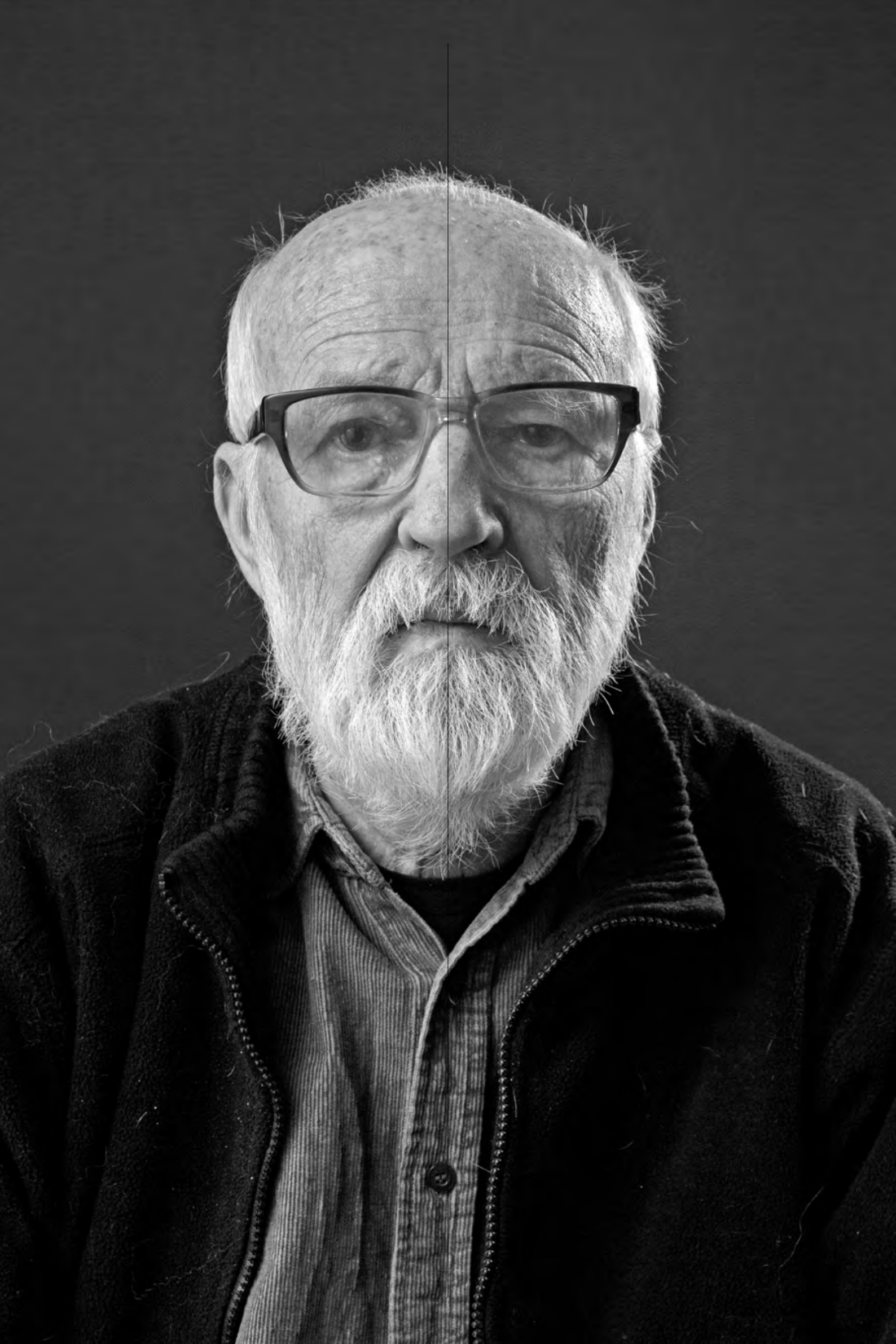
What inspired you about the *Pictures from the Insects' Life* (Ze života hmyzu) theatre play? The literary world of the Brothers Čapek is quite distant from surrealism...

The play by the Brothers Čapek was not all that much of an inspiration for me, maybe just because of its misanthropy. The Brothers Čapek do not rank among my pantheon of gods. The puppet film dramaturgists told me the director Pixa had a brilliant idea back in 1970: to make *Pictures from the Insects' Life* a feature puppet film. There was a German co-producer for it as well. And he thought I could make the

film. I answered that it didn't make sense as the Brothers Čapek had written the play for live actors, likening people to insects, and if it was played by "insect puppets", it wouldn't make any sense. Moreover, I only worked with my own screenplays. I could say no as I wasn't an employee of Krátký Film (I only made films with Krátký Film as a contractor when the dramaturgists approved a story of mine). It was then offered to me a few more times, and against my will, my unconscious mind started processing how to make the film without destroying the main intention of the Brothers Čapek, and without directly adapting their play at the same time. So I wrote a treatment, which was immediately criticised by the dramaturgists, so I ended up putting it in a drawer.

In contrast to the screenplay which has a compact story, the film contains several other layers, e.g. the dreams of the protagonists or documentary recordings of the shooting. When and why did you decide to broaden the composition of the film?

These other levels were actually only added to the film at the beginning of the shooting. In my experience, the best ideas don't come when you are sitting at the desk and writing the screenplay, but only at the moment when I am fully "inside" the film, when I see the actors in costume and the





decorations. I have full faith in these “ideas”, even though I do not necessarily have to understand them first.

In *Lunacy* (Šilení, 2005), one can't help being attracted to Jan Tříska masterfully, unscrupulously defaming and admiring the world he lives in. He is radical and knows no mercy. Your opening comments, which are an integral part of the structure of *Insects*, somewhat disturb this radicality and bring irony and distance to the story. Isn't that a bit of a shame? How do you see your comments making up an entire narrative level in *Insects*?

I believe that the disaster of this civilization is so advanced that you can't talk about it without irony and black humour, including self-irony.

In your introduction to *Insects*, you mention certain specifically Czech jitters. It reminds us of Vladimír Macura's brilliant analysis of Czech culture, not only at the time of the Czech National Revival. Our culture is based on a lie, a myth we attend to, not unsimilar to blinded dung beetles. And it's not a dream we will wake up from in the end. What do your characters dream about?

My film does not contain the Čapekian counterbalance to the insects' swarming in the character of the hero of the Tramp (so infamously betrayed by the Brothers Čapek in their “optimistic version”). My characters, who survive the rehearsal, are not dreamers but contemporary pragmatists, and there is nothing they can wake up from. They are the winners and it is their “optimistic ending”.

The magic formula of every relationship counts on a certain masochism which like in a myth (in a dream), we see as amorousness (and we call it that way as well). In this sense, the world of insects is an ideal place of awakening. What is your favourite insect representative?

I am fascinated by the praying mantis, including its biological name. For “study purposes”, I visited several insect markets before making the film. It was fascinating. Thanks to this film, I added insects to my magical/imaginative collections.

It seems that you strengthen the key theme of the play—misanthropy—in your film with the motifs of consumerism, possessiveness and murder in direct relation to the human protagonists. Moreover, you emphasize material reality, allowing for social or political criticism. Is the status of our society worse—or, as Effenberger puts it, “more brutal”—than in the 1990s, the atmosphere of which is mainly captured in *Greedy Guts* (Otesánek, 2000)?

I don't know if it's more brutal, but it's definitely more unscrupulous. The decay has progressed even further, although it seemed impossible in the 1990s. Looking for a solution reminds one of a black comedy. People voluntarily elect square pegs in round holes.

An important element of your films is freedom: creative, artistic or interpretative freedom related to the imagination of “children's minds”, not encumbered by the wisdom of adults. It seems as if *Insects* is consistent in this aspect and at the same time unpleasantly current (including the allusions to the literary and real worlds of the Brothers Čapek). How can you make sense of creative freedom in the twenty-first century?

If there is any sense to art, then it is the setting free of both the creator and the viewer. It currently seems that this is no longer what matters either to artists or viewers. Artists push for their place in the artistic market and viewers want to entertain themselves to death, so the only thing remaining is a “complete departure” (this is what an exhibition of a Parisian surrealist group was called in the 1960s) and a personal revolt.

How did you work with animation in *Insects*?

In *Insects*, animation is very much suppressed. Actually, it only represents the macho visions of the director, the more or less utilitarian movement of the dung ball (growing larger and smaller) and Mr Borovička joining the dung beetles. It is really very little for a feature film. But also in other films of mine, I only use animation where it makes sense. I have never



claimed to be an animated film director. I use animation as one of the means of expression.

How do you direct the actors? Was your approach to acting different for the different levels of the film: the theatre rehearsal, amateur stage performances or the documentary on the making of the film?

There are indeed several levels in *Insects* requiring different approaches from the actors. The main approach is the “civil” acting of amateur actors, but I also wanted a certain black farce stylization from them but without too much exaggerated overacting. When they were playing the Čapeks, I told them: “the more embarrassing it will be, the better.” When they were telling the dreams, I wanted the viewers to believe that they were telling their dreams, i.e. the dreams of Mr Dulava, Ivana Uhlířová, etc., even though it’s not their dreams but mine and Eva’s. The “documentary” shots were of course not directed. My aim was to grasp pure reality. Out of these shots, we then selected those in the cutting room that were charged with objective humour.

Similarly to image, sound also has several levels in *Insects*. The music is dominated by nineteenth century Romanticism, the nobleness of which you place in opposition to the “low”, instinctive behaviour of the characters. Why did you only choose Slavic authors, such as Smetana or Rimskij-Korsakov?

And you forgot about Tchaikovsky. But there was no intention behind it. It was pure accident. I have only been using archival music in my films for some time now. I think that the world is flooded with music, and I do not want to add to it. I see this dominance of music as a sign of the contemporary decay. In the 1920s and 1930s, poetry and painting were still the dominant art. Music involves moving the artistic expression from figurative poetry towards abstraction. In one survey, French surrealists called music a “diarrhoea of intelligence”. I had been considering Smetana from the very beginning. As an idol of “Czechness”, he corresponded well with the Brothers Čapek. The rhythm and pace of the *Flight of the*

Bumblebee by Rimsky-Korsakov was ideal for the motif of Larva’s vomiting. And for the three Růženas collecting hay, I was thinking about a female choir of peasant girls. *Onegin* was the obvious choice. As you can see, I didn’t put much effort into choosing the music.

Your method of fast cutting goes against the current trends of commercial cinematography. Its aim is not to immediately pull the viewer into pseudo-realistic action, but to evoke a dream—and make the viewer more insecure. Do you follow contemporary filmmaking procedures, or do you intentionally distance yourself from them?

I do not follow contemporary filmmaking, with the exception of perhaps David Lynch, and Karel Vachek and David Jařab in the Czech Republic. I don’t go to the cinema, and I watch old films from the 1960s on DVD, such as by Buñuel or Fellini. I have a bias for my own approach.

We never really understood the criticism emphasising a certain morbidity, negativism and pessimistic cynicism in your films. What we found much more fitting were possible allusions to the tradition of black farce based on the “will to pleasure”; in this aspect, *Conspirators of Pleasure* (Spiklenci slasti, 1996) seem to be *pars pro toto* of your production. Can your films be seen as a possible reaction to the absence of such pleasure in life and art (artistic production)? In what aspects?

This is precisely what I meant by saying that the purpose of art is to set free the creator and viewer. Freedom and the principle of pleasure are one. That’s why I, for example, called *Conspirators of Pleasure* a film about freedom.

What are you working on now?

I am constructing new objects: Fetishes and reliquaries as magical and ritual aids for a change to life (Rimbaud) and change to the world (Marx).

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Close to Characters



Interview with Lukáš Kokeš about the Film *Nothing Like Before*

Miloš Kameník

Klára Tasovská (born 1980) and Lukáš Kokeš (born 1983), along with Petr Hátle, Jaroslav Kratochvíl, Rozálie Kohoutová, Andran Abramjan, Bohdan Bláhovec or Apolena Rychlíková, rank among the most significant figures in the young Czech documentary scene. Instead of the ironic distance, absurd, sometimes even biting humour, philosophizing playfulness, performative situatedness or socio-critical appeal typical of the generation of Jan Gogola Jr., Vít Janeček, Martin Mareček, Erika Hníková or Vít Klusák and Filip Remunda, they manifest an authenticity of situations, illusive stylization of narration, an atmospheric depiction of the particular environment and a distinctive treatment of style. Tasovská and Kokeš debuted as co-directors with their film *Fortress* (Pevnost, 2012) and contributed with individual stories to the anthology film *Gottland* (2014). Last autumn, their latest film *Nothing Like Before* (Nic jako dřív, 2017) premiered at the IDFA festival in Amsterdam. After its premiere at the One World film festival in the Czech Republic, the film was also screened in Czech cinemas this spring and became the topic of our interview with Lukáš Kokeš.



Why did you place your film in Varnsdorf? Is there anything distinctive about the place?

The original intention did not make any mention of Varnsdorf. We initially determined the method we would like to use. The language was supposed to have affinities with the language of feature films. We defined the set of rules we wanted to adhere to in our shooting, such as an emphasis on closeness to the characters, filming details, the movie camera making a physical impression and drawing the viewers into the environment, etc. We also realized that we would need people who would be willing to tolerate the closeness of the movie camera and who would be able to put it out of mind. We aimed at teenagers because we thought to ourselves that if the protagonists were 17 to 19 years old, their lives might tend to develop faster. They would have energy, would be graduating from secondary school and entering adulthood. We decided to organize something like a casting and placed an invitation on Facebook, YouTube and in the local newspapers in western, northern and eastern Bohemia in order to find young people who would be interested in sharing their lives in front of a movie camera. They sent us short videos and texts about themselves. Out of about one hundred interested people, we liked a young man who was studying in Varnsdorf to become a cook and who presented a very interesting local school to us. It consisted of five buildings with about 1400 students studying various fields of study on each floor, such as gardening, bricklaying, hairdressing, hotel management, public administration, car mechanics, metal working or cabinet making. There was even accommodation facilities for students on the upper floors. We saw the school as a reduced model of our society. Although the boy who had brought us to Varnsdorf refused to play in the film, because he did not want to commit to a two years of shooting, we decided to stay at the school and find the main protagonists there.

Did you also organize casting at the school?

We printed leaflets giving them an idea of what it was supposed to be, but no one spontaneously contacted us afterwards. Then we asked them in the school corridors to recommend, for example, their friends who might be interested. We looked at their Facebook profiles and contacted them on-line because for this generation it is common to interact mostly on Facebook. This “street casting” helped us find our four main characters.

What were the criteria for choosing the final four protagonists?

Naturalness in front of the movie camera was the most important for us. It is impossible to exactly predict someone's life. We therefore also focused on the portrait of the school we wanted to penetrate through the characters' subjective perceptions. By chance or fate, our first character Teo

terminated his studies and began working. Another character Renča first seemed to take school seriously, as she said she ranked among the best students in her class and was also the class president, etc. Later, however, it turned out that she had been struggling for quite a while with her studies at school. After three months of shooting, we discovered that the other two characters Anička and Nikola were going to Greece to get some professional experience, which seemed to be a perfect way to open up that space. These kinds of accidents led us further and further away from the school, so we decided to primarily follow the lives of our protagonists. The school itself thus moved to the background of the film.

What do you think links up the characters, apart from the school?

We mainly chose people who could be kind of social actors with performative potential and able to show their lives in front of the movie camera. This was the main casting criterion. We were not trying to create a representative sample of young people from Varnsdorf, nor were we looking for any connections between them. Later we discovered that all four characters (in three plot lines) were linked by having dysfunctional families in which the parents had either been divorced for a long time, or had been going through some kind of crises of partners. Another unifying element was their economic and financial deprivation and the difficult situations these people lived in. Without intending to do so, we were able to portray a region where it is difficult to find a reasonably paid job which one would not only like, but which would seem useful. Teo works in a dairy for about 480 euros per month, just as his mother used to work there. Everyone wants to escape from Varnsdorf which is mentioned in the film several times. The sociologist Martin Buchtík has recently said that an expense of about 400 euros is a major problem for one third of the Czech population. If a washing machine or a dishwasher breaks down, one can risk falling into a debt trap. Sending your children to study in another city is a similar problem, because when you look for a flat to rent, you have to pay a tenancy deposit of about 360 euros which is basically an expense these people cannot afford. Varnsdorf and the above-mentioned social situation is this kind of trap for everyone. What is inspiring for me is the fact that they are working hard to manage everything in their lives the best way they can.

Is their generation different in any way from ours which graduated from secondary school at the turn of the twenty-first century?

Klára and I have been asked at times about how we managed to get so close to our characters. I believe that an important role was played by the social networks where most of the secondary school students spend all of their time. The

↳ Gottland



fact that young people are used to sharing their pictures and videos was helpful. We only offered them a different kind of media than Facebook and Instagram where they reveal their privacy one way or another every day. We only offered them a different experience. This is perhaps where I see the difference. In one of our debates there was a teacher at a vocational school in Prague who said that she had had similar problems in the position of a teacher and that it had not been a phenomenon occurring on the periphery. Perhaps this is also related to the level of education, so we should ask ourselves whether the way we educate and prepare our secondary school students for their professional lives is ideal.

Was it so much different when we were students?

I don't know. I attended an eight-year selective school. This kind of school is currently considered the beginning of exclusion, since exclusivity is only offered to some children, while other children get only what is left. It is therefore inspiring for me to think about how we can change the system. For example, in Finland primary and secondary education has undergone major reform. They have closed multi-year selective schools and started using the same pedagogical methodology at all schools. They have also closed private schools, so that people from well-off families cannot pay for better education for their children anymore. All children start on the same level because all primary schools are equally good. Moreover, the Finnish educational system has been ranked the best in the world for a long time. The issue has been intensely discussed by the current generation of parents. Maybe we have to be the ones who will have to request a change in the system. Of course, there are also excellent public schools in the Czech Republic.

The teachers in your film do not seem to be doing their job badly.

Those who agreed with the shooting had a natural respect. They knew that they had been doing their job consistently and sincerely, therefore they probably were not afraid to participate in the film. The children liked the teachers, because they also saw good examples of fathers and mothers in them which had not often been the case in their families. I recently became interested in the work of Tomáš Feřtek dealing with the educational system in the Czech Republic. He has pointed out how much our society values teachers at the selective schools who have been enjoying a higher social status than teachers at the vocational schools whose job is more difficult in terms of motivating the students to learn something. Perhaps it would be worth changing the perception and increasing the salaries of the teachers at the vocational schools to motivate them a bit more. The degree of indifference and frustration they have been experiencing is, in contrast, much higher.

Was it difficult to agree on the filming with the head teacher in the school?

The school head teacher, all the other teachers and the participants, had a rough idea about what we wanted to film which they agreed with at the beginning. The head teacher allowed us to come to the school over the following two years whenever we wished. Everyone was aware of it, which was very helpful. Thanks to this openness, our film was able to work with such a degree of authenticity. Not all of the teachers were willing, of course, to participate in the film. We did not use any hidden movie cameras or tricks because we would not be able to use such material anyway. Our producers, together with HBO Europe, ensured that the filming was always done with the participants' consent. When speaking to the head teacher and other teachers, we emphasized that our filming was not to be a reportage about a secondary school, that there were not going to be any interviews, that they would not have to speak about their satisfaction or dissatisfaction, etc., and that all it was going to be was a partially directed observation. We basically needed the people to really forget about us being there. When shooting, I always recalled a scene from *Apocalypse Now* (1979) in which an army disembarks and Coppola is there in the background in the role of a war reporter standing alone and shouting at the soldiers "Don't look at the camera!" This was what we needed here too – to be invisible and for nobody to notice the movie camera.

The documentarist Frederick Wiseman works in a similar way by not using shots in which it would be apparent that the protagonist is aware of the crew presence.

For these kinds of observational documentaries, it is important that the film form creates an illusion of the crew absence and for the situations to occur naturally, so that the viewers can share them. We wanted to draw the viewers in as much as possible, so that they would look at things from the teenagers' and teachers' perspectives. Interaction with the movie camera would contradict the sense of the chosen method.

What was the form of the screenplay and how intuitive was the shooting method?

For this type of film, something like an ideal sequence of scenes is written. You work with a rough idea of what it might look like. We would always, for example, make notes about the situations and scenes we wanted to capture in about a week, so that we could prepare for them a little bit. So when I knew that Teo and Diana wanted to tell their parents at a Sunday lunch that Diana was expecting a baby, I thought about how to move around and behave in the room. We had an idea of how it might go, but we did not push anything. What is important is that even if you give up an

↳ Gottland



idea, you keep working using the same style. I always give an example of a scene in which Diana takes a pregnancy test. We did not capture the first pregnancy test, of course, as a woman probably would not invite a filming crew home at such a moment. However, we knew how it might have gone, so we had two options. One option was to film a scene in which Diana talks about it with her friend which would be only verbal informing someone about the fact. Another option was to reconstruct the situation which would be played over again and enable working with the atmosphere by narrating via images, non-verbally and the scene thus acquired a “more film-like” character. Sometimes we interfered by bringing up a topic for discussion. When Anička and Nikola were talking, for example, about something in their beds before falling asleep in the boarding room, we asked them to talk about what it was going to be like in Greece so that we could be better prepared for the following narration. From my point of view, this is actually standard work, since each director’s question brings up a topic for discussion.

The scene with the pregnancy test is followed by an image of Diana and Teo lying in bed. They look forward without saying a word. You film them from above and it is obvious to us what they are probably thinking about. It reminds me of a feature film. The scene in bed, however, could have occurred in a different context, couldn’t it?

All that was a matter of one morning. The scene with the test was shot several times which is typical when making feature films, because Diana first thought it was funny, laughing at why she should do a pregnancy test again, when we all knew that she was already pregnant. Nevertheless, she was finally able to get into the mood she experienced when doing the first test. Then we asked them just to lie in bed and think about what had happened instead of talking about it and pretending to be surprised which would not have worked anyway. This was once again the actual reality, since she had just got pregnant and they were thinking about what to do every day. At this point, it became a definite document since the fear in their eyes was real.

In the following scene Teo discusses with his friend on the balcony whether to have an abortion, or not. Is it a topic you had asked them to discuss?

It was spontaneous. We started filming the guys playing with a ball and hanging out in the park, buying themselves hamburgers and eating them on a bench, when Diana called Teo asking him to buy some bread and come home. Teo hung up and all of a sudden said to his friend that Diana had missed her period. And his friend went: “Dude, what are you going to do? Are you going to be a dad, or what?” We stopped them at the moment and agreed that we had better go home so as

not to upset Diana. When we got home they went on the balcony where they smoked a joint and where we asked them to talk about what they had started speaking about in the park.

How do you maintain the degree of authenticity when using that kind of method? Have you ever had to interrupt shooting? Or, have you filmed scenes you knew you would not use?

This was the reason for having a casting call, with testing and mutual sizing up at the beginning of this shooting. This allowed us to continue filming with those we knew would be able to handle it. Sometimes it didn’t work, but we didn’t just stop the scenes, because the acting would have been interrupted. We had to ask the protagonists a couple of times to talk about the topics again and a little bit differently. Then, when you are already thinking of the editing, changing the camera position and shooting perspective, they try it again and say it totally different and you suddenly achieve the desired naturalness and directness. Then, you let things happen and only fine-tune certain gestures, unintentional smiles and other details in the editing. Five-minute scenes in the film were often a result of two-hours of shooting, since our method also included long periods of waiting. So it’s not like you just prepare everything and tell the protagonists to show what they can do. This might work when shooting something like *The White World According to Daliborek* (Svět podle Daliborka, 2017) directed by Vít Klusák, when the film-makers prepared some shots and the characters then played the agreed upon scenes a little bit like in a theatre. This is why *The White World According to Daliborek* generated so much discussion about shooting methods in documentary films.

How long did you shoot the film and how big was the crew?

These are two connected items. We kept the number of people in the crew to a minimum, so that there were only three or even two of us going to Varnsdorf in order to reduce our expenses and allow ourselves more filming days. There were between 80 and 90 of them, but the filming could not be done some days. We came there, for example, for four days, spent two days filming and the other two just “hanging out” with the people, but in a good way, so that we strengthened our relationship and mutual trust.

Did you use one movie camera, or sometimes two?

We always used only one camera. I’ve developed a shooting method providing us with material for editing which is often a result of working with two cameras. I’ve learned to move around in situations to “capture” the necessary shots.

You often use a classic connection of shots and countershots in the film.

⇒ Nic jako dřív



It helps create the illusion of narration in feature films. There is always someone speaking in the film which was recorded in synchronous sound. The countershots were sometimes filmed fifteen minutes later when the other person only listened or responded to another statement. It looks like a parallel plot in editing, but in fact the shots were done at different times. Sometimes I intuitively managed to react in time and reframe it so that it could later be edited as a shot/countershot.

The fact that only one camera was used, is probably visible for the repetitive jump-cuts.

We wanted to achieve a rough chiseled visual style, so we chose a hand-held camera, filming details which are sometimes quite shaken. Jump-cuts are characteristic for this coarse-grained style. The cinemascope ratio of one side to another of 1:2.35 was achieved by cutting in post-production. The original format was 16:9, but later we realized that if the topic was closeness and intimacy, this step could help us to get even closer physically to the characters, to make details out of semidetails, bigger details out of the details by cutting.

Cinemascope usually opens the space to width, while in this film it, paradoxically, confines the protagonists.

This is related to the theme of the film. Viewers often ask us whether Varnsdorf is really such a depressing place. I am convinced that it is, and that this is just a visual way of emphasizing the depression.

To what extent do you think your observational method is universal? Would it work for filming portraits of famous and successful people?

I guess it would. The question is how it would work, because not everybody is willing to pretend they are not being filmed. If an athlete or an actor is open to play with it, why not. The problem is also the fact that it's time-consuming. I can imagine a portrait, for example, of Ester Ledecká, but I cannot imagine that she would accept, being so busy, spending, for example, four hours in a row in front of the movie camera. But it's possible. One interesting and very successful documentary film *Over the Limit* (Za hranicemi možností, 2017), directed by Marta Prusová, is a physical portrait of a Russian gymnast who was the winner of a gold medal at last summer's Olympics. The film crew went with her through the preparation for the Olympic Games, her training, her coaches shouting at her, her not believing in herself, using this very intense and intimate style.

How did you prevent the uninvolved observation of ordinary life from becoming just a more refined reality show? Where is the boundary between a voyeuristic fascination with reality and an expressive value?

The boundary is probably quite thin. One of the first exercises in the Documentary Film Department of the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (FAMU) is called Fascination with Reality which I believe is always present in documentary films. What is missing in reality shows, I think, are deeper relationships and the trust between the film-makers and the protagonists. We also wanted to listen to people from other social bubbles, to look at the world from a different point of view. Exploitation of characters from a different social stratum is, I guess, always present in these kinds of films, but we wanted to build it on understanding, unity and solidarity. I would like to avoid speaking of our characters as the "others". I had a feeling from the very beginning that we were also making a film about ourselves, how we are able to face life challenges and take responsibility for something.

You are hidden in the film at the same time.

That's true. We tried to be invisible when shooting, but I think that, although it is a little bit more difficult for the viewers and requires more sensitivity and maybe even knowledge, the editing, dynamic camera and acting also point to a different type of narration, deliberate form, and awareness of what and how the film is being made. We wanted to edit it in a way that would enable the viewers to realize that it is not a documentary, but a film based on its own rules and narrating with its own language. It wasn't important for us to descriptively show how the film was being made by an intervention in front of the movie camera. When you choose a form well and try to maintain it consistently, there is no need to break it and insert any anti-illusive elements in the film. It was important for me and Klára that *Nothing Like Before* not only become a film about people from Varnsdorf as a socially problematic location. We also wanted the film to be a topic in and of itself, to emphasize the way it was made and speaks to its viewers.

How did you ensure during shooting that the unifying and umbrella theme was maintained?

We had planned to spend two years in touch with our film characters. The main assumption was that during that time they would pass or fail their final secondary school exams, but they would certainly leave secondary school and enter what we call adult life. They might suddenly have to face some new situations, for example, look for a job or a new place to live, and we wanted to observe and film the impact of the situations.

Why did you use open ends? Should they lead to some generalizing considerations?

The ends, or happy ends, had been there in each chapter for a long time before we decided to cut them off. Hav-

⇒ Nic jako dřív



ing discussed it with our producers and script writers Tomáš Hrubý and Pavla Kubečková, people at various festivals, our acquaintances and film-makers from abroad, we asked ourselves, whether it was necessary to tell the stories until the end and therefore meet some imaginary expectations.

Don't you have to tell the stories up until the end in your interviews now?

We didn't want just to leave open ends, but also to make some space for secrecy. Open ends provide tension, confusion and make one think, not of what has happened, but of what it all has meant for the characters. We also had an epilogue in which we came back to the story of Teo, when we saw him taking care of Dominik, which was quite surprising, because he took his role of a father quite seriously. We also asked ourselves some practical questions, such as why we came back to one of the characters and not to the other two, etc. At each screening, I wondered if it was correct not to come back to them, but at some point you simply have to make a decision risking that either it will work or won't.

How did you decide about the order of stories to be told?

We tried to switch them in various ways, but the story of Teo introduces the environment of Varnsdorf and the school effectively. When we tried to switch it with the second part, the story of Renča, the exposition didn't work. Viewers also sometimes say that the first part is the strongest and that it only "goes downhill" from there. We have also been told, however, that Teo's story is in many aspects typical of a number of other films, and that the girls, who, in contrast, are not all that distinctive at first sight, drew their attention much more by not being readily readable.

Have you thought of making a feature film in the future? Or is social reality in a way more important for you than its complete reconstruction?

It has two sides. I think it was Dan Řehák who recently remarked in his radio programme *Jaws* (Čelisti) that in *Nothing Like Before*, at least in its first third, he had heard the best and the most natural conversations in recent Czech films. This was given, however, by the fact that we had not written any conversations in advance and had just been trying to create conditions for the people to improvise in front of the camera and show their natural talents, behaviour and speech. Reality is always smarter than me in the role of a screenwriter. We did experience, of course, many interesting situations, but the documentary genre did not allow us to shoot them. Various things can be on the verge of legitimacy or of what is already too intimate. You think to yourself what a good scene that would be for a feature film. It would definitely be a challenge, for example, in the future to collect the

stories we came across during our filming and compile them for a feature film script in the spirit of the veristic cinema which the Dardenne brothers and Ken Loach are famous for. I definitely find this appealing, but it will take us a while to get down to it.

Are you referring to the realization possibilities, in other words, what and with what expenses one can film in the Czech Republic?

I guess so, but on the other hand, I believe that we did manage to shoot *Nothing Like Before* quite efficiently for a reasonable amount of money. The working tools have to be adapted to the financial and time possibilities. I enjoy the style of shooting when you improvise and combine actors with non-actors. We could probably make a feature film in a similar way. I think that the conditions for making films in the Czech Republic have improved a lot. Getting money has never been and will never be easy, but I can't complain. It just depends on how good ideas you have and how much appeal you have with your subject matter. New possibilities for international co-production have developed thanks to film festivals and industry programs. Short films such as *Retriever* (2014) by Tomáš Klein, *Bába* (2008) by Zuzana Kirchnerová (Špidlová), *Out* (2017) by György Kristóf from the Film Direction Department of the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (FAMU), all three presented in Cannes, or successful work by Olmo Omerzu have shown that it's possible. Ondřej Hudeček was successful with his short film *Peacock* (Furiant, 2015) at the Sundance film festival, having made *The Nagano Tapes: Rewound, Replayed & Reviewed* (Pásky z Nagana, 2018) which is a phenomenal example of a simple yet focused work consisting of archival material and talking heads. It's a film with the potential to reach out to a huge audience and has also been made intelligently and consistently. There are quite a few possibilities and, of course, if you do not plan a 60-million dollar narrative, but start with situating the story in the present and in the real environment, you can raise money for filming.

Why has HBO invested in a documentary which is not likely to significantly expand the number of its subscribers?

You always have to find two subjects to start shooting such a film. In the Czech Republic, it is always the State Cinematography Fund and one of the televisions. It has usually been Czech Television, but HBO Europe has also been recently involved. Over the course of the last 8 to 10 years, I have observed the growing importance of festivals. The way it works in sports is very similar. There are so-called scouts, for example, going to various, often local, football and ice-hockey matches and competitions, and trying to find talented players they could then recommend to bigger clubs. Festivals provide

→ Pevnost



similar possibilities. I was recently pleased to hear that the continuation of the series *Big Little Lies* (2017) is going to be directed by Andrea Arnold, which is an important name in European festival cinematography. Here you can see the efforts of the mainstream to differentiate itself from its competitors by engaging an art film director. Attending festivals is also positive promotion for television. I appreciate the care taken on films by HBO as well. When we needed more time for editing, for example, it was possible to agree on it with them. I think that Czech Television has overslept and missed out a little bit here. It's important to realize that films with festival potential require more time and a different approach than just filling in tables, keeping to the given number of days, deadlines, etc. On the other hand, I would like to point out that last year the film *The Russian Job* (*Švéd v žigulíku*, 2017), directed by Petr Horký in co-production with Czech Television, ranks among the best contemporary Czech documentaries.

Your film is formally closer to such documentaries as *The Great Night* (*Velká noc*, 2014) by Petr Hátle, *The White World According to Daliborek* (*Svět podle Daliborka*, 2017) by Vít Klusák, and especially *Into the Clouds We Gaze* (*K oblakům vzhlížíme*, 2014) by Martin Dušek. Do you feel an aesthetic affinity with these films and their directors?

All these films were shot by documentarists. I think that the only link between us is our interest in realistic cinematography and those heroes of everyday life. Perhaps we are also united by our efforts to also make films relevant beyond the borders of the Czech Republic.

How do you approach the image aesthetization as a documentarist?

Films for me still represent a visual medium. I am interested in their aesthetic quality, although in the case of this film we decided to make it "roughly chiseled". We used a small Blackmagic Pocket Cinema Camera that looks like you only have the lens in your hand. I could thus easily crawl, hide, bend in the corner and wait for various situations, etc. Before FAMU, I studied film science at the Faculty of Arts, so I have remained a cinephile. I enjoy watching films which is probably reflected in my subconsciousness. I then try to make shots that would have an emotional impact or an expressive value, but I do it very intuitively.

Do you think about the fact that you are going to present a private, or even an intimate film in such cool colours? Doesn't it create a certain distance between the viewers and the characters?

I wasn't interested in the quality of the colours during shooting, nor did we use any additional lights. It was in post-production when the grader and colourist Vladimír Bobenič

from the Magic Lab came up with the concept of colour tonation and contrasts. I did not have all that much experience with it, when he offered me a solution I liked. Cool colours match this kind of film, since most realistic social dramas are coloured this way. Paradoxically, we had to colour the original material so as to make the colours deeper. Every camera has a certain colour profile, so if I had used a Canon or Sony camera, it would have looked different. *Fortress* (*Pevnost*, 2012) was, for example, shot with a Canon camera, which has deeper colours. Blackmagic is rather greenish and blueish which is given by the type of the film pick-up device. I have shot many times without thinking of the tones. Afterwards, we tried to balance the extremes in postproduction, so the result was a colour compromise. We added some graining so that the image could evoke a 16mm film which was supposed to highlight a certain "roughness" depending on the shown environment.

Who came up with the idea of addressing the composer (Ondřej Holy) for cooperation?

It was Klára's idea. Two years ago, Ondřej released an album called *These Semi Feelings, They Are Everywhere*, and the music atmosphere seemed to match our intention. We later found out that Ondřej had won many Czech music awards with this album. When I opened his tracks on Spotify, I was astonished to find out that one of them had had 4,300,000 views, which was arguably the most that any Czech artist ever collected. When Ondřej saw our rough editing he proposed several musical motifs, and what is interesting is that we used half of them straight away because they fit the film at the first try. We agreed to work more with minimalistic sound surfaces than with distinctive melodies.

How do you share the directing work with Klára?

We co-operate in directing with the preparation for each shooting day. Since we live together we can spend evenings preparing a framework plan of what we can expect from the shooting. The shooting itself then goes on spontaneously, without much directing in front of the camera, since it is mainly our cameraman's work. The directing work is later done again in the editing room where it is all put together.

×

→ Pevnost



FEELMS SMITHS

Insect	(Hmyz, CR – Athanor, SR – PubRes 2018)
Director and writer	Jan Švankmajer
Cinematography	Jan Růžička, Adam Oíha
Art Direction	Jan Švankmajer, Václav Švankmajer
Sound	Ivo Špalj
Film Editing	Jan Daňhel
Music	Bedřich Smetana, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, Erwin Schulhoff
Cast	Jan Budař, Jaromír Dulava, Jiří Lábus, Norbert Lichý, Kamila Magálová, Ivana Uhlířová and others
Runtime	98 min.
Distribution CZ	CinemArt
Release date	19 February 2018

Keep the beetle alive...

... these are lyrics from another film's song (*Trhák* [The Hit], dir. Zdeněk Podskalský, 1980). Its humour, based on the Dada movement rather than on Surrealism, the latter having followed, and, to some extent even absorbed the former in the 1920s (including its main representative Tristan Tzara). The lyrics might also serve, however, as the motto of Jan Švankmajer's recent feature film *Hmyz* (Insect, 2018).

Based on the famous play by the Čapek brothers entitled *Ze života hmyzu* (Pictures from the Insects' Life, 1921). It is the second one from the total of three plays they wrote together within a 15-year period (1911–1927). Indeed, the three of them feature Expressionism and Futurism moving towards Dadaism, which then changed into Surrealism, with Poetism marking a mid-stage. In their first joint work *Lásky hra osudná* (The Fateful Game of Love), the Čapek brothers play with a sort of Commedia dell'arte in an ephemeral picture of a love rivalry marked by the opposition of love and greed. The second joint play, the revue-style féerie *Ze života hmyzu* (staged in the Czech National Theatre under K. H. Hilar in April 1922, with Josef Čapek who designed the costumes, masks as well as the oval-shape stage with a transparent curtain where pictures from the individual scenes were screened),⁰¹ follows on the interest of the Flemish dramaturge Maurice Maeterlinck in bees' or ants' worlds parallel with the world of human beings, taking butterflies (including those in love), beetles, tumblebugs, crickets, flies and ants (soldiers and workers) as an example to create a gloomy picture of earthly chasing after personal and social goals, leading more or less nowhere as it is the stronger predators who always win. On the verge of Anarchism and undoubtedly of an eccentric nature, the third Čapek brothers joint work *Adam Stvořitel* (Adam the Creator) attacks the very idea of creation or attempts at re-creation, as they always result in fail-

ure, with the world created being in some way unsatisfying, as is the case in real-life. In fact, all these works labeled them as pessimists (mostly by communist-era reviewers such as M. Majerová, J. Fučík, B. Václavek, Z. Nejedlý, J. Hora). In the 1930s, Karel Čapek stated to his defense that a person who "works, searches and brings to life is not and cannot be a pessimist". In fact, in a foreword to the *Ze života hmyzu* play the authors defended themselves against their pessimist label, having also added an epilogue with a note for the director offering the option that all the gloomy things about insects and human beings were just a tramp's dream and that the world can be improved if human beings can still be helped. The note ends, however, with a global response "Happy good morning! Happy-good-morning!", which instead of an optimist's lyrical exclamation sounds more like cruel irony or perhaps even sarcasm. All in all, the brothers put everything into the play.

In his preview to the film dating from April 2014, Švankmajer reproaches the act of making the optimistic-note end as "a day when the Czechs started to get the jitters which would surge later on to become a national symbol". Indeed, it was he who coined the character of Bohouš, director of the play (portraying at the same time Čapek's Mr Cricket) who seems to hesitate whether to use the original ending or instead the optimistic one. While Bohouš's choice remains unclear to the audience, Švankmajer, as author of the film, opted for the former. This is true, however, only on the condition that we do not take his picture of amateur-style production as the "dream" which would then mean he had opted for the optimistic ending. He also puts all in the play, although in a bit different way. Having been in a similar situation as the Čapek brothers, he knows what the play is about. Interviewed by Peter Hames, he recollects: "Since my school times, people would reproach me for some kind of morbidity, 'illnessness', negativism, pessimism, which I would always refuse."⁰²

⁰¹ Dějiny českého divadla IV (History of Czech Theatre IV), Academia Praha 1983, p. 34. It also states that the play had 83 successful performances and had been re-staged under Mr. Hilar in 1925 and 1932. Moreover, in 1922 it was also staged at the Brno National Theatre (then called Zemské divadlo v Brně).

⁰² Jan Švankmajer, *Síla imaginace* (The Power of Imagination). Prague: Dauphin, Mladá fronta 2001, p. 137.



Speaking about the genesis of the film, he says it is based in 1970: that year, Karel Pixa, then the normalization director of Krátký film Studio suggested he make a ten-minute puppet film based on the Čapek brothers' play. (Mr Pixa might have been inspired by the worldwide success of Miroslav Macháček's production of the play staged in the National Theatre in 1965.) This would mean that Pixa, co-founder of the Czech State Security, would grab royalty for "being involved in the script play", as usually, and together with Švankmajer and the entire studio they would have credit for, most probably, an internationally renowned film, as *Kostnice* (The Ossuary, 1970) and puppet play *Don Šajn* (Don Juan, 1969) were at the time. Švankmajer then opposed the dramaturge and Mr Pixa arguing that "it must be played by human beings", that "making it in a puppet play is nonsense"⁰³. He wrote about a 17-page long film novel in 1971 containing nearly all the basic points of the future film.⁰⁴ Pixa rejected it and, two years later, prevented Švankmajer from continuing with his film production, which would last for several years.

The first draft of the current script was created based on the novel nearly 40 years later in 2010. At the beginning of 2011, the producer Jaromír Kallista used it to participate in the CimeMart new projects market organized as part of IFF Rotterdam. The film production was supported by funding from Czech Television, the State Cinematography Fund, from the Slovak Audiovisual Fund and from other international co-producers, associated producers and investors as well as from over three thousand donors who contributed through website crowdfunding. It was also supported by producers such as Guillermo del Toro, the Quay brothers, Ivan Passer, Miloš Forman and many more. Based on the 2013 second draft of the script, the film was shot in 2017 in Knovíz stu-

dio and released as a world premiere on IFF Rotterdam under Signatures Section (new work by established filmmakers) on 27 January 2018.

To make the issue somewhat more complicated, the film retained something of Mr Pixa's "idea": we hear there Švankmajer announcing that his direction of the film and the actors resemble animated film or puppet theatre direction. "It is as if the actors had a wire in their heads and strings on their hands", just as was the case i.e. in his *Lekce Faust* (Lesson Faust, 1993), *Don Šajn* and certain others.⁰⁵ Although live action with only a dozen seconds of animation, it is strongly perceived as featuring high visual stylization (perhaps it is thanks to the costumes, the make-up, the type cast and the scene resembling puppet theatre decoration) and, in total, as animated film (mainly due to frequent use of big details of actors, their looks in the camera and subjective camera looks that give us the impression of an urgent physical, nearly haptic and tactile presence, but also due to a rather fast film editing technique. The director mentions it in the film, comparing it to the principle of dream and assigning it a magical role, mainly as regards transitions in place).

The above-mentioned clearly indicates that the shape of the film, although simple, naive and preserving an amateur play's beauty at first sight, can in fact turn out to be truly complicated. The director speaks about three levels. The first one is the story of "amateur actors" arising from the "Oedipus complex ground plan"; the second one is the act of the Čapek brothers' play; while the third one presents documentary scenes from the filmmaking. He states that this enabled him to unveil the creative process, allowing the audience to look at it, because as a Surrealist, he considers "the creative process more important than the result itself".⁰⁶ Such a loosening of form and demonstration of the double creation process (play and film)—as Studio Y used to do it—allow the audience to participate with projection in the process, in

03 *Film o filmu Hmyz* (Film about the Insects Film, dir. Adam Olha, 2018). Olha was primarily the author of the pictures of the documentary level of the film, producing at the same time a feature film on Athanor Studio with the working title *Alchemická pícka* (Alchemical Furnace).

04 Jan Švankmajer, *Síla imaginace*. Prague: Dauphin, Mladá fronta 2001, p. 213–231.

05 A similar stylization can be found in P. P. Pasolini's 1967 film *Che cosa sono le nuvole?*

06 Printed material to the *Hmyz* film.



a way instead of their identification with the characters. Indeed, the audience have the possibility to “engage in the performance” with both the directors as well as with the actors.

The most important level is obviously the one on which the film is generally based, i.e. the second act of the theatre play originally called *Kořistníci* (The Spoilers). Švankmajer left out the commenting character of the Tramp (the actor who was to portray him did not turn up at the rehearsal as he was waiting for a parcel from his family; some of his replicas are taken over by Bohouš the director); the symbolic character of Chrysalis that should give birth to “something great”, “world revival” (part of its replicas are read by Karel by mistake); as well as Mrs Bug (Klásková, who was to stage this character, did not turn up either, suffering from sciatica). As a result, having removed Čapek’s characters (although he later comes back to some of them), he only concentrates on the story of the Dung Beetle and his small fortune—the little ball that means everything for him. Furthermore, he focuses on the motif of the Crickets wishing to start a family life but ending up under the knife of Mrs Fly who is giving the crickets to her Larva as feed, only to be finally usurped by the Parasite. The director’s effort resulted in an allegory of the petty bourgeoisie, consumerism and the world cycle going for individualism, egoism and exploitation, and remaining in fact faithful to the Čapek brothers as well as to the Surrealists’ essential point of view.

The narration level of the amateur actors, all of them added by the director including the principle of the amateur theatre rehearsal, has been somewhat modified, deformed and completed in comparison to the Čapek brothers. Absolutely incapable of grasping the text, Karel, portraying the character of the Dung Beetle, gradually identifies himself with the role, even getting used to the ball, which at first chased him as a paranoid hallucination (in fact, the roles are subversively inverted: instead of rolling the ball, the Dung Beetle is being rolled by it, i.e. fortune usurps its owner), to finally become the Dung Beetle, leaving the stage through the window to join other bugs in the outside world. Václav, portraying Mr Fly, is another example of a poor actor, who turns out to be incapable of “killing” Mrs Cricket, being in platonic love with her performer Růžena (which slightly unveils the above-mentioned Oedipus complex motif), while

the latter “consumes” him without mercy. Václav is also incapable of coming to terms with killing Mr Cricket, portrayed by Bohouš (who, in contrast, has no difficulty in “killing” his unfaithful wife Růžena aka Mrs Cricket on stage) but who, as director, completely dominates over Václav and, insisting on the fulfillment of the actor’s task assigned, finally kills him. Thus, the frightening nature of Václav-portrayed Mr Fly is semantically taken over by the sound of his flickering antennae and strange threatening whistling and growling present on the stage as well as in the music.

Jitka, in contrast, turns out to be a great actress, showing no difficulties in reciting any characters’ dialogue to get finally incarnated, although disgusted by the costume look, yet perfectly in line with Stanislavský’s method, in the feeding Larva and finally being eaten by the Parasite, also portrayed by the great performer František, the railway guy. Following this massacre of both the play characters and their “performers”, when the rehearsal is over—as was the case with those sixteen from Château de Silling in de Sade’s *The 120 Days of Sodom*—we can see the following person demonstrating triumph as they are leaving the theatre pub hall and walking on the streets of the small town: Bohouš (wearing Václav’s hat) accompanied by Růžena, who, in the meantime, gave birth to his daughter Bohunka (whether the baby had been conceived with him is not certain, however) and František, praising Bohunka’s delicate flesh after he gave her a romper suit weaved by Jitka. The circle of actors and characters is closed. Only some beetles can survive. (The rest of them are consumed by banquet guests organized on the occasion of the first release of the film at the Prague Lucerna Cinema.)

The amateur actors’ story interferes in a sense with the level of the actors’ actors, i.e. the director Švankmajer’s performers, the way they grasped and portrayed their double roles and Švankmajer’s playing with them as with “living ones” (i.e. puppet actors portraying the puppet characters). Jiří Lábus (aka Karel), having attempted the kind of playing with animation already in the character of Zlatá hlava (Golden Head) in Bárta’s *Na půdě* (In the Attic, 2009), starred in Švankmajer’s *Spiklenci slasti* (Conspirator of Pleasure, 1996) and performs in Studio Y, where the tradition of “the living ones” used to be very strong. He is transformed here in Dung Bee-



tle by means of beetle-look paper animation in the bathroom mirror (and, obviously, by means of wings as well). The fact that he sees his colleagues' legs under the table as insects' feet is not paranoid as is the case in Jitka's or Václav's characters: it is instead a symptom of gradual transformation and, even incarnation of his fortune—aka the ball he had stolen together with its original beetle “owner”—uses to prepare him for itself. As with other “beetles”, he also represents Švankmajer's reminder of the message in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, and, consequently, also the world of petty bourgeois family and their “values”. Ivana Uhlířová (aka Jitka) starred with Jan Budař already in *Nuda v Brně* (Bored in Brno, 2003), a film produced by the latter and Vladimír Morávek. In contrast to the above-mentioned film, here she virtually does not interact with Budař's Mr Fly, portraying his Larva. She instead primarily interacts with Norbert Lichý in his roles of František and Parasite in the hinted feeling that she will be “devoured” by the Parasite being given no possibility to reproduce (weaving of the romper suit). This level also includes her paranoid vision of beetles and ants coming alive in František's beer (including a living cockroach). Not only is Lichý given the possibility to develop his pyknic-type of dramatic and comical theatre as well as film characters, parodied in the Zelenka-directed TV series *Dabing Street* (2018), but, more importantly, his piano improvisations refer to his capacities as a music composer and to his sensitivity, which significantly enriches the ambivalent concept of his character. He is also reciting *King Lear*'s dialogues gently commenting on the characters and the situations. Kamila Magálová (aka Růžena), a Slovak actress speaking in Czech as Mrs Cricket and in Slovak outside that role, follows to some extent upon the performance of other Slovak actresses in the previous film by Švankmajer *Přežít svůj život* (Surviving Life, 2010), such as Daniela Bakerová, Zuzana Krónerová, Emília Došeková, representing also a sort of dominant woman and sadomasochism practices (i.e. the fact that she has smacked her husband, bruised thighs, the scene of the director “killing” Mrs Cricket). She actually modifies her “calm force” role of Helena Altmanová which she portrayed in Marie Poledňáková's films *Libáš jako Bůh* (You Kiss like a God, 2009) and *Libáš jako ďábel* (You Kiss Like a Devil, 2012), overcoming all obstacles. Jaromír Dulava (aka Director Bohouš) follows

mainly upon his desk clerk and pseudo-macho role portrayed in David Ondříček's *Grandhotel* (2006), creating the desired multifaceted “alpha male” role as a masterly actor and director, ruling his colleagues with firmness yet kindness (and with his unnecessary use of a mike when giving director's instructions). He portrays the heroic Mr Cricket who places family above everything else, although henpecked by his wife. The actors' work is also highlighted by hinted beetle masks, referring perhaps to the Mask Theatre Švankmajer established as a graduate from the Puppet Department of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (AMU), in Semafor Theatre. He actually used its principles in his first film entitled *Poslední trik pana Schwarcewalldea a pana Edgara* (The Last Trick, 1964).

There are several types of connection between the level of amateur actors and their characters with the last level, i.e. takes from the film production. First of all it is by means shots showing Švankmajer explaining the roles of interpretation and presentation to some actors (Lichý, Dulava and Magálová). In the case of Dulava he explains, in contrast to the director's concept of the Stanislavský methodology, how to act in an empty space in front of the camera with his absent co-actors. He does not mind that the actors do not perform their roles with any expression, stating that the “more embarrassing their performance is, the better”. Secondly, it is by means of draft shots; their working-state character is highlighted by the sound of the camera whirring (as in the prologue scene) and with actors explaining, to a seemingly absent psychoanalyst, (Švankmajer?, Bohuslav Brouk?) their civil-life dreams, most often even on a kind of psychoanalyst's sofa in the studio. Although it is not necessarily only their own dreams—they might be adopted or inspired by the director. Moreover, some of them might be rather context-sophisticated, e.g. Uhlířová describing her dream on a yard bench where the character of Jitka she portrays vomited; Dulava, describing his dream in which he transforms into another dream character, changes from time to time into the dummy of Mr Cricket which, in certain other parts of the film, comes back as Mr Dulava-Cricket. These dreams usually have very little connection, however, with the “dreamy” ambiance of the play rehearsal, indicating thus the difficult and complex nature of the dream and real-life relationship under Surrealist conception. There is undoubtedly a significant extension be-



tween this movie semantics of “magnetic fields” as another stylization level and the picture-codes keys that can be used. In all probability, the “documentary” level concerning the film production came to life during the filming and editing phases, contained neither in any script version, nor in the storyboard. Including the fact that the film reveals tricks and film shooting techniques, not leaving aside mistakes and slips of the tongue and the like, it portrays the present-state of the filming, being both the frame and leitmotif of the film. (Framing within framing is also provided by means of a theatre curtain opening when the reading rehearsal is over and the Crickets enter the scene and its closing when the rehearsal is over. Furthermore, film, production and life framing is also indicated by the above-mentioned scene of actors leaving the theatre, with Bohouš locking the door of Knovíz Athanor Studio, hiding the key above the door. It is as if he put there a label stating “Anybody wishing to come in, do not lose hope!” The key is still there!) The principal framing begins with Švankmajer’s introduction (foreword, commentary) to the film, being of a playful and ambivalent nature and serving as a real explanation as well as its own irony. (In fact, Švankmajer started with this type of foreword in the film *Lekce Faust* [1993] and continued with the foreword shot within *Šílení* [Lunacy, 2005].) The end is marked by his postscript related to the “optimistic-note” ending, including not-much-in-the Čapek brothers’-style lumberjacks with a chainsaw and the homeless-option of the Tramp portrayed by Pavel Nový, Švankmajer’s frequent actor playing significant roles. It also includes other inputs by Švankmajer, mentioned above, concerning the nature of his film production, shots of his colleagues, animators, sound master Ivo Špalje, multiple Český lev award winner, in the role of a mike-man, his dog and his son Václav (animator and director), as well as “civil-life” pictures of the actors (eg. Kamila Magálová going home when the filming is over). Nevertheless, instead of the alienation effect, these inputs should bring a special effect enabling the audience to directly experience the creation process of Švankmajer’s last feature film (he himself admits that he might still engage in some short film), being an organic part of the work as a whole, the work which, apart from its main (Čapek-style) topic should be seen as an essay on the life-and-production relationship. Apart from the feeling of nostalgia, the essay is pervaded with

permanent subversion, so typical of Surrealism, based on the author’s understanding of so-called objective humor, often in its “black” version.

When interviewed by Jan Kolář about the nature of humour, Švankmajer stated that objective humour is part of Surrealism, being that kind of humour that “is created on the reverse side of rationality”, hidden humour that “is brought to life in a reader’s head”.⁰⁷ In the above-mentioned interview with Peter Hames he quotes Vratislav Effenberger, who views objective humour as the greatest and most complex form of humour following logic and rational order but going beyond their border in a dialect-style synthesis of rational and irrational.⁰⁸

Music and “postmodern-style” references to other works are also a key part of the film. Some scenes (in particular the film introduction with the subtitles, the Cricket’s coming on stage or the exhibition of a box with beetles) are “dramatized” by parts of the prelude to Bedřich Smetana’s *The Bartered Bride*, which provides horror-style tuning (the killing of Mrs Cricket). Moreover, they are also played with the “optimistic-note” ending of the film. The relationship of Faithful Love and Jituška is ironized by the motif of Faithful Love, with Jituška dressed in a kitschy costume dancing ballet (partly accompanied by František) to the music of the Slovak tango *Dita* by Štefan Hoza, which is also played just before she as Larva is devoured by František aka Parasite. Strange pictures of the scenes “outside the window” (haymaking and red-dress-clad women-farmers represented by Magálová) can be seen as Švankmajer’s obsessive vision or his childhood memory, or just anything else, although in the film they serve as Director-Mr Cricket’s vision, illustrated by the song of *Děvicy krasavicy* from Tchaikovsky’s *Eugene Onegin*, resembling Isaak Dunayevsky’s socialist-style songs from Ivan Pyryev’s socio-realist musicals. Insects motifs are highlighted by means of fragments from Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Flight of the Bumblebee* in the Tale of Tsar Saltan,

07 Jan Švankmajer, “Nothing is what it appears to be at first sight”. In: Jan Kolář, *12x v hlavní úloze*. Praha: Akropolis 2010, p. 193.

08 *Síla imaginace*, p. 141, 142.



used in particular in the scene capturing Jitka vomiting after she had seen František as he drank a beer with cockroach, and Jitka's paranoid vision of ants in the theatre (whether it was a vision is put in doubt when the studio is cleaned from the ants spread over the room) and her vision of beetles in the window. The song *Love Has Gone Away* by Erwin Schulhoff (composer of a musical version of *The Communist Manifesto*) accompanies Karel's metamorphosis into a beetle in the bathroom mirror scene and in the scene of his jumping out of the window among other dung beetles.

There are also references to the director's own work, such as the director's lecture on beetle history (*Historia naturae* [1967]) or Růžička, the cinematographer, falling on the pavement when shooting Karel running to the theatre (the fall of cinematographer Svatopluk Malý when filming Petr Čepěk in *Lekce Faust*⁰⁹; connected theatre spaces with the corridor, toilet, backstage, yard and the space "outside the window" can be seen as another reference to the same film). Allusions to other pieces of work can be seen in the scene of the Parasite "swallowing" the Larva through a large detail of his mouth (*The Big Swallow*, 1901 by James Williamson where a fat man is trying to swallow a camera with the cinematographer, but he disgorges them back as they are inedible), or in the scene of Mr Cricket's revived dummy standing up from the basket (*Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror*, 1922) by F. W. Murnau. Some actors (Lichý, Lábus) are attracted, as if it was by magic force (emphasised by urgent watch ticking), from their homes or their work to the place of their dedication, to the theatre; with costume-dressed Lábus running through various locations, including a snow-covered landscape, towards the theatre, which might be considered as reference to Alexander Dovzhenko's *Aerograd* (1965) where Young Chukcha is running in the snow to Aerograd, a just completed attractive communist city. (In contrast, the possible interpretation of the act of a swallowed cockroach in the beer as a reference to Švankmajer's colleague from the Surrealists group and the grandson of the first Czech film actor,

Josef Šváb-Malostranský, doctor Luděk Šváb—pyknic-type comparable to Lichý—and his drowning in the sea might be a rather critical overinterpretation, comparably to seeing the depiction of beetles as a reference to the work and personality of Bohuslav Brouk, Surrealist and psychoanalyst. Nevertheless, multiple associations are definitely not forbidden.) What I consider of key importance is the connection with the first, and also last film by Václav Havel *Odcházení* (Leaving, 2011) through František quoting parts of *King Lear* including the thunderstorm scene, as well as through actors cast in Mr Havel's film (Budař, Uhlířová). It might be seen as an allusive analogy to Švankmajer's last opus magnum and his quitting the filmmaking world.

In fact, Švankmajer places the film in the context of worldwide cinematography as well as of his own work, providing the audience with a key to unlock how the work is being constructed (as is usual for Milan Kundera's novels) and achieves a perfect connection between all its components and levels on the principle of their playful employment on the principle of a theatre rehearsal (eg. Petr Zelenka's *Karamazovi* [The Karamazov Brothers, 2008]) with the actors' destinies entering into it (Truffaut's *Day for Night* [1973], Karel Reisz's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* [1981]). Nothing new, you say? Bah! And critical remarks? The audience might not notice that Lábus has disappeared among the bung beetles? It was not the "flag-wavers" but the communists who criticised the Čapek brothers' work? The play was not produced in 1924, as mentioned in the preface, but three years earlier? It does not matter given the fact that the film provides us with an excellent experience of what is possible for an open and playful mind! Consequently, the film fulfills the time frame since 1970, when the idea of the work had been conceived and when Švankmajer met Vratislav Effenberger, who encouraged him to join the Prague Surrealist Group and, gradually, became its most significant representative. Thank you, Mr Švankmajer.

P. S.: Those who are interested can have a look at *Jan Švankmajer's "hand-held kunstkamera"* compiled by Bruno Solařík, published at the same time as the film's first release.

09 Cf. Švankmajer's dairy entry in *Síla imaginace*, p. 184.

Nothing Like Before	(Nic jako dřív, Czech Republic 2017)
Directors and writers	Klára Tasovská, Lukáš Kokeš
Cinematography	Lukáš Kokeš
Film Editing	Klára Tasovská
Sound	Adam Levý
Runtime	92 min.
Distribution CZ	AČFK
Release date	22 March 2018

A collective portrait of a “lost generation”

The camera moves through a crowd, focusing on a young man called Teo. Teo likes fun. A performer on the stage says that unless one of the present ladies strips, the show will have to stop. Teo asks one of the ladies to undress. The lady is his girlfriend. The fun can resume. A few scenes later, Teo and his girlfriend are walking on the street. An argument sparks off about why she shows herself naked in front of strangers. The good feelings from the alcohol are now gradually fading.

This is the opening of *Nothing Like Before* (Nic jako dřív, 2017). the latest film by the creative couple Klára Tasovská and Lukáš Kokeš. Their previous shared full-length project, *Fortress* (Pevnost, 2012), a peculiar travelogue from the existent/non-existent Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic, enjoying the shadow support of Moscow, already had some attributes of a sociological study. The authors were interested in finding an answer to the question as to why someone would choose a life in a non-democratic system.

Nothing Like Before is an unusual sociological peek into the lives of a generation of teenagers. The topic of the film is particularly relevant at present. Film festivals are screening a number of coming-of-age stories, as told from the perspective of the young generation in different genres and narrative variations. These films, often also regionally specific, play a crucial role in current social debates.

The life of the young generation was also treated in Martin Dušek’s full-length *Into the Clouds We Gaze* (K oblakům vzhlížíme, 2014). The film dealt with emptiness in the everyday life of the main protagonist Ráďa, a car tuning enthusiast failing to keep a job and a girlfriend. Dušek’s film uses the bleak life of the main character to illustrate the hopeless social and economic situation in a distant region, home to low-income youth, sometimes called “white trash”, who occupy themselves with car tuning as a sort of compensation.

Creating a “spiritual prequel” to Dušek’s film, Tasovská and Kokeš use the three segments of their anthropological documentary to follow the stories of four protagonists, while





elaborating on the topic of a “lost generation”. As opposed to the protagonist of *Into the Clouds We Gaze*, their characters belong to the social group of 19-year olds living quite at ease in a small town in the border area. Apart from his problems at school, Teo is struggling from the opening scene to find a place to live, and also a job, when his girlfriend, who until now supported him financially, gets pregnant. Renata earns a living working in a bar and in her free time pursues her dream of working as a DJ. Anička and Nikola travel to Greece for a school internship.

Nothing Like Before reveals the dark side of millennials’ lives as an antithesis of the most common characteristics ascribed to Generation Y. The form of the documentary intensifies the tension between the vicious circle the characters are trapped in, and their alarming apathy. Based on the displayed psychological and social phenomena, the situation of the young generation seems to be more complicated than expected. There seems to be more at stake than only a certain kind of “hereditary sin”, defined by the time and place of the protagonists’ birth. The living space common to all four characters, consisting of a small town in the border area and a secondary school in Varnsdorf, introduces a series of motifs and serves as an elegant dramaturgical tool to reveal the characters’ background. The summarizing scene of a school board meeting provides a discussion of the protagonists’ personal and domestic issues, as well as their school results and poor attendance.

In addition to the content of the documentary itself, its form is equally interesting. Tasovská and Kokeš move into the close, intimate proximity of the protagonists, and observe them coping with different situations, both dramatic and mundane. *Nothing Like Before* can be seen as a time-lapse documentary of its kind, turning 160 hours of footage into a 92-minute long final cut. Unlike Dušek’s slightly cynical approach to the subject, Tasovská and Kokeš handle the portrait of the youth of Vansdorf with more sensitivity and civility, without stylization or an attempt to create controversy (supposedly, the authors cut out an interesting, but possibly harmful, view of one of the protagonists).

A significant aspect of *Nothing Like Before* is its documentary and realistic character, achieved not only through

its methods or the dynamics among the protagonists, the camera, and the audience, but also thanks to the characters’ motivation to take part in recording their reality of the commonplace. The participants in the documentary were chosen through casting, announced via YouTube, in a video featuring the popular singer Adam Mišík and the rapper Sharkass. The invitation first defined the age limits and localities the applicants were supposed to come from and then asked: “Do you want to make some money?” It went on to announce: “If we choose you, you will receive CZK 10,000 as a one-off remuneration, plus daily payments.” This makes the motivation of the applicants rather self-explanatory, although it would not be quite fair to denounce the project as mere (media) exploitation.

Nothing Like Before deals with the existential and psychological situation of young people, as well as the general social standing of the “selfie” generation. Its members are typically marked by a great deal of narcissism, the prospect of profit, and a lack of self-reflexion, all essential ingredients for local reality shows. These same characteristics, shown in this collective portrait of a “lost generation” groping in the dark, were actually also a pre-condition for the film’s very existence.

× Martin Kudláč



When the War Comes

(Až přijde válka, Czech Republic
– Croatia 2018)

Director

Jan Gebert

Cinematography

Lukáš Milota

Producers

Radovan Šíbrt, Alžběta Karásková

Film editing

Jana Vlčková

Sound

Dominik Dolejší, Petr Neubauer

Runtime

76 min.

Patriotic when it suits—a Central European pathology

With respect to the current expansion, thematic diversity and increasing support for documentary films, the question is often raised whether the moments when documentaries are needed more than before can be identified. The critical, therapeutic, informative, artistic, meditative (and many other) functions of documentary films are more or less known. Nevertheless, it is apparent at present that documentary films can (and, in the opinion of many, also should) actively look into current affairs and comment on them in a committed way. Not using this potential means abandoning its own importance. Is this really the case?

Jan Gebert's feature-length documentary debut *When the War Comes* (2018), presented this year in the Panorama Dokumente section of the German Berlinale, provides insight into a Slovak paramilitary organisation Slovenskí branci (Recruits of Slovakia), with Peter Švrček as their ideological as well as actual leader. Gebert's background as a historian and having worked as a reporter has in all probability influenced his approach to a phenomenon which is all but unique in present-day Europe. Building up the rhythm gradually, he closely observes the development of a motley group of people gathering in the woods, preparing for the military defence of their country under the leadership of a young student. The seeming innocence of their unity—the very first sequence of the film, for example, depicts a group of young people lying around the fire, cracking jokes about their adventures—is gradually replaced (in a predictable, yet in many aspects surprising way) by a systematic ideological and physical drill leading to a clear vision of the future social system. Soon,

the recruits emerge from the woods and march through the town, and at the very end establish a political movement, as the deception, fear and frustration of many must be rightly understood. Instead of explicitness, Gebert chooses a more intricate way to comment on what he is filming, and plays a sort of a game with the individual characters, who are often unable to decide between their own opinions, or between the desire to clearly express them and elaborate self-presentation (they are being filmed after all), built around the image of innocent and committed young patriots. Refraining from conscious comments may in fact be what makes Gebert's documentary even more critical, as it helps to point out the simple fact that serious societal problems come to life in the silence of civic indifference.

The documentary skilfully addresses several problems of present-day society with a European-wide impact. Militant tendencies involving a vision of a looming conflict can be found in any society. The same applies to the popularity of guns and the idea of sovereign freedom of defence at any cost (with the enemy varying according to the current needs). The aim of Gebert's film study of one particular case would seem to be, however, more general: to show specific societal tendencies consisting in the demand for a stronger, firmer leadership based on nationalist images of rigorous patriotism. The depiction of a phase of the commander's life is a kind of microstudy showing how a leader is born, regardless of whether he succeeds or not. The diversity of the characters and backgrounds of the individual recruits (including their age), who, socially speaking, are often very different, enhances the plasticity of the image of reality which can no





longer be reduced to simple indoctrinations about the mental and economic insufficiency of extremists of nationalist and militant orientation.

The primary focus of the documentary is Peter Švrček, a successful secondary school graduate and newly admitted university student, through whom we have the opportunity to see the perspective of the other recruits, be they his closest colleagues, who by their joint decision-making gradually change the rules of the community, or other recruits reaching higher ranks and becoming leaders of smaller groups elsewhere in Slovakia. The longer the characters are recorded, the more they seem to forget about the presence of the camera. The sequences show them shouting rude things at a group of refugees, deeply regretting not being able to shoot them down with a tommy gun or wishing to clear the country of all unadaptive elements (i.e. unadaptive to their vision of society). This corresponds, to a greater or lesser extent, to the viewer's expectations concerning a documentary of this kind. What is more interesting, and eventually more menacing, are the sequences showing the community presenting

its opinions in public, in a controlled manner (e.g. in a discussion organised by the Open Society Fund). It is here that the danger which similar tendencies represent for society is clearly visible. The ideas of pan-slavism, of a militant union of the Slavic nations controlled by Russia are unfortunately not new—but to identify the latent agenda based on sophisticated lies is something we still need to learn. This quiet drama about the loss of freedom is actually taking place with the majority looking on with indifference.

Despite a major conflict missing, Gebert's documentary does not lack a certain escalation, which is oftentimes emphasized by the editing and the sound track. At first glance, the film is showing us what we already know (one might recall, for example, *Teaching War [Výchova k válce]*, dir. Adéla Komrží, 2016] from the Czech Journal cycle), but in fact it artfully reveals something that we do not really want to see: the indifference of every one of us. Are Czech documentary films setting out on a new path?

× Michal Kříž



The Russian Job	(Švéd v žigulíku, Czech Republic 2017)
Director and writer	Petr Horký
Cinematography	Milan Bureš
Runtime	64 min.
Distribution CZ	Pilot Film
Release date	22 March 2017

The Frozen Volga

One of the few recent Czech documentary films which is truly worth watching, and which has attracted attention abroad as well, was shot by a man lacking both education and experience in filmmaking. Petr Horký is a journalist and the theme of his film debut arose from his experience as a reporter. Several years ago, he travelled to the Russian city of Togliatti to depict the Swedish crisis manager Bo Inge Andersson working to revive the dying AvtoVAZ car factory where legendary Lada cars were produced. A simple financial report later revealed a more complex issue, this being a clash between two different cultures and two different ways of thinking. Horký decided to make a feature documentary film. With the help of Martin Jůza, a young producer at the Krutart company, he took part in several European pitching forums that enabled him to gather funds, specify the dramaturgical aspect of his film and connect with the international festival network. *The Russian Job* (Švéd v žigulíku, 2017) consequently had its premiere at the prestigious documentary film festival in

Amsterdam where it was introduced in the mid-length film section (see *Film a doba* 1/2018).

Since Horký is not involved in the local director's community, he is not affected by its formal stereotypes. He does not make use of the estrangement effects of "Vachek's school", nor does he strive for a visually catchy style as is the case with a number of representatives of the younger generation. He does not, surprisingly, provide short-spoken reporting coverage based on interviews, analyses and presented facts. Horký builds his direction simply on narration—on a few individuals and a slow unfolding of the plot.

Andersson arrives in the city of Togliatti as a confident manager of his success. He rapidly implements changes which proved useful at other companies going bankrupt: shutting down an ineffective production line, dismissing unnecessary employees, introducing a new car model to the market and increasing its production. The factory gradually emerges from the worst, only for additional problems to arise. Andersson begins to realise his limitations: his idea of functional capitalism clashes with the reality of the post-Soviet Russia





he is unable to change. A formerly successful manager needs to confront the deep-seated habits of workers who used to be part of the Soviet elite living in a state of artificially sustained welfare at the expense of others. The previously talk-active Andersson grows more introverted. The audience learns about his motives through the comments of his Czech girlfriend, also a top manager at AvtoVAZ. Another Czech person in the Andersson's crisis management team is the company's vice-president who comments on their mission in Russia concisely: "Either you love your job, or you need to leave immediately."

Horký does not take sides with anyone involved in the conflict. He takes his camera among the factory workers, picking a few of them and showing, by means of their life stories, that it is not very meaningful to adapt a particular culture to a different one. He observes Russia without prejudice, moralizing or judging. He portrays a country still mired in its troubled past, a country where attempts at a speedy transformation, however good the intentions may be, can end up being contra-productive.

The fact that Horký primarily concentrates on a smooth narration of Andersson's story does not mean that he completely ignores the visual aspect of his film. The composition of some shots from the camera of Milan Bureš (also a film debutante) actually enhance the overall meaning of the film. We see Andersson in a luxurious villa inherited from his predecessor, surrounded by kitsch furniture and decorations. We see him sitting alone in a huge sauna seating sixty people, or standing on the deck of a yacht in the middle of the vast Volga river. These scenes serve to establish the second dimension of the film: the story of a man who has overestimated his strengths, who could not confront a phenomenon which exceeds him, and who lost all illusions about himself. Andersson is unbroken in the end and we view him humbly accepting his defeat. And the endless Volga river begins to freeze, transforming itself into a picture of a country frozen in its own past.

× Jan Křipač



The Ark of Lights and Shadows	(Archa světél a stínů, Czech Republic 2018)
Director and writer	Jan Svatoš
Cinematography	Romi Straková
Runtime	90 min.
Distribution CZ	Art Francesco
Release date	19 March 2018

The eventful fate and legacy of the Johnsons

Martin and Osa Johnson, who explored the Pacific Islands and Africa with their camera and video camera, were among the most celebrated adventurers of their time in the 1920s and 1930s. They shared their experience through a number of documentaries—as deformed by Hollywood consumers as might be—and authored a wide range of publications, describing, among other things, the difficult circumstances in which the footage was shot. They later became pioneers of aerial filming. Their films, ranging from the silent *Head Hunters of the South Seas*, 1922, or *Simba: The King of the Beasts*, 1928, to the sound movies *Congorilla*, 1932, *Baboona*, 1935, or *Borneo*, 1937, were all but unknown in 1920s and 1930s Czechoslovakia, and several books—*Martin's Safari*, *Simba: King of the Beasts*, *Congorilla*, *Wings Over Africa*, *Bride in the Salomons*—were translated into Czech and accompanied with rich pictorial supplements.

They were devoted amateurs without any technical background, and without the ambition to ever obtain one. Their aim was not to conduct ethnological or anthropological

research and they were not interested in finding the most effective film form. In their eyes, the video camera and the pen represented instruments helping to capture and put across their feelings and fascination. Their story comes back to life in *The Ark of Lights and Shadows*, a film by the Czech director Jan Svatoš, commemorating and reflecting upon the legacy of the Johnsons' artwork.

Jan Svatoš delved into the story of the Johnsons during his studies, and it is to them that he dedicated his TV documentary entitled *Africa obscura*, which served as the basis for *The Ark of Lights and Shadows*. In the footsteps of his heroes, Jan Svatoš demonstrates admirable perseverance. His research takes him to America, to a museum dedicated to the Johnsons as well as to the Library of Congress, Washington DC, USA. He sets out for Kenya to see the far-off places where the Johnsons spent several happy years. Like them, he climbs the high, snow-covered mountain where Mrs Johnson almost lost her life—and reveals, just by the way, that Africa has other, far less friendly faces than the charming “velvety” one with animals running around in the deserted landscape.





Svatoš provides a voice to diverse personalities influenced by the Johnsons in one way or another, be they a guard or a guide in a Kenya national park, or experts overseeing their estate in various places. They are not, however, the only resources Svatoš made use of. He includes extensive extracts from translations of books written by the Johnsons themselves, the slightly archaic language of which helps revive the charm of times long past—almost a century—as well as unedited (and therefore never used) materials proving that not only animals, but also human beings and the everyday life of the indigenous tribes aroused the curiosity of the courageous couple.

The film also reveals bits of the Johnsons' private life. Osa was only sixteen years old when she ran off with Martin to set off on their travels around the world. Their spontaneous marriage upset their parents a great deal as their ideas about their children's future were completely different. The Johnsons took their first cruise with Jack London. Facing countless challenges and dangers, they formed almost a perfect couple, with Martin viewing his wife as an equal human being—who, on top of everything, saved his life when she shot down a raging animal running directly at the video camera he was standing behind.

They made ambitious plans for the future (for the next one hundred years, as they would jokingly say); a plane crash (1937) ruined them all. The 52-year-old Martin did not survive; Osa took a long time to recover from the serious injuries she had suffered. She never got over her husband's death. Not even her frantic work pace helped her resist alcohol, in which she sought consolation. She worked as an advisor for

feature films about wildlife, wrote books, edited the ample footage she once captured with her husband to be used in new projects and cooperated with the expanding TV industry. She died alone in a New York hotel, not yet 60 years old...

The Ark of Lights and Shadows tells the story of these unjustly forgotten enthusiasts and shows that Jan Svatoš and his small team, in spite of a limited budget, have been fighting for this project for so long and with so much determination, sharing the same zeal. The advice of Werner Herzog, the renowned German filmmaker who receives a special thanks in the final credits, was undoubtedly of great use to him. Let us keep our fingers crossed for Jan Svatoš not only to get the English version of his film into American cinemas, but also to introduce it in Kenya, where it might help to make the past, so recent and yet already forgotten, present once again.

× Jan Jaroš



The Hastrman	(Hastrman, Czech Republic 2018)
Director	Ondřej Havelka
Writers	Ondřej Havelka, Petr Hudský
Cinematography	Diviš Marek
Music	Petr Wajsar
Cast	Karel Dobrý, Simona Zmrzlá, Jiří Lábus, Jan Kolařík, Jiří Maryško, David Novotný, Norbert Lichý, Vladimír Polívka and others
Runtime	100 min.
Distribution CZ	CinemArt
Release date	19 April 2018

“Our land and her, that’s one body”

In his film debut, the actor, musician, documentarist and theatre director Ondřej Havelka embarked on a challenging task of literary adaptation, having chosen the postmodern novel *Hastrman* by Miloš Urban. He focused on the first part of the book, taking place around 1830, and its central motif of a romance of the nobleman and a village girl. He omits the second part, reincarnating the hero into an eco-terrorist on the threshold of the twenty-first century, and also the general philosophical level and motif of a victim. This represented the pivotal element of this “green” novel which, written in 2001, represented a certain political statement and was awarded the Magnesia Litera Book Prize.

The film thus narrates a historical fairy tale story. After several years spent abroad, Baron de Caus (Karel Dobrý) is returning to his ancestral barony in North Bohemia to renovate a system of ponds and find peace. The ageing nobleman is actually, however, a Hastrman: a human, animal and supernatural being at the same time. He falls in love with a young femme fatale from the village. The magistrate’s daughter Katynka (Simona Zmrzlá) is extremely well-read, but also headstrong, beautiful and animally attractive. Epitomizing the essence of femininity which men tend to fall for, she is the archetype of a nymph, a virgin goddess of nature, unpredictable and amoral, unbound by morality. Only a similarly interesting personality can attract the attention of such a girl, an elegant intellectual who would broaden her horizons and offer her a more exciting life. It is the animal in him, however, which is able to enthrall and tame her, beating three more suitors in an imaginary battle: the villager Jakub (Vladimír Polívka), who loses his life in a duel with the Baron, an enlightened teacher (Jiří Maryško) and a perverse pastor (Jan Kolařík). The Hastrman, a nearly omnipotent creature, is suddenly powerless against human emotion. He is the archetype of Bluebeard, an ambivalent man, scary and irresistible at the same time. The fancy gloves of the nobleman, hiding animal talons, symbolize the impossibility of normal human contact. The Hastrman is afraid to hurt and be hurt, which is why he hides and sheathes his feelings just like his claws, reluctant to reveal his true self to his beloved woman. His predatory nature only comes to light after gallant manoeuvres of order-

ly courting and suppressed blasts of forbidden feelings. At first, Katynka only plays with him, testing her female power over him. However: “What was conceived in a play, suddenly becomes a dark fate,” to quote the Privy Councillor who the Hastrman knows in person, as he did not forget to mention by the way (in the book, not in the film). Katynka probably has no idea what looms over her, but seemingly unknowingly heads for her, in a way fascinating, self-destruction. On this level, the screenplay largely succeeds in romantically characterizing the torn souls of the protagonists and their fatal, tragic affair. Havelka’s stage-like direction helps slowly build up the atmosphere of a relationship made even more passionate due to the necessary restraint. It sometimes allows, however, for stiff declamations. Moreover, the tout ensemble is disturbed by the post-synchronization. The shallow ancillary characters are on the verge of caricature, mainly the pastor who shares with the Hastrman a broad range of knowledge, a sense of outsiderhood, and a battle with his nature. This, in confrontation with his noble intellectual and ethical ideals, is interpreted as bestiality and is transformed into frenzy due to suppression. Their polemic could have created a fruitful tension, but it instead shrinks into a schematic opposition between enlightened reason and Catholic obscurantism, leaving the ambivalent reader of forbidden books a mere skeleton of a moralizing church servant.

Corresponding to the periodic seasons of the year, celebrated by a mixture of Christian and Pagan rituals, the rhythm of chapters underlines the connection with nature, landscape and land. The screenplay sections only cover, however, spring and summer (Sunday of the Dead, Easter, May Day, Saint John’s Eve, Haymaking). What is even more inconsistent is the narrator’s commentary, which is imbalanced within the whole. It begins in the exposition as a literal quotation from the novel, sticking out from the film like a bookmark from a book, only to gradually disappear as the story naturally moves. The individual chapters begin with folk songs consonant with the original music composed by Petr Wajsar. In spite of Havelka’s erudition in this field, the singing and dancing acts resemble the performances of a folklore group. Finally given the chance to shine on the silver screen, Karel Dobrý depicts the conflicts of the Hastrman’s nature with a charm of his own. Simona



Zmrzlá's interpretation is rather limited to a seductress, and fails to cover other aspects of Katynka's personality. Her rebellion and large-mindedness do not seem to be a product of a sophisticated intent or the fruit of education, but rather a manifestation of a natural need to define oneself against authorities, just like the rest of the village youth.

The author of the novel approaches romanticism more or less ironically. The screenwriters, in contrast, take it seriously, using effects at the same time (hard to say whether intentionally distancing) which make it look like contemporary film clichés. They did not stick either to Urban's, or to a purely romantic interpretation. They decided not to let the darkness be dark, probably thinking a Czech film needs some humour and that a tragic drama or a horror could not stand on its own. A dramatic gesture must be apparently followed by a pleasantry from time to time. The demonic character of the Hastrman needs an antipole in a clown—as represented by the old servant Francl (Jiří Lábus) in this case. The means of expression were also contaminated, with quotations from the archaically rich language of Urban's book followed by current phrases such as the terrible: "Přesně ták!" ("Exactly!") or the inadmissible reference to "vomiting" made by a nobleman. These slips cannot be justified as an update considering the fact that the authors abandoned the postmodern style, which could potentially serve to cover the genre confusion and helplessness in screenwriting.

The depiction of the relationship with landscape, Urban's particular accent, is primarily created by the camera, and the visual aspects are thus more prominent or replace the idea of Katynka being one with Mother Nature which is

being violated. The environmental nature of the novel is only reflected in the film allusively, in an epilogue lacking catharsis. In this case, the incompleteness and the open end do not make much sense.

What can certainly be appreciated is the obvious genuineness with which the authors approached the subject matter, or the intention to make a film with deep thoughts and emotions and revive a Mácha-like sentiments in the viewers. It is all the more disappointing that the individual well done elements of the film do not make up a work which would realize its artistic ambitions. Although obviously far from the cultural bottom, which many creations of Czech cinematography have tended to fall to recently, there is still a great deal to be desired for the promised *great film*.

× Zdena Mejzlíková



Mečiar	(Slovakia–Czech Republic 2017)
Director	Tereza Nvotová
Writers	Tereza Nvotová, Josef Krajbich
Cinematography	Martin Žiaran
Music	Jonatán Pastirčák
Cast	Vladimír Mečiar, Tereza Nvotová, Milan Žitný, Fedor Flašík, Fedor Gál, Petr Pithart, Michael Kocáb, Tom Nicholson, Eugen Korda, Václav Klaus, Gérard Depardieu and others
Runtime	89 min.
Distribution CZ	AČFK
Release date	8 March 2017

A Mečiar Lesson

“When I was ten, my friend and I mostly played Winnetou, E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial and Mečiar, not realizing at that time that the last one was not fictitious. Yet he was ubiquitous: on TV, on posters, in our parents’ discussions, in our heads. Having become a grown-up, I am now curious to find out who he really was, where he came from and what he did with us and with our country, as I feel that stories like this are now all around the world,” says Tereza Nvotová in the first part of the film.

I personally consider her *Mečiar* (Meciar, 2017) ghostly: in its precision, personal tone and selection of people speaking in the film. It is of particular interest that Tereza Nvotová’s documentary film will symbolically have its first release now when the murders of Ján Kuciak and Martina Kušnírová have given rise to demonstrations, in Bratislava and elsewhere, against this revival of the 1990s: a period of national terrorism, hired murders and strange cash flows.

Nvotová scored managed to get access to Mečiar’s villa in Trenčianské Teplice. Who else has managed to do so? In

addition, apart from Vladimír Mečiar, the aging good-natured bard welcoming the film director with a bunch of flowers, there are other people of great interest: Fedor Flašík, political marketer and advertising wizard; Petr Pithart, ex-prime minister of the Czech Republic (then part of Czechoslovakia); and Luboš Jurík, spokesperson of the National Council of Slovakia, former member of the People’s Party–Movement for a Democratic Slovakia and writer. It was Mr Jurík who in his essay on power called *Lessons on Power* (Poučení z moci, 2013) compared the former and current state of government in Slovakia as follows: “Political scientist Miroslav Kusý made a response, having found the right name for Mr Fico’s mental state: it is paranoia and pathology when the media are being accused because they have been informing the public about the current situation. Instead of focusing on the cause and source of the criticism, the Prime Minister turns against the critics themselves.” Generally speaking, *Mečiar* is a film about accumulation of power, manipulation of the public and demoralization of society, which began under the Communist regime and continues up until the present.





Without leaving the level of specific examples and experience from history for a single moment, Nvotová depicts Mečiar as the first autocratic ruler in a row, whose successors managed to secure strong positions all over Central Europe. Indeed, they significantly, though indirectly, inspire one other, this being reflected in their statements. In the film, Mečiar lights a fire in the fireplace, pondering that looking at a fire is more interesting than watching TV. In fact, two years ago, Miloš Zeman could be heard stating something similar. In addition, Mečiar and Zeman, together with Fico and Okamura, also share their disrespect for journalists, all of them claiming that journalists lie and invent stories. All of them maintain a list of “hostile” media they refuse to communicate with. Vladimir Putin has been following in Mečiar’s footsteps by inviting international business stars to his political events (shown in the film based on the archives).

The contribution of Nvotová lies mainly in her presenting the train of thought of the autocrat and his supporters. The film consequently maps out Mečiar’s career since 1970, when he for some reason condemned Soviet occupation, up until his fall in 1998. The list of key events are completed with Tereza Nvotová’s edited personal memories of the revolution, of her parents and their support and later rejection of Mečiar. Something is over, something remains. The amnesties declared by Mečiar for Kováč’s kidnappers were annulled, for example, only in 2017. Indeed, autocratic governance is growing stronger again—and not only in Slovakia.

While proceeding in chronological order, Nvotová does not proceed as a historian, although she does use well-known historical facts, memories, archives and contemporary

witnesses. Historical events are always related to her inner feelings, in the same way that she managed to empathize with the heroine of her live action film *Filthy* (Špína, 2017), who had also grown disillusioned. The director cast a critical view on the role of “the people” who have always been mistaken in their leaders, claiming that she has nearly lost faith in any change. “Little faith has remained in me today,” is how the 30-year old woman, who used to play Mečiar as a child, views the current situation. Her documentary film is highly topical and provides apt lessons. And what about her “magic old man” in *Elektra villa*? While claiming that he now put an end to his social life and turned to his family and roasting of sausages, the strong manipulator has remained within him. Tereza Nvotová’s documentary film plays a significant role, pointing subtly to the dictator’s power expansion and to the volatility of the so-called people’s will. Although it might seem locally-focused, the topic goes beyond to create a picture of Europe, with its narration reaching the level of a European film. Indeed, the Slovakia vs. Europe confrontation works well. Bratislava is not depicted as a grey and dirty city of homeless people, as is the case in a number of other Slovak films, but rather as a modern city situated on the “international” Danube River. The film does not present anything that would not be known from the past, yet its synthesis of well-known facts and the form of narration creates an impressive, complex, elaborate piece of work that deserves the attention of temporary witnesses, young people and the public as a whole.

× Radovan Holub



Stomach of the World	(Žaludek světa, Czech Republic–Greece 2017)
Writer and artistic concept	Eva Kořátková
Director	Tomáš Luňák
Cinematography	Aleš Svoboda
Music	Aid Kid
Cast	František Bouzek, Marie Bouzková, Katie Brown, Sam Budiman, Tobiáš Haertl, Antonín Holoubek, Katharina Kasíková, Adéla Kašparová and others
Runtime	45 min.

Metaphors for consumption

In her new film, the renowned artist Eva Kořátková returns to the motif of child play, using it to observe certain burning questions current in contemporary society.

The artistic work of Eva Kořátková is characterized by the use of various means of expression—ranging from drawings and 3D objects to performance and video. These are often interconnected in a specific gallery installation. The author produced a feature film, *The Judicial Murder of Jakob Mohr* (Justiční vražda Jakoba Mohra, 2016) in 2016, based on a theatre play of the same name and directed in cooperation with the film director Tomáš Luňák (*Alois Nebel*, 2011). This project was logically followed by a new mid-length film entitled *Stomach of the World* (Žaludek světa, 2017).

Similarly to the *Jakob Mohr* film, the work with actors/performers is the basic expressive element of the new film. In contrast to the previous project where professional actors and patients of the Bohnice Psychiatric Hospital played side by side, Kořátková now turns her attention to children as performers. She follows up on some of her earlier projects where children as performers were part of an installation. This time, however, children and their physical expression were not adapted to gallery surroundings but to the lens of a camera directly pointed at them, with the shots incorporated into the form of a consistent and relatively precise structure.

The film consists of self-contained scenes or “pictures” sequenced according to the literary script, with the script text being read in the soundtrack. A male voice, representing a kind of transpersonal supervising authority, gradually presents ten exercises framing the performances of the actors on stage. This is initially a gym (a variant of a school environment often used by Kořátková in her works). The story moves at the end from a strictly bordered setting to several outdoor locations as the value scope of the film moves from partial (schooling system, education) to general questions concerning all of society.

Following the instructions in the soundtrack, children perform various “tasks” such as drawing on a piece of paper, doing a puppet show or moving in a giant-sized mask of a snake. Kořátková transposes artistic means of expression (drawing–theatre–object), previously used in her in-

stallations or cultivated at separate events out of a gallery (e.g. the puppet show *A Brief History of Daydreaming and String Control* at the Art Basel fair), into a film setting. In all of these scenes, the children’s group works on its own as a micro-cosmos having its own social relations. It is also possible to perceive the group metaphorically, as a portrait of all society and its patterns of behaviour. This is further enhanced by the central metaphor of a stomach, possibly associated with the multiple faces of the present world, ranging from poverty issues to the unbounded consumerism of the western liberal world or the options for the planet’s sustainable development. The film consequently comes to an end in a corresponding scene, at a waste dump with children collecting discarded and unwanted things to “bring them back to life”.

The film *Stomach of the World* (Žaludek světa, 2017) premiered last year in March at the exposition in the Benaki Museum in Athens. It was part of a sophisticated installation using the concept of the passage through the digestion tract ending in the room where the film was projected. The Czech version of the film had its premiere on 25 June in the Ponrepo cinema in Prague. The film was also presented at IFF in Rotterdam at the end of January.

× Jan Křipač



BOOKS

Poetika českého filmu

an old project come true

Published by the Publishing House of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (NAMU) in the usual grey design, *Poetika českého filmu* (Poetics of Czech Film) is a work by Jan Kučera (1908–1977), in cooperation with Jan Svoboda (*1940). Jan Svoboda has been systematically dealing with the personality and diverse activities of Jan Kučera, a theoretician, critic, teacher and filmmaker, for several decades, with the 2007 extensive monograph *Skladba a řád* (Composition and Order) being the undisputed highlight of his research efforts.⁰¹ In this book, Svoboda among other things mentions the theoretical essays and analytical articles of late 1960s Czech films (and one Slovak film, Juraj Jakubisko's *The Deserter and the Nomads* (Zbehovia a pútnici, 1968)) published in *Film a doba* between 1969–1970, and the author's project of their publication in a collected edition under the name *Poetika českého filmu*. Under, however, the dismal conditions of the beginning of the normalization period, this project was not—or considering the topics of the articles could not be—carried out (two of the analyses were not even allowed to be published in a magazine and readers could only first read them in 1990). Almost ten years after the monograph was published, Jan Svoboda managed to reconstruct and carry out Kučera's project.

Svoboda added an extensive introduction to Kučera's texts. In evaluating this book, it is appropriate to consider both the form of the introduction, and to ask ourselves if and how the collected edition of articles, written almost half a century ago, is beneficial and useful in today's specialist context (and also if the articles have lost something compared to the original edition).

The almost 40-page long essay entitled *Jan Kučera a jeho poetika* (Jan Kučera and His Poetics) (p. 7–43) draws of course on Svoboda's earlier monograph to a great extent;

some formulations are repeated here nearly literally. The findings and conclusions contained in the monograph were selected and condensed in a way that the essay very well serves its main function, i.e. to give the reader orientation in Kučera's ideas and introduce his approach to film theory and analysis. The overview of Kučera's life and professional career and the main features of his concept of film composition is followed by a chapter on the perception of film poetics of several researchers and directors and especially of Kučera. The final part of the essay recapitulates the history of the finally carried out project. The text also, however, contains elements adding to and enriching the earlier findings. More recent literature on the topics was taken into account, e.g. the conclusions of other researchers were pointed out dealing with the same films as Kučera. The author also takes into greater consideration a broader theoretical framework, constantly and consistently pointing out remarkable similarities and analogies between Kučera's approaches and the terminological systems developed by other researchers. A unifying perspective is provided by the emphasis on "structurally semiotic tendencies" (p. 42) and their "scattered persistence" in contemporary research concepts. The author thus draws a line between the semiotic reflections of the 1960s and the cognitively neo-formalist approach or cognitive narratology. Worth mentioning is the fact that, among other things, he also points out often ignored, but undoubtedly important, works by Polish researchers (mainly Alicja Helman). While on the subject, it would be appropriate to mention the parallel (mentioned in the earlier monograph) between Kučera's concept of the composition of shots as chains of questions and answers and Noël Carroll's erotematic (i.e. based on raising questions) model of narration.⁰²

01 Jan Svoboda, *Skladba a řád. Český teoretik filmu a televize Jan Kučera*. Praha: Národní filmový archiv 2007.

02 Noël Carroll, "Síla filmu". In: Vlastimil Zuska (ed.), *Sborník filmové teorie I. Angloamerické studie*. Praha: Český filmový ústav 1991, p. 69–70.



↳ Jan Kučera, *Poetika českého filmu (Poetics of Czech Film)*. Praha: Nakladatelství AMU 2016, 218 pp. ISBN 978-80-7331-415-6.

Of importance for Jan Kučera's work, pragmatically speaking, around which the book is centered, is the very fact that they were introduced to the public after several years and thanks to their presence in one book, are readily available. The new publication also makes one think about what they meant at the time of their creation. (If I may add a personal remark: I remember how back then, they significantly increased my interest in film. I was impatiently waiting for other texts by Kučera, although I could only partially understand them at the age of fifteen and I must have only understood them rather superficially).

The execution of Kučera's project also reveals that it is an organised and elaborated whole, although the original plan was not executed completely (the author probably did not even start preparing the few declared analyses considering the changes in the political situation, which made their publication impossible). There is a continuum in the analyses of the individual films (nine in total) complementing one other and being placed in a framework, on the one hand, by a general methodological, and one might say instructive essay entitled *Nač dbát při zkoumání filmového díla* (What to pay attention to when examining a film work), and on the other hand, by a genealogical essay *Film mezi dramatem a epikou* (Film between drama and epic) summarizing and systematizing matters often touched upon by Kučera earlier.

Last but not least, the publication of the articles together helps us realize the importance of Kučera's approach to film poetics, what the concepts, topics and methods are that are repeated in the texts and in what way the author constructs his interpretations. Generally, the articles undoubtedly fully correspond to the stage of development of the specialised thinking about film of the time. Leaning on the structuralist tradition, the author becomes involved in efforts to create film semiotics (while critically evaluating this approach at the same time). He discusses the main building units of a film, the structural relationships in a film work, the relations between rules and their breaking and the genesis or forming of meanings. In line with the reflections

by film semioticians of the day, Kučera has a tendency to use metaphors; he e.g. mentions "standard" and "informal" styles or territorial and social dialects in cinematography (p. 55). In addition, the nature of Kučera's texts corresponds to the turn to detailed film analyses, emphasizing the methodological aspects of these analyses at the same time. This approach began to be used in the late 1960s (e.g. in works by Raymond Bellour).

In line with the author's Czech structuralist roots, it is symptomatic of his analyses that he does not avoid "looking from the perspective of the author who wants to create something, something with a specific meaning and form" (p. 46). Kučera always relates the discussed films to the creative concepts of their directors (Juraj Jakubisko, Vojtěch Jasný, Otakar Vávra, Jaroslav Papoušek, Věra Chytilová, Pavel Juráček, etc.),⁰³ while at the same time carefully examining the contribution of their co-workers, mainly cinematographers and composers. Discussions concerning the thematic structure of the films (characters, actions depicted, story structure) in connection with analyses of the use of diverse means and techniques (great attention is paid e.g. to the use of colours) usually result in an attempt to find a unifying element linking the individual parts of the work to form an interconnected whole. Juraj Jakubisko, according to Kučera, "shows human actions as a continuous, changeable stream of human energy forcing its way forward" (p. 76), and *The Witch Hunt* (Kladivo na čarodějnice, 1969, dir. Otakar Vávra) aims at "making abstract the things presented to the viewer through his senses, and making the human fate absolute" (p. 96). In this context, Jan Svoboda speaks about the semantic gesture concept (p. 28–34), despite the fact that this term is not explicitly mentioned in the analyses. Kučera often emphasizes, in contrast, the subject of a (mod-

⁰³ The concepts are always derived from the works and he reminds the reader that they do not have to correspond to the author's initial intention (p. 95).

el) viewer, sees the creation of a film's meaning as a result of interactions between the impulses provided by the work and the viewer's interpretation activity, and tries to describe the anticipated actions in the process of understanding (e.g. p. 156, 168).

The interconnectedness of the individual articles is enhanced by the fact that they lean on a set of polarities used to characterize the films. There is a contrast here between authenticity, "a copy of reality", "ordinary life" (p. 137) and stylization connected with allegories, the present day and a depiction of history, which is always determined by contemporary problems and approaches. As concerns the structure of themes, there is a contrast between drama based on active, targeted actions prompted by objective forces, and epic demonstrating itself in a free addition of elements. Another significant common element is the author's tendency not to limit his explanations to an immanent analysis of the films, not to take them as self-absorbed units, but to constantly take into account the cultural or historical contexts (to find comparisons or explanations). The texts are full of references to literature, theatre, folk art, mythology and also—with a specifically significant impact—to the visual arts; in many shots in *The Witch Hunt*, Kučera finds allusions to different visual styles or specific paintings (p. 93–94). As a key to an understanding of the film, he includes in the analysis a long passage on the history and practices of the Inquisition (p. 86–88). Although these sections sometimes tend to make the text less concise, in the vast majority of cases they serve their function and are a testament to the author's extremely broad range of knowledge.

Great attention was paid to editing Kučera's articles. The texts were proofread and bibliographical data were completed and made more accurate. While Kučera often translated himself from original texts when quoting, the new edition adds versions from published Czech translations. As concerns correctness of language, however, not all the mistakes were removed and there are sometimes new ones compared to the original edition. These involve mainly the use of diacritical marks. We can thus find in the book "může jich byt mnoho" ("byt" instead of "být") (p. 68), "jakési barevně staccato" ("barevně" instead of "barevné") (p. 80), "oděv [...] je střídavé všední [...] i rafinovaný" ("střídavé" instead of "střídavě"). The celebrated Doctor *Caligari* was probably automatically corrected to the name of the city *Cagliari* (p. 145). A similar mistake occurred in Svoboda's introductory essay with "předvědecká" (pre-science) stage of thinking about film becoming "přírodovědecká" (natural science) (p. 43).

A comparison of the magazine editions and the book can again raise the above-mentioned question as to whether the texts have "lost" something with the new edition and whether it is worth it to return back to the magazines. The modest book edition misses one thing, albeit a complementary one—the picture material. The many photos of the discussed films, originally complementing Kučera's analyses, were not directly related to the presented explanations, as is the case with many papers at present, but they could still concretize some of the aspects (for instance the appearance and clothes of the Homolka family and the space without a horizon in *We Eat the Fruit of the Trees of Paradise* (Ovoce stromů rajských jíme 1969, dir. Věra Chytilová). Moreover, the analysis of this film by Věra Chytilová was also supplemented by samples from the film music score written by Zdeněk Liška. A properly educated reader could thus verify at least some of the claims contained in the extensive analyses of the form and function of music in this film.

In addition to the edition of the already known texts, *Poetika českého filmu* also provides a still practically unknown text. Kučera's article "Účtování pro zítřek" (Accounting for Tomorrow, 1964–1967), originally written for a volume of *Československá vlastivěda* (Czechoslovak Homeland Study) on photography and film, was added, which Kučera was

also involved with as a scientific editor (p. 193–210). The already completed typography of the book was destroyed at the beginning of the 1970s, and the article is thus presented to the public for the first time. "Účtování pro zítřek" is distinctly different from the preceding, analytically and theoretically oriented texts. It is a popularizing overview sometimes containing figurative expressions and essayist or journalist formulations not particularly rich in content ("Opájela se nevyčerpatelným bohatstvím druhů a proměnlivostí forem smysly postřehnutelného světa" [She was revelling in the bottomless richness of species and the changeability of forms of the world graspable by the senses]) (p. 208). The article is of interest, however, as it portrays and evaluates the development of Czech cinematography in its most celebrated period and briefly characterizes significant authors and films. Of particular interest is the author's view according to which the 1967 works that are generally very much appreciated (such as for instance *The Firemen's Ball* [Hoří, má panenko, dir. Miloš Forman], *Markéta Lazarová* [dir. František Vlácil]) are not all that innovative as they "only" develop already established techniques (p. 205). The article's focus on the period around the mid-1960s also provides a certain background to the topics of the main part of the book (the films analysed here were made between 1968 and 1970).

Publishing an article originally prepared for the unpublished *Československá vlastivěda* serves to recall another work by Kučera worth pointing out and making available to readers. *Filmová poetika 1.* (Film poetics I), based on film club seminar lectures in Písek in 1972, is only available in the form of an internal photocopied typescript.⁰⁴ While Kučera's lectures on two classic films are clearly impacted by the political situation of the day, the author could nevertheless best use his ability to thoroughly and systematically analyse the means and techniques used in a film work here. A number of passages of this text are undoubtedly still inspiring and instructive.

Returning to *Poetika českého filmu*, one can conclude that it is a necessary and dignified reminder, making accessible a work by a key representative of Czech film theory and analysis. Although the reprinted studies were written several decades ago, they are not merely an item in the history of the field, but function as a current source of knowledge and an invitation to think.⁰⁵

× Petr Mareš

04 Jan Kučera, *Filmová poetika 1. René Clair: Slaměný klobouk, S. M. Ejzenštejn: Ivan Hrozný*. Praha: Československá federace filmových klubů 1973.

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