

002

FILM

010

014

018

A DOEBA

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028

035

037

041

043

045

047

049

051

054



	Forum – Czech film/Interview	
002	Jaromír Blažejovský: The smiles of sad Czechs	002
	— Looking back at the motion pictures of the past season	
010	Pavel Horáček: Czech animation: waiting in the mezzanine	010
014	Sylva Poláková: Where does a film experiment begin and end?	014
018	Martin Svoboda: You must not take it so seriously	018
	— Interview with Karel Vachek	
028	Martin Svoboda: So that the viewers don't feel deceived	028
	— Interview with Bohdan Karásek	
	Films	
035	Karel Vachek: Communism and the Net or the End of Representative Democracy (Janis Prášil)	035
037	Václav Marhoul: The Painted Bird (Martin Svoboda)	037
041	Bohdan Karásek: Karel, me and you (Martin Šrajcr)	041
043	Johana Ožvold: The Sound Is Innocent (Štěpánka Ištvančková)	043
045	Michal Hogenauer: A Certain Kind of Silence (Marek Koutesh)	045
047	Martin Dušek, Ondřej Provazník: Old-Timers (Jan Jaroš)	047
049	Martin Mareček: Over the Hills (Martin Šrajcr)	049
051	Jiří Havelka: Owners (Zdena Mejzlíková)	051
	Books	
054	A milestone of Czech writing about films (Zdena Škapová)	054

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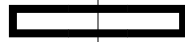
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The smiles of sad Czechs



Looking back at the motion pictures of the past season

Jaromír Blažejovský

At the end of 2018, something unprecedented was happening: Czech cinemas were cancelling the screenings of Czech comedies to satisfy the hunger of all generations for the Queen. And all this in spite of the critics trying their best to explain to the public that *Bohemian Rhapsody* (dir. by Bryan Singer, 2018) was really nothing special! In contrast, they supported the film *Winter Flies* (Všechno bude, 2018) trying to talk the audiences into believing that this time Olmo Omerzu had made an easy to watch film. But it was a wasted effort: in no calendar week, the teenager road movie was among the Top 20. It didn't help that it was included in the Academy Award competition section, or that it was praised by female reviewers who had been yawning with boredom at Václav Kadrnka's allegedly non-communicative *Little Crusader* (Křížáček, 2017) the year before;⁰¹ the distribution results of the winner of the Crystal Globe at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival *Little Crusader* and of the winner of the Best Director Award at the same festival *Winter Flies* were comparably mediocre.

Artistically ambitious films are scarce in the contemporary Czech production and their importance is minor: they almost can't be seen at cinemas, they don't reach international festivals, they don't have a say in public discussion. Basically all domestic arthouse films were presented in last year's competition sections at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival and we have already written about them in *Film a*

doba. Only one of them earned distribution results (100,000 viewers) worth mentioning: Tomáš Pavlíček's *Bear with Us* (Chata na prodej, 2018), a metaphor of the closed nature of Czechs who feel comfortable in their woods, although even there they can make each other's lives miserable. Two debuts received at least the attention of critics: Beata Parkanová's *Moments* (Chvilky, 2018) showed Jenováfa Boková in the role of a young woman who wants to please everyone but can't develop or assert her own self. Adam Sedlák's *Domestic* (Domestik, 2018) attracted with its physicality and extravagant form.

Havířov, alcohol, Most!

In 2018, 16,344,483 viewers came to cinemas, which is the most since 1994 when the commercial TV station Nova started broadcasting, and twice as much as in the weakest year 1999. However, the most impressive audiovisual works of last year were made for the Czech Television, and not for cinemas: two two-part dramas based on devastating events in the Karviná region.

It has been 57 years since the fire in the Dukla coal mine in the Havířov region, where 108 miners died on 07 July 1961, which is a similar period to the one that elapsed between the Kladno miner strike in 1889 and its depiction in *The Strike* (Siréna, 1947), as made by Karel Steklý using the socialist realism method. Just like *The Strike* sounded like an indictment of capitalism, *Dukla 61* (dir. by David Ondříček, 2018) could easily have become a common-place anti-communist film. However, the authors approached the matter in a more complex way and offered a cultural and anthropological reconstruction of the life of miners of the time, based on extensive research.

The Czech Television accompanied this fiction drama with a documentary by Bára Kopecká and Jakub Režný *The Black Gold* (Černé zlato), also in two parts. Watching this

01 Cf. Mirka Spáčilová, *Trucovité nedivácký. Křížáček je křížovka, co ztratila legendu*, 1. 8. 2017, see https://www.idnes.cz/kultura/film-televize/krizacek-recenze.A170731_100836_filmvideo_ts, cit. 10/02/2019; Mirka Spáčilová, *Páni kluci stále věří, že všechno bude. Dost možná film roku*, 2. 9. 2018, see https://www.idnes.cz/kultura/film-televize/recenze-vsechno-bude-olmo-omerzu.A180831_112836_filmvideo_spm, cit. 10. 2. 2019.



↳ Úsměvy smutných mužů

documentary, we can see that the screenwriters Jakub Režný and Matěj Podzimek transformed the empirical findings into fiction in a graphic way: where the documentary mentions the alcoholism of miners and their dissatisfied wives, the film portrays such a family in the neighbourhood. The documentary talks about high earnings and in the 42nd minute of the second part of *Dukla 61*, there is a scene where a miner drops his elegantly dressed partner with a new fridge, and then makes a U-turn and helps the wives of other miners reach the disaster site. The authors paid significant attention to the dialogues in the Silesian dialect with traces of Polish, Slovak, and Hungarian. For those interested in facts, the Czech Television made an interactive website.

Little attention has been paid to the working class in the Czech production after November 1989; a solitary attempt was Martin Šulík's *Working Class Heroes* (Sluneční stát, 2005) and Jan Prušinovský's *The Snake Brothers* (Kobry a užovky, 2015) ten years later. The typical heroes of the Czech film after 1989 are nouveau riches, weaklings, and idlers. It is this kind of funny films such as *Whisper* (Šeptej,

1996), *Loners* (Samotáři, 2000), *Grand Hotel* (Grandhotel, 2006) which the director David Ondříček was famous for. In his turn-around to the working class, he made a masterpiece which can be compared to the remarkable Silesian trilogy by Kazimierz Kutz; mainly to its second part *Pearl in the Crown* (Perła w koronie, 1971). Also Martha Issová and Marek Talcík and the debuting Antonie Formanová playing Jana whose parents had died in the Holocaust, did their top acting job in *Dukla 61*. Even though the story takes place under socialism, it resonates even now lively and painfully. Seven months after the TV première, methane exploded at the ČSM mine in Stonava; and both the Czech Republic and Poland, the country most of the 13 victims came from, were overwhelmed with grief.

Methanol (Metanol), directed by Tereza Kopáčová based on a screenplay by Lenka Szántó and Matěj Podzimek, examines the wave of people turning blind and dying, which affected Silesia and Moravia and killed more than 50 people. Just like *Dukla 61*, *Methanol* has two parts as well with the second part having a different tone than the first one: the

↳ 2x Dukla 61





↳ Most!

first part of *Dukla 61* is a family drama, while the second one was conceived as a disaster film. In *Methanol*, we first watch the doom spread, and in the second part, we witness the police investigation and court proceedings. The affair showed that Czechs were drinking a lot and that this heavy drinking was a product of, let's say, limited life horizons. *Methanol* culminates with the testimony of Iveta Ožanová: "You are trying to make my parents appear as fools and alcoholics? Shame on you! Don't you have multiple bottles of alcohol at home? Don't you have a glass after a long day? Who of you can say they didn't have multiple bottles at home? You probably drink something fancier. But my dad was working all his life. And his pension was 9,000 crowns, sir. He couldn't afford more than rum from a kiosk. Treasure your parents, because I don't have them anymore."

Alcohol is also a key substance in the satirical series *Most!*⁰² by the screenwriter Petr Kolečko and director Jan Prušinovský. Its broadcasting at the beginning of 2019 fascinated both TV and Internet viewers and provoked public discussion with the series depicting things and words we hadn't seen and heard on the TV screen before. The story takes place in a specific location as well – this time in the North Bohemian Most; however, the location serves as a synecdoche of the entire country. Its protagonists are neglected men who only deal with the demands of today randomly and with difficulties; one rank lower on the social ladder are the Roma from the Chanov neighbourhood.

The first parts could be interpreted as a pack of stereotypes shared by the intellectuals from the capital towards the losers from the periphery who also have different opinions and voting patterns. This is the message of the after-1989 cinematography after all: if you are not successful, it's your fault! However, the moron Lud'an, played by the frowny Martin Hofmann, is an anti-hero in whom everyone can find certain features of their own being and thinking. Racism, xenophobia, homophobia, and male chauvinism the mocking of which sounds very educational at the beginning, turn into something "domestic" together with the protagonists later on. *Most!* is a friendly contribution of the Czech Television to what is called

culture war. It involves the pleasure brought by comical situations, sparkling dialogues and excellent acting (Zdeněk Godla, Cyril Drozda, Erika Stárková, Julius Oračko, etc.), while containing a decent dose of hopelessness at the same time.

In a room with a stranger

While under the former regime, the state television was trying to calm the audiences down and one had to go to the cinema to watch a subversive film, the opposite is true today: public service television has established itself as a disturbing medium and the consumers go to the cinema to calm down. That's why it is not easy to appeal to multiplex visitors with an analysis of a problem. For instance of alcoholism. This topic used to appear in the times when the regime was not so strict and it was possible to focus on some depressing topics as well: in the late 1950s⁰³ and in the normalization period.⁰⁴ Last year, *The Smiles of Sad Men* (Úsměvy smutných mužů, 2018) came to the cinemas, based on Josef Formánek's autobiographical novel; so far the best film directed by Dan Svátek. The series of stories from the alcohol rehab grew into a coherent, heavy, even naturalistic work which is quite as good as Wojciech Smarzowsky's great *The Mighty Angel* (Pod Mocnym Aniołem, 2014) based on Jerzy Pilch's book of the same name. Outstanding is Ondřej Malý in the small part of a businessman and marathon runner killed by drinking. *The Smiles of Sad Men* is not one of the parables where the rehab serves as a metaphor of totality.⁰⁵ It is truly a devastating testimony to an addiction which is a threat to up to ten percent of the Czech population, based on experts' estimates. And the closer the viewer's relationship with the bottle, the paler he or she leaves the cinema.

03 *At the Terminus* (Tam na konečné, dir. by Ján Kadár and Elmar Klos, 1957), *Today for the Last Time* (Dnes naposled, dir. by Martin Frič, 1958).

04 *Ikaros' Fall* (Ikarův pád, dir. by František Filip, 1977), *Girl With the Seeshell* (Dívka s mušlí, dir. by Jiří Svoboda, 1980), *Snake Poison* (Hadí jed, dir. by František Vlácil, 1981), *He Will Stop because of Me* (Kvůli mně přestane, dir. by Jiří Adamec, 1982), *Good Pigeons Fly Home* (Dobří holubi se vracejí, dir. by Dušan Klein, 1988).

05 Cf. *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (Přelet nad kukaččím hnízdem, dir. by Miloš Forman, 1975), *Special Therapy* (Posebaní, dir. by Goran Paskaljević, 1980).

02 The title plays with an allusion to the Swedish-Danish crime series *Bron/Broen*, the Czech name of which is the same as the name of the North Bohemian town – the centre of the brown coal field.



↳ Most!

Jiří Mádl started his original production as an actor-celebrity; however, in his debut *To See the Sea* (*Pojedeme k moři*, 2014), he demonstrated decent filmmaking skills and raised further expectations. His second work *On the Roof* (*Na střeše*, 2018) gained tragic publicity even before take one, with the originally cast leading actor Jan Tříska fatally wounded after falling from the Charles Bridge. Jiří Mádl was also famous for his participation in the offensive election spot *Convince Grandma and Grandpa not to Vote for the Left* (*Přemluv bábu a dědu, ať nevolí levici*, 2010) together with Martha Issová. Mádl has the opinions of the elderly at heart, and he is not the only one. Elderly people with their often nostalgic relationship to the socialist past are often considered a breeding ground for political reaction and xenophobia in the Czech Republic. Not long before the premiere of *On the Roof*, the public was shocked by the case of the 70-year-old Jaromír Balda convicted of a terrorist attack on the railway which he had maliciously committed to shift the blame onto Muslim migrants.

Jiří Mádl allegedly wrote the screenplay for *On the Roof* as a school assignment when he was studying screenwriting in New York and had a Korean room-mate. The result looks like that: a story good enough for a medium length film at the most is diluted into 97 minutes, and the hero's guest is Vietnamese but has a Korean surname – Song. The story's anchoring in the local environment is negligible, and the author doesn't know anything about the life and culture of Vietnamese. It is determined by the plot that the foreigner almost can't speak Czech, and the film thus has an unwanted colonial undertone with Song (even though the leading actor Duy Anh Tran was born in the Czech Republic and has a proficient command of Czech) not being able to pronounce more than "thank you, sir". As a result, the multicultural relationship between the Prague Robinson and his Friday is incorrectly asymmetric: a high school professor with a perfect diction played by Alois Švehlík versus a servile and nodding non-professional actor with a single task: to pretend not to speak Czech.

The author didn't create a full-blown personality for Song; he only let him obligingly clean the pensioner's flat and submit to his bizarre flaws. The old Rypar is more of a success: the film doesn't depict him as a hardshell woodenhead (as we would expect from Mádl), but as a noble gentleman with a certain moral culture. That's why we don't buy his hostile relationship towards migrants and his other acts and

opinions. The story is divided into two parts. Before buying a computer and joining Facebook, Rypar is grumpy and grouchy. Everything changes for the better with the purchase of a computer. So the film can also be seen as a long Facebook advertisement.

We could easily regard *The Hastrman* (*Hastrman*, 2018), an adaptation of Miloš Urban's novel, as a celebrity film since it's a directorial debut of the swing singer Ondřej Havelka. The resulting work is surprisingly professional and full of outstanding actors, and its failure wasn't caused by the director. *The Hastrman* is a ballad about female power embodied by the village femme fatale Katynka (Simona Zmrzlá) who even the water sprite Hastrman (Karel Dobrý) can't resist. The style draws inspiration from the tradition of poetic films as once cultivated by the Ukrainian school. However, the story is narrated clumsily; instead of coming into bloom, it withers and its meaning gets diluted. After the debacle of *Green Horse Rustlers* (*Zloději zelených koní*, dir. by Dan Włodarczyk, 2016) based on the book by Jiří Hájíček, *The Hastrman* is yet another proof that the contemporary Czech literature has nothing to offer to the silver screen.

Follow your lucky star

The most visited domestic film of last year was the comedy *What Men Long For* (*Po čem muži touží*, 2018) with 558,988 viewers. It was the third motion picture by the successful celebrity and self-taught director Rudolf Havlík based on the screenplay by the bestselling female author Radka Třeščíková who once wrote on her blog: "Feminism is a relic."⁰⁶ The main message of the film, repeated several times, is the finding that middle-aged men still look good, whereas women have to work hard on their appearance, and they still fail. This finding is supported by the fact that the female version of the chief-editor Karel Král played by the 52-year old Jiří Langmajer was played by Anna Polívková who is 13 years younger. The actress won't spoil any fun; even the fun which is not funny. Her pantomime tottering when serving coffee reminds one of the famous era of her father Bolek Polívka in the Divadlo na Provázku Theatre in Brno.

06 Radka Třeščíková, *Feminismus je přežitek*, 08/11/2011, see <https://velikovska.blog.respekt.cz/feminismus-je-prezitek/#>, cit. 10/02/2019.



↳ Jan Palach

However, just like *Karla*, the whole film totters as well: the harder the authors are trying to play out the relationship plots, the more boring it is. The opening characterization of Karel Král and his ultimate wising up didn't get enough space to give his transformation some sense. I appreciate the effective moments of recognition when Karel realizes in his bathroom that he has become a woman (or a man, later on), which are directed in the style of the famous Japanese horror film *Kwaidan* (1964) by Masaki Kobayashi. The audience welcomed the mocking of "genderism" and of the popular desexualization of erotic contents: the men's magazine *Playboy* gives up on nudity and must be led by a woman. The film reveals that what women want most is an archetypal guy.⁰⁷

The screenwriter and debuting director Martin Horský tried to boost women's confidence with his comedy *Women on the Run* (*Ženy v běhu*, 2019), which was seen by a terrifying number of 400,000 viewers within 11 days after the premiere. A widowed mother and her three daughters are training for a marathon in Prague locations; but the finish line is in fact marriage! Men are portrayed as self-centered egotists, making the ladies in the audience laugh with satisfaction. The dialogues draw humour from spicy childish misunderstandings similarly to the way they were exploited by the popular TV

⁰⁷ The stereotyped portrayal of women in extremely popular Czech comedies was commented on by Jindřiška Bláhová: *K čemu jsou filmy na světě*, Respekt Weekly, year 30 (2019), No. 7, pp. 49–51.

↳ 2x *Ženy v běhu*

series *Bachelors* (*Bakaláři*, 1980) during the normalization period. *Women on the Run* gave a running opportunity to Zlata Adamovská, Tereza Kostková, Veronika Khek Kubařová, and Jenovéfa Boková; however, the best directed person was the 8-year-old Míša Sodomková playing Rozárka.

Patrimony (*Tátova volha*, 2018) made with routine by Jiří Vejdělek based on the screenplay by Iva K. Jestřáblová, uses the ancient plot pattern where we find out at the end that the family secret isn't what it looked like at the beginning. The road movie with Eliška Balzerová and Tatiana Vilhelmová playing mother and daughter raises more expectations than it can fulfil. Tomáš Svoboda contributed to the relationship genre with his film *Two Brides and One Wedding* (*Dvě nevěsty a jedna svatba*, 2018) making fun of overgrown rock fans. And there is indeed the obligatory toilet humour: pushing the intrusive mayor into excrement.

In her new film *The Price of Happiness* (*Cena za štěstí*, 2019), the screenwriter and director Olga Dabrowská wanted to follow up on Petr Zelenka's and David Ondříček's comedy *Loners* (*Samotáři*, 2000), the story of which she co-authored. At first it seems that she will portray the generation of the wild 1990s, who are now in their fifties, as a generation of idiots, which would be a noble authorial intent. There is a drunken guy kicking the door of a woman who has no idea who the father of her son is; we watch a lesbian couple where one of the women doesn't know whether she is a lesbian. It is as if the film was supposed to make fun of atypical partnerships. However, in the end it turns out that the author wants nothing less than a general harmony.





↳ Tátova volha

What seems to be a counterbalance to the ladies' comedies is the malicious and misogynist narrative experiment by Jan Novák *Pepa* (2018), where the women are mischievous, lascivious and drunk. Even though the mousy good for nothing (Michal Suchánek) tells his life story in first person narrative, the viewer has a chance to see or guess his parallel, real story hidden behind the words or images: his mother was doing night shifts (she was moonlighting as a prostitute), his partner suddenly desires sex (she needs to legitimize her pregnancy). Watching *Pepa*, many people might realize the uselessness of their own lives. The depression grows even stronger with the dialogues full of phrases from poorly translated American films having infested our language: "What do you think you are doing?" "You must be XY,..." etc.

The contemporary Czech comedies made for the cinemas (unlike those for the Czech Television, as already mentioned) are remarkably empty with their orientation on relationships and nothing more. Whereas the 1960s comedies were uniting the viewers in a conspiracy, the contemporary ones seek to avoid any opinions. The exception is the work of Marek Najbrt who after the satire *President Blaník* (Prezident Blaník, 2018) surprised with the fairy tale *The Magic Quill* (Čertí brko, 2018), which gained an undeserved reputation of a political pamphlet. The Mayor of the little town Pytlov keeps manipulating the municipal elections to always win; probably a reference to Venezuela. The Czech President's election is reflected in the question: "Do you know anyone who voted for him?" Pytlov's Mayor is giving away beer and sausages for free. This might be a reference to the Czech

Prime Minister Andrej Babiš who was giving away doughnuts before the elections and whose concern Agrofert includes companies producing smoked meat. Such innuendos will hardly destroy the Czech political scene. There are no actually likeable positive heroes in the film, with most attention being paid to the annoying fraud Klouzek (Jan Budař).

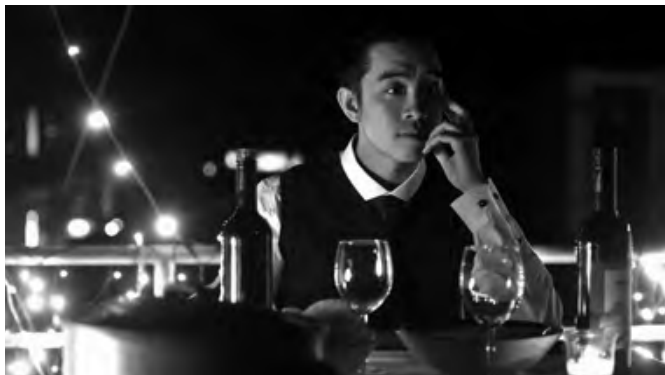
The co-author of Najbrt's older films Benjamin Tuček exceeded the domestic horizons with his prank comedy *Mars* (2018) filmed at the Utah research station. The result is unbearable boredom with humour missing the most. One of the films the screenings of which were cancelled because of *Bohemian Rhapsody* was the comedy *The One Who Loved You* (Ten, kdo tě miloval, 2018). It was made by the crime film specialist Jan Páchl⁰⁸ based on a book by Marie Poledňáková, the author of popular family and social comedies.⁰⁹ A combination of a detective film, family comedy and ghost story feels miserable.

Petr Zahrádka's drollery *Doctor Martin: A Mystery in the Beskydy Mountains* (Doktor Martin: Záhada v Beskydech,

⁰⁸ He is the author of the diptych *Gangster Ka* (2015, 2018) and the series *Circus Bukowsky* (Cirkus Bukowsky, 2013–2014) and *In Rage* (Rapl, 2016, 2019).

⁰⁹ *How to Pull Out a Whale's Tooth* (Jak vytrhnout velrybě stoličku, 1977), *How to Get Dad into Reform School* (Jak dostat tatínka do polepšovny, 1978), *I Enjoy the World with You* (S tebou mě baví svět, 1982), *You Kiss like a God* (Libáš jako bůh, 2009), *You Kiss like a Devil* (Libáš jako ďábel, 2012).

↳ 2x Na střeše



2018) was released to some marginal cinemas before Christmas only to premiere on the Czech Television shortly after the New Year's Eve. It served as a trailer to the detective series *Sergeant Topinka* (Strážmistr Topinka, 2019), which is a spin-off to the series *Doctor Martin* (Doktor Martin, 2015), a Czech version of the British series *Doc Martin* (2004–2017). The Beskydy sergeant Topinka became yet another member of the freak show of domestic dimwits who in spite of his clumsiness solves every case and engages in silly skirmishes with his Slovak colleague. A detective film is also *Miss Hanoi* (2018) made by Zdeněk Viktora. The dark case takes place in the Czech Vietnamese community with one of the two investigators being Anh (played by Ha Thanh Špetlíková). The story collapses due to a weak plot. Only slightly more successful was the sci-fi thriller *Intimate Enemy* (Důvěrný nepřítel, 2018) in which the former hitmaker Karel Janák develops a not very original motif of a killing intelligent home. Nevertheless thanks to Gabriela Marcinková as the female lead, the film is certainly photogenic. The box office earnings of the dancing spectacle *Backstage* (2018) were lower than expected. The director Andrea Sedláčková was trying to offer teenagers an attractive, Hollywood-like and professional film exposing the world of talent shows. However, the fakeness of the kitschy story only reminds one of the emotional blackmailing show *Dangerous Relationships* (Nebezpečné vztahy) on Barrandov TV.

Deliberately on the edge is the black-and-white, wide-screen film *Supervising the Meaning of Dreams* (Odborný dohled nad výkladem snu, 2018) – the second part of an intended trilogy in which Pavel Göbl drew on his equally outsider *Sunrise Supervising* (Odborný dohled nad východem Slunce, 2014), with both films involving the underground musician Vratislav Brabenec. The ostentatiously well-worn work is based on the idea that when weather-beaten veterans have a beer together, a moment of wisdom comes.

The past forever alive

In January 2019, the Czech Republic commemorated the 50th anniversary of the protest self-immolation of Jan Palach. The media space was full of commemorative shows, two more men attempted self-immolation on the Wenceslas Square, a dispute over the martyr's legacy broke out. According to some old-timers, Palach had leftist opinions; others claimed he had been a tough anti-Communist while accord-

ing to others, he was not the only one determined to become a human torch and there were other students to follow. It turned out that he had liked weapons, he had been carrying a gun with him and in August 1968, he had been ready to shoot. The public was shocked by the fact that Jan Palach had been an idol of Italian neo-fascists since the 1970s.¹⁰

None of this affected Robert Sedláček's *Jan Palach* (2018), where the screenwriter Eva Kantůrková remained faithful to the original myth as preserved by the media of the time and by the journalist Jiří Lederer. The result is a romantic, mostly psychological portrayal of an introvert young man who during 1968 was gradually growing more and more disappointed in the Prague Spring politicians, represented here by Josef Smrkovský, and was experiencing a relationship with two girls. Some details were reconstructed carefully in the film (including posters of the time), whereas in other cases the authors used artistic licence: the historians for instance aren't aware that Jan Palach would find out on a temporary job in France about the self-immolation of Ryszard Siwiec on 08 September 1968 in Warsaw. It is hard to believe that in autumn 1968, Palach's mother would have a poster commemorating the October Revolution (it would have to be one left from the previous anniversary year); the final sound collage mentions that Alexander Dubček was the General Secretary, while he was in fact the First Secretary. And I believe that he distribution of the *News* (Zprávy) occupation newspaper, the prohibition of which Jan Palach demanded together with the lifting of censorship, was in fact more underhand than in the film. Whereas the Blake Snyder's screenwriting book commands the hero to save the cat (*Save the Cat!*, 2005), Jan Palach drowns puppies in the film (which was allegedly documented). But figuratively speaking, the saved cat is indeed in the film – represented by the Russian friend from the temporary job in Kazakhstan. Fascinating from the filmmaking perspective, Sedláček's *Jan Palach* is a dignified memorial to a young man whose sacrifice brought the nation all the way to the Velvet Revolution of 1989.

In his film *Toman*, the director and producer Ondřej Trojan tried to capture a brief part of the life of an adven-

¹⁰ See ČTK, *Bělehradský: Italská krajní pravice adoptovala Palachův čin ihned, byli vděční za boj proti komunismu*, https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-svet/koncert-jan-palach-italie-neofasiste-belehradsky-radikalni-pravice_1901111915_jgr, cit. 10/02/2019.

→ Hastman



turer of many names who was responsible for rackets and hanky-panky at the top of the Communist Party between 1945 and 1948. Moreover, he was helping Jews leave Eastern Europe for Israel and was getting paid for it. Impressive with its production (a budget of 48 million), acting jobs (Jiří Macháček, Kateřina Winterová) and length (145 minutes), the film can be funny and highly informative. After David Mrnka's failed film attempt *Milada* (2017), *Toman* (2018) is another film in which the Communists are referring to their political enemies as "democrats" in February 1948; in fact, they were reactionaries for them then.

On the contrary, *Talks with TGM* (Hovory s TGM), Jakub Červenka's debut based on the screenplay by Pavel Kosatík, is rather modest or even dull. The submissive Karel Čapek played by Jan Budař is not an adequate partner to President Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk monumentally played by Martin Huba. For me, the narrow picture frame and its brownish shade is an unnecessary and mannerist effort to get closer to the graphics of the time.

An absolute failure was the sports megafilm *Golden Sting* (Zlatý podraz, 2018) made with a nearly 100-million budget by Radim Špaček based on the inputs of the journalists Jakub Bažant and Jiří Závozda and the screenwriter Kristina Nedvědová. It tells the story of the Czechoslovak basketball team from the late 1930s to the early 1950s. With its set, architecture, costumes and Vladimír Smutný's effective cinematography, the film tries to keep up with European trends. It strives for an international dimension (in a Paris brothel, the hero falls into a relationship with a Polish Jewess), there is an ambitious mise-en-scene, a careful arrangement in the middle of a field, special shots (from above, shots of balls), and intrusive music by Jakub Kudláč. However, the story only follows a pre-determined and worn-out ideological line from bad Nazis to bad Communists. From the beginning, it's clear that the sports official Hrabal (Ondřej Malý) would turn out to be a villain and that František, whose father is a democratic minister in the after-war government, would maintain his unspoiled nature.

Also *The Intruder* (Narušitel, 2019) had megafilm ambitions, even though its budget was 166 times lower (with the number of viewers being only about four times lower). The 17-year-old David Balda took on a burden the master of which is Alfonso Cuarón these days: he wrote the screenplay, directed the film and filmed it, including the aerial shots. Like

Golden Sting, *The Intruder* was inspired by the memories of old-timers as well. David Balda is one of the authors who think that saying "Communist swines" a couple of times is enough to come to terms with the past. The story of pilots in the Socialist Czechoslovakia certainly has a moral dimension to it though: the pilots serve the army of a regime they don't agree with and against their conscience, they have to fight other pilots who want to emigrate by air. It is as if the film was disputing Vladimír Čech's normalization film *High Blue Wall* (Vysoká modrá zeď) having premiered in 1974 – the year in which the key episode of *The Intruder* takes place. However, it's difficult to follow the story which is illogical, the characters behave in a confused way and time flies lyrically in the flood of aerial shots accompanied by Michal Hruža's banal song. In the end, the main villain expresses his evil in one single histrionic monologue. Funny is the switch from a game of chess to combat readiness. David Balda can think as a filmmaker, but can't develop an epic story yet. He shouldn't let the devastating reviews clip his wings.

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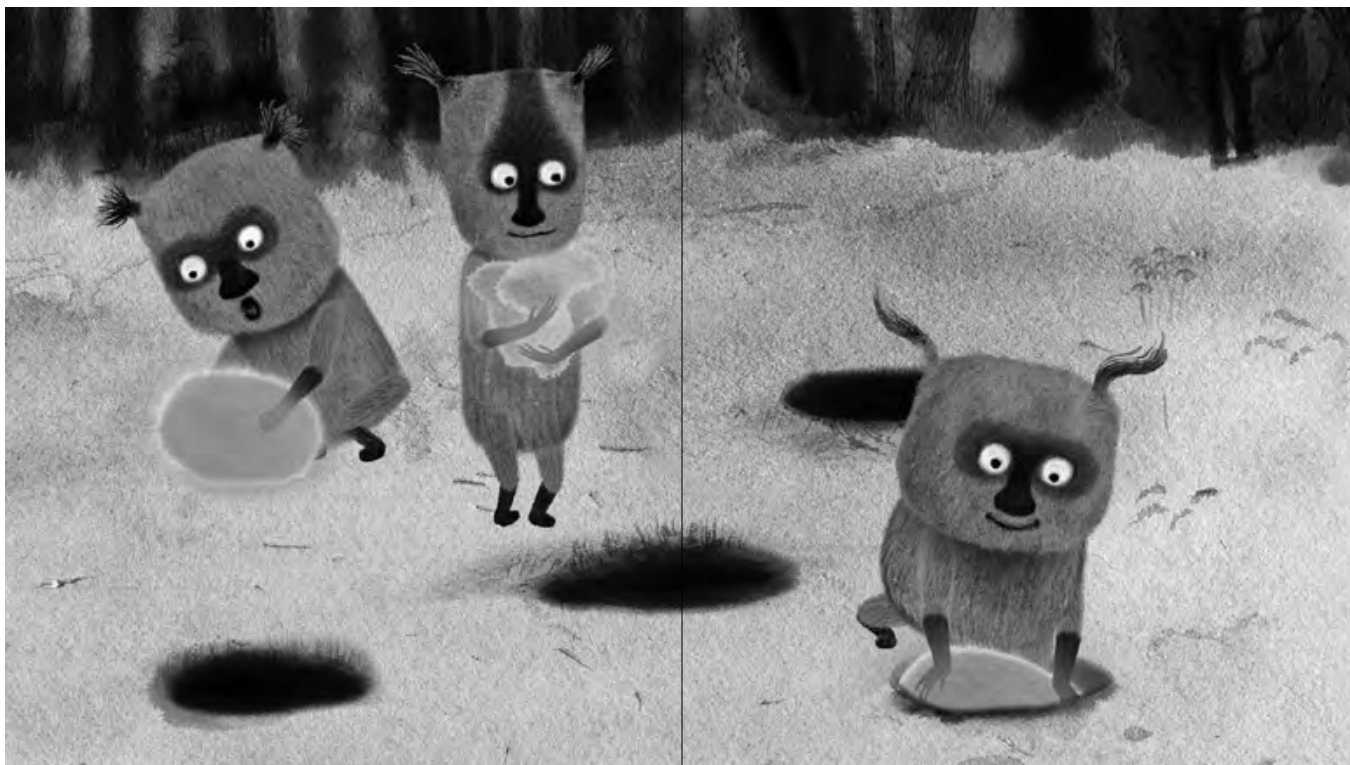
Since 1990, Czech filmmakers and producers have been using different strategies to give their work an international dimension: they have tried co-production, casting international stars, shooting in English, imitating American patterns, and filming biographies of personalities. However, none of these work in the long-term as there are no powerful domestic stories. Our greatest festival success of recent years was the co-production participation in Romanian projects.¹¹ The upcoming season should be dominated by adaptations of contemporary world literature: Václav Marhoul announced his *The Painted Bird* (Nabarvené ptáče, 2019) based on Jerzy Kosiński, Julius Ševčík his *The Glass Room* (Skleněný pokoj, 2019) based on Simon Mawer, and Irena Pavlásková her *The Prague Orgy* (Pražské orgie, 2019) based on Philip Roth.

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¹¹ *Aferim!* (dir. by Radu Jude, 2015), *Touch Me Not* (dir. by Adina Pintilie, 2018), *I Do Not Care if We Go Down in History as Barbarians* (dir. by Radu Jude, 2018).

↳ Zlatý podraz





↳ Plody mraků

Czech animation: waiting in the mezzanine

Pavel Horáček

Last year was not really successful for Czech animation. The aftertaste of 2017, the second half of which saw the premières of *Harvie and the Magic Museum* (Hurvínek a kouzelné muzeum) and *Laika* (Lajka), is still there. In spite of having been prepared for more than seven years, *Harvie* (dir. by Martin Kotík) wasn't successful with the viewers, let alone with the critics. It isn't as bad – at least technically – as the two *Goat Stories* (dir. by Jan Tománek, 2008, 2012), but I think that in the course of time, the differences in perception of all the three 3D CGI films will become blurred. In a way, *Harvie* was remarkable for its crazy “action” nature. Following the bizarre logic of the story under a frantic flood

of sensations was causing a strange nausea. Nothing this extreme has appeared in our cinematography so far. It should be noted that the film obtained international distribution and the number of viewers was not so bad after all. Being prepared for more than ten years, Aurela Klimt's *Laika* came to the cinemas at the end of 2017. It was no success with the viewers and most critics. It was the extremely long preparation time that turned out to be a significant weak spot of the hopeful project. The individual thirds of the film reflect the stages of its creation and kind of appear to be parts of three different films. To *Laika*'s defence, I would like to praise the part developing after the animals arrive at the planet Qem. I



↳ O tom co potom

believe it's exceptional from the artistic and animation perspectives. Petr Čtvrtníček stole it for himself in the role of the randy amoeba Quirkrk which was tailor-made for him. Full of sexual double meanings, the scenes with him rouse even adult viewers from the lethargy. In reaction to the film, a lot has been written about child viewers coming to the cinema with adults. In addition to the ambiguous definition of the target group, with which Czech animated feature films have been seriously struggling for the past 30 years, there have been a number of other negative comments. What I see as important though is the fact that both films (again) reflect poorly on Czech animation as a whole. It is mainly *Laika*, made by the well-known director Aurel Klimt, one of the leading followers of Břetislav Pojar, that was a disappointment for many people. In the future, it will be not only the viewers who would be sceptical about Czech animation, but also the producers such as the Czech Television. I believe that the mood hasn't improved with the only two feature films released in 2018 – *Pat & Mat Back in Action* (Pat a Mat znovu v akci) and *Pat & Mat: Winter Fun* (Pat a Mat: Zimní radovánky). Marek Beneš is to be credited for his tireless effort to review the legacy of the iconic characters. However, the results are neither as good as the original series, nor progressive and different in any way. In last year's Švankmajer's *Insects*, there was so little animation that it can't even be included in a general summary.

Unfortunately, no progress was made in TV production either, even though for Czech animation, this used to be the most natural field managed for decades. Once the leading producer of animated films for children, the Czech Television only starts getting used to its potential self-consciously after an inexplicably long amnesia. As a result, we have the popular science series *Little Stars* (Hvězdičky, dir. by Lucie Štamfestová, 2018) or *Speaking of Our Country* (Když se řekne naše země, dir. by Maria Procházková, 2018) and the similarly silly *The Kokoška Family on the Road* (Kokoškovi na cestách,

dir. by Ivo Hejzman, Jitka Petrová, 2018). Until the management decides to invest in Czech animators instead of the failed and expensive fairy tale motion pictures, the results will never be satisfactory.

The Stream online TV, which not long ago had made the lovely series *Live from Moss* (Živě z mechu, dir. by Filip Pošivač, 2016) as a spin-off to *Deep in Moss* (Až po uši v mechu, 2015) or the punk-like and crazy *Fridge Stories* (Špekáček a Feferonky, dir. by Robert Geisler, Lukáš Záhoř, Milan Kuchynka, 2016), only continued with *The Dark Secret* (Mrazivá tajemství, dir. by Radovan Surý, Pavel Jindra) last year. The large audiences commanded by this series, albeit difficult to understand, could inspire other players; however, they don't seem to notice. Mall TV, founded by the former authors of Stream, has given up on animation entirely.

However, not everything is as black as it seems. For a long time, the quality of Czech animation has been set by student films, which remain hidden for common viewers for several reasons. With the exception of true fans and connoisseurs, people don't have access to quality Czech animation, even though for instance the website aniont.com is trying to change this. The problem is that young and talented artists are valued at festivals but unfortunately neither the Czech viewers, nor the professional public have an idea about them. Which brings us back to the aftertaste from 2 years ago.

Last year, quality student works were included in the Czech Horizon – the national competition section of the Anifilm Festival. For instance, there were films cleverly employing documentary principles such as *Hypnagogia* (dir. by Magdalena Kvasničková, 2017), *Chase* (Štvanice, dir. by Michaela Režová, 2017), *Our Street* (Náš prostor, dir. by Petra Fendřová, 2017) or *Wandering Bondy* (Egon Bondy o filosofii a vůbec, dir. by Veronika Zacharová, 2017). Solid and original children's films were represented by *Through the Marsh* (Bažinou, dir. by Kryštof Ulbert, 2017), *Insatiable* (Otesánek, dir. by Linda Retterová, 2017) or *Red Riding Hood* (O Červené



↳ Bloody Fairy Tales

karkulce, dir. by Martina Holcová, 2017). There were also films having only one thing in common – being simply good; these were for instance *Very Close* (Velmi blízko, dir. by Eliška Oz, Lee Oz, 2017), *Wedding Day* (Veselka, dir. by Zuzana Čupová, 2017), *FOOD* (dir. by Michaela Mihalyiová, 2017) or *WOO-HOO!* (dir. by Dávid Štumpf, 2018), which was the winner of the Czech student film category. A surprising international success was Matouš Valchář's existential puppet film *After* (O tom co potom, 2017), which was selected for the Annecy Festival. Also the funny *Bloody Fairy Tales* (dir. by Tereza Kovandová, 2018) made at the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts has been screened at several festivals.

Otherwise, past success remained the main focus. The rotation of successful films from 2017 at different festivals went on, which was mainly the case for Kateřina Karháňková's *Fruits of Clouds* (Plody mraků). Subtle and artistically refined, the film has been by far the most successful Czech export "article" since it was made, both in terms of the number of screenings and awards received. The high point seems to be this year's Berlinale where the two years "old" *Fruits of*

↳ Malá



Clouds was awarded as the best film in the children's section.

Another film still cruising the festival waters is Diana Cam Van Nguyen's *The Little One* (Malá, 2017). This student of the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts is also behind the biggest Czech animation sensation of 2018, having finished her film *Apart* (Spolu sami, 2018) which was awarded as the best Czech experimental documentary at the Jihlava Festival, won the Famufest and was screened at this year's prestigious Rotterdam Festival, which opened the world for it. In the film, the author draws on her documentary tendencies from *The Little One*. In *Apart*, she goes even further and approaches the heavy and taboo topic of parents' death using rotoscoping, which gives her the necessary distance. The visually attractive shots of the redrawn protagonists constitute a certain filter for their statements. And in the moments of especially painful memories, the author opts for entirely abstract animation. We can only tell that this is a student film because of the university logo in the credits. As in the case of the above mentioned films, we don't feel that we would be watching something made by the authors only to meet a school assignment – a necessary

↳ Spolu sami





↳ Vánoční svatba sněhuláka Karla

means to finish the studies. Student films match those made by professional authors. One of these films is *Hide N Seek* (Schovka) by Barbora Halířová which is to premiere at the Anifilm Festival and has a promising future ahead.

However outside of university, short animated films are still struggling. Only nine of them were presented at last year's Anifilm Festival in the national competition. The Czech Animation Council, an academy deciding about the Czech Horizon, awarded Vít Pancíř for his *Walking and Running* (Chůze a běhy, 2018). However in my opinion, it's only *Charlie the Snowman's Christmas Wedding* (Vánoční svatba sněhuláka Karla, dir. by Petr Vodička, 2017) that can potentially succeed in international festival competitions or among viewers – an old school style film, but with a very good puppet animation and clearly targeting children as an audience.

As for the rest, there is a spirit of waiting for a big change. This has been a typical feature of Czech animation of the past approximately eight years. Every year, we see the students' success and at least the people involved in short films already take for granted that student animation is the best product of Czech film schools every year. Where are all the strong personalities who were making great films while at the university though? Do they even have adequate conditions to make short films? Can they become a distinct wave? Will there finally be a feature film assuring even the general public that Czech animation is more than a fan club made of weirdos? Definitely yes; the question is when.

Martin Vandas, one of the most active Czech animated film producers, said in his February interview with Cinepur Monthly: "There are many talented and ambitious (in a good way) people who want to progress and want to try and look for new possibilities, new stories, strong emotions and remarkable artistic ideas. Which is not so much the case in motion pictures in my opinion. By contrast in animation, there are talents having European or even world class parameters." I think so too but at the same time, I feel like we are stuck

in some kind of an interspace. Stuck in a mezzanine between the complex 1990s and 2000s when the institutional approach to cinematography was being reconstructed and Czech animation was becoming more confident. This phase is certainly over. But somewhere ahead of us, there is a vision of the Czech Republic as an animation superpower it once used to be. The vision is blurred. It cannot be the same like in the times of the state monopoly. But when will the talent come to light which is certainly dormant in Czech animation? And will we ever become "something like" Estonia or Ireland in animation?

The nervous waiting is even more thrilling considering the number of works under preparation. Moreover, in animation things are made very slowly. Will the feature film showing what the new talented generation is capable of be Denisa Grimmová's and Jan Bubeníček's *Mice Belong to Heaven* (Myši patří do nebe)? Or Kristina Dufková's *Life to Devour* (Život k sežrání) which will follow *Mice* on the legendary premises of the former Krátký film studio? As early as this year, we can be enchanted by the long-awaited animated feature film by Noro Držiak *The Impossible Voyage* (Cesta do nemožna) about the life of Milan Rastislav Štefánik. Or will the next sensation be the children's series *Hungry Bear Tales* (Mlsné medvědí příběhy) authored by two remarkable personalities: Alexandra Májová and Kateřina Karhánková? A huge success can also be *Tonda, Slávka and the Genius* (Tonda, Slávka a génius), awarded by Eurimage for Best Development and being prepared by Filip Pošivač. Or for instance *Rosentaal*, a feature film adaptation of the adventures of Eskymo Welzl to be directed by Miroslav Krobot and animated by Václav Švankmajer. It is to be hoped that there won't be yet another disappointment and that as many viewers as possible will get rid of the bitter aftertaste of recent animation efforts.

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Where does a film experiment begin and end?

Sylva Poláková

What, when, where and by whom is considered to be an experimental film nowadays? Each one of these questions may mean a significant change to any attempts at defining experimental film. It could be assessed based on how it relates to the film material and, in that case, it would correspond to the specific film genre, which is to a certain extent determined in terms of time and place by the chosen and available materials and by the specific filmmaker's influence. Exploration of the medium's possibilities and limitations and their overcoming may take place on all levels of expression tools, which appear in the process of film making and presentation.

Experimental film, or rather the practice of experimenting with moving pictures, is not only found in art cinemas or at the relevant festivals and exhibitions but also in galleries, and today also commonly on the Internet and on television - within the scope of specialized platforms (e.g. on-line galleries, artist portfolios, video channels), but even virally. Public space interventions or convergence with other media where moving pictures appear in other art contexts (theatre, dance, music, etc.) are no exception.

The criteria, which could be used to assess how experimental a film is, are non-specific. While rather vague, the extent of experimenting in one direction or another is the only available tool for subjective assessment, which is why it is used by movie critique as well as by expert councils from such institutions as the Czech Film Fund (CFF) whose verdicts largely determine the home production's financial possibilities. In a document issued at the beginning of 2019, which was evaluating grant applications for experimental film creation, the CFF Council defined this field as "an aesthetic category referring to film whose author tests and verifies certain formal (audio)visual or thought concepts, and experiments with expression tools, new technologies, or with the

film medium itself."⁰¹ At the same time, the expert committee agreed that "some of the films, which appeared in the call, contained a relatively low degree of experimenting and some were closer to the categories of a drama, a documentary or a dance film."⁰² For these two reasons - low degree of experimenting and the closeness to other film types and genres - the committee decided to support "distinctly experimental projects."⁰³ Out of nine applications, the committee divided two million Czech crowns among four projects; some of the authors had already received funding from the budget allocated to experimental film in previous years. For Martin Ježek that has even been the case repeatedly, due to the filmmaker's long-term dedication to this area - mainly to structural and conceptual film. In his planned 16mm film called *Můj očištec*, he follows up on his previous work selecting adaptation (this time of literary texts by Jakub Deml), which allows the film medium to enter into a dialogue with another art form. Also, František Týmal received the Fund support for the second time. The FAMU's CAS (Center for Audio-visual Studies) graduate approaches the film medium as a complex tool whose "product" is not only a mere light projection of a picture, but also a technical object with historical anchoring, which can be used as an audio-kinetic plastic art enabling site-specific performanc-

01 2019-2-8-24 Výroba experimentálního filmu s majoritní českou finanční účastí na celkových výrobních nákladech, *fondkinematografie.cz*. Available online: <<https://fondkinematografie.cz/assets/media/files/H/Vysledky%20rozhodovani/2019%2001/web-hodnoceni2018-2-8-24experiment.pdf>> (cit. 1. 3. 2019).

02 Ibid.

03 Ibid.

→ Jako z filmu



→ Neptun



es. This approach was obvious in the case of his project called *Taran*, which was created thanks to the Fund support in 2017. In his new application to create a short film called *Barvy z kosmu*, Týmal together with Marek Brožek will focus on the processes occurring on the film emulsion once it has been attacked by mould microorganisms. Ježek, Týmal and Brožek oscillate between film nostalgia and an updated view on the photochemical film material, the tool as well as on the audience experience.

Nostalgia, though directed elsewhere, is also characteristic of another two supported projects. Lea Petříková succeeded with her application for support of her found footage film *Podle čaroděje*. This female artist's art creations include professional research in the audio-visual field where she selects interdisciplinary areas including non-fiction and experimental cinematography (e.g. the archives of the pharmaceutical company Sandoz).⁰⁴ Petříková addresses the positions of the viewer-creator towards the observed while she draws on painting and literary tradition. Her attention is captured by specific female artists, such as the writer and painter Leonor Carrington or Alice Rahon. Petříková focused on Rahon's lost film *Le Magicien* (1947) in her diploma thesis project in the Supermedia Studio at UMPRUM; it is supposed to also serve as a model for her new film, which will bring to life the surrealist aesthetics and the forgotten works of the neglected Mexican artist.

The fourth supported project uses visual nostalgia to return to the recent past. Petr Šprincl, graduate from FAVU in Brno, works with trash video aesthetics, simulates the old VHS image quality, and creates a parody of the TV production from the 80s and 90s. Using visual language, which he grew up with, he comments on popular myths, which were and still are an efficient source of xenophobic thinking and behaviour. Together with Marie Hájková, he created an ending part of the trilogy *Morava, krásná zem*, which was supported by the Fund in 2016. In their planned film *Blue box* inspired by their joint stay in the USA, they plan to step outside the local limitations and borrow the transatlantic genres to accentuate the topics of racism and extremism.

In their general evaluation of this year's grant call, the committee noted as surprising that the presented projects mainly used established experimental film methods.⁰⁵ Nevertheless, when it comes to their presentation, even those works do not only focus on the cinema auditoriums, but their creators demonstrate their knowledge of the art gallery environment or site-specific situations. A year ago, the call itself already emphasized that it is also meant for authors of "video art and that it aims to provide financial support to projects in between fine arts and film."⁰⁶ The films made by fine artists,

which were supported by CFF in the previous years, include, among others, films such as *Jako z filmu* (2017) by Tomáš Svoboda and *Neptun* (2018) by Adéla Babanová or the recently released *Mitsu* (2018) by Marek Ther. Both Svoboda and Babanová received the grant to create their medium-length films in 2015; Ther received it a year later. *Jako z filmu* was preceded by a gallery exhibition in the tranzitdisplay gallery where the author focused on one of the chapters of the resulting film called *Jako film*. After a number of releases in art cinemas and at film festival galleries, this February *Neptun* finally also reached exhibitions in the Zahorian & Van Espen Gallery in Bratislava, and since March 2019 together with another film by Babanová (*Už šedesát let je mi třicet*, 2010), it has been presented within the tenth chapter of the Moving Image Department called *Podle skutečných událostí* (Based on true events) in the Trade Fair Palace in Prague.

Jako z filmu is a culmination of the previous work by Tomáš Svoboda, where he explores from the standpoint of an audio-visual artist the (de)construction or (re)imagination of film - in this case, through the "experience" of its audience. Thus, several times he simulated the environment of a screening room or a stage set from specific scenes, and he created his own method called "imagine film", which is based on reduction of the film language or the storyline. Using this method, he was revealing that our presumed imagination capability is a strongly disciplined experience interwoven with specific applied film strategies. He eliminated the experience with film "narration" to an "action description" (using text in the shot, and live or recorded performances), or to bare syntax. In his film *Jako z filmu* as well as in the preceding exhibition *Jako film* Svoboda summarized the part of his work related to film as a medium, audiovisual art, entertainment industry, way of thinking; and he emphasized its intelligibility. *Jako z filmu* highlights the extent to which film experience has become part of the way we relate to the world on a daily basis.

Also in the case of Adéla Babanová, all her work up to now has been related to the film medium. The artist uses film and photographic materials to unfold themes, which oscillate between subjective and collective memory including facts as well as popular rumours and lies. She works together with her brother, the screenwriter and musician Džian Baban. Their historical "palavering" culminated in an open trilogy. In the short called *Odkud spadla letuška* (2013), they returned to the fate of one flight attendant who survived a fall of a Serbian plane, which fell in 1974 under unclear circumstances near Děčín. In their *Návrat do Adriaportu* (2013), which was awarded in 2015 by Umělec má cenu (Artist has a pri(c)ze) for the best work of the year, they explored futuristic visions of a landlocked country's independent access to the sea using an artificially built tunnel. In *Neptun*, they revisited the disinfection campaign by the State Security, which supposedly revealed Nazi documents from WW2. Babanová used the archive materials of the Czech, then Czechoslovak, television. The takes from a popular TV show *Zvědavá kamera* (Curious camera) used in the film appear in their original form, but also serve as a model for the acting scenes, which the artist shot with Czech actors. Thus, tension arises between documentary and fiction, exaggeration and seriousness as well as absurdity and a memento. Not only in *Neptun*, but also in her other films, Babanová proves that the local history may be taken, and, via film language, it can resonate with current social themes.

Neptun, first released at the last year's Febiofest, along with Svoboda's *Jako z filmu* offered their creators a new experience with the complex film making process. The cinema distribution of the films was only at the end of a path, which may be evaluated only by the artists themselves. From the outside perspective, we are at least able to highlight the professionalism of the way their moving picture artwork is made; it may be due to the financial support itself or because of the obligations resulting from its reception.

04 Lea Petříková explored the film library of the pharmaceutical company Sandoz, which worked on synthesizing of LSD since the fifties. During the following two decades, the film department of the company produced 450 films, some of which went outside the frame of advertising, because they were also made in cooperation with artists from the surrealist groups such as Henri Michaux, Max Ernst, Éric Duvivier or Jean-Daniel Pollet. Lea Petříková, *Umělecké filmy produkované farmaceutickou společností Sandoz, Iluminace*, č. 1, 2017.

05 "Most creators chose to use one of the methods of experimental cinematography, which have long been established - from a spontaneous diary film to a structural film or a surrealism revival to, for instance, intentional work with film material decay. On one hand, the CFF Council appreciated the thoughtfulness and efficiency with which these methods, which have been known for many years, were used in the projects, on the other hand, it commented with a certain degree of regret that the films presented in this appeal were aiming more towards the traditional forms and processes and mostly gave up on searching for new paths of experimenting with film image and sound." See for 2019-2-8-24 *Výroba experimentálního filmu s majoritní českou finanční účastí na celkových výrobních nákladech, fondkinematografie.cz*.

06 2017-2-6-19 *Výroba experimentálního filmu s majoritní českou účastí, fondkinematografie.cz*. Available online: <<https://fondkinematografie.cz/vysledky-rozhodovani-rady-vyroba-experimentalniho-filmu-s-majoritni-ceskou-ucasti.html>> (cit. 1. 3. 2019).

Increased professionalism of the works made by the filmmakers with an artistic background has been gradually pushing away craft amateurism characteristic of the Czech video art during its awakening phase across the newly formed university studios in the nineties. This “characteristic” could be justified by their lack of technical and production background, however, it also stemmed from their independence on the then film production, which was fighting its own challenges and difficulties. The key change in this area is the acceptance of collective film creation, which enables engagement of independent professions that do not only require special technical skills, but also professional qualifications and experience. The artists who chose moving pictures as their expression tool no longer approach this field as amateurs or autodidacts; they surround themselves with film professionals. That holds true in the case of the Baban sibling duo as well as for Eva Kořátková who approached the director and animator Tomáš Luňák to put her film ideas into practice. Their highly stylized films *Justiční vražda Jakoba Mohra* (2016) and *Žaludek světa* (2017) are also an example of productions, which put their budget together without the CFF support. Their professionalism and presentation both in Czechia and abroad show other efficient models of medium-length film production.

Through her long-standing interest in the way institutions work and their influence on individuals, Eva Kořátková works with personal archives and institution files. The resulting collage of both borrowed and original images and messages is then presented through performances, installations, and films. Her themes include educational institutions and psychiatric facilities along with the regulations such institutions were using in the past in order to discipline their charges. The artist's independent study of the Bohnice files and the archive of the Heidelberg university psychiatric hospital resulted in a theatre play called *Justiční vražda Jakoba Mohra* (2016), which had several reruns performed by professional actors side by side with patients and personnel from the Bohnice psychiatric hospital. What followed was a film compilation under the same name using the performance recordings, which is a stage commentary of art brut and the psychiatric patients' creations; it also offers more general insight into the institutional structures and possible reactions of individuals who cannot or don't want to operate within the given limits. Both the film and the performance were created in cooperation and produced by an NGO active in the area of contemporary art - Are | are-events.org and using financial support by the Czech-German Fund for the Future, State Cultural Fund, Ministry of Culture Czech Republic, Prague City Hall, and PLATO – platform (for contemporary art) in Ostrava where the film's premiere took place. Before long, Kořátková introduced another film, which was first shown in the Ponrepo cinema; it was also presented as an exhibition installation. *Žaludek světa* (2017) - an allegory about digestion - both as a physical and mental process - and about the mechanisms of obtaining and passing knowledge was designed as a drama play performed by child actors on real elementary school premises. The exhibition under the same name at the 21er

Haus gallery in Vienna simulated a theatre stage where the film was presented. The moving pictures formed the centre of the exhibition, which - as if upside down - was surrounded by backstage with precisely selected stage props forming a collage - Kořátková's preferred genre enabling layered reading. The production of this complex project was again handled by Are | are-events.org. This time Are managed to secure support from the Greek art project Polyeco Contemporary Art Initiative (PSAI) and the Prague City Hall.

In recent years also other Czech production companies, both film- and art-oriented, have become open to complex art projects, which combine cinema screening and gallery presentation. Art film productions may send their requests for financial support to various cultural institutions and initiatives, which organize their calls and budgets. Nevertheless, it is a rather complex area, which is not easily mapped due to its volatility. Calls are often modified or cease to exist, which is also the case with some newly formed entities that may be called association, foundation, initiative, institute, etc. Considering how financially demanding it is to create a medium- or a feature-length film, even if it is a low-budget one, support by independent platforms cannot cover a substantial part of their budget. Hence, in the case of films by Eva Kořátková, Are was seeking support from state institutions.

The situation of short film creation is quite different. To a large extent, shorts are created at fine arts universities, as noted also by Vítězslav Chovanec, who is responsible for shorts at the Czech Film Centre, a CFF department that focuses on presentation and distribution in Czechia and abroad.⁰⁷ Their shorter length also makes them suitable for gallery presentation in a loop, which has been used by established artists including the above mentioned Svoboda, Babanová or Kořátková. Nevertheless, there are some artists for whom the moving pictures field is but a temporary stop. Experimental short films and moving pictures as works of art are created by university productions; FAMU's Centre for audiovisual studies is worth mentioning, as there is a high concentration of such projects. Distribution of short film production occurs mostly in the form of series; Vítězslav Chovanec summarised the reasons in his interview for *Filmový přehled* (Film review) magazine: “Nowadays cinemas do not provide space for shorts. During the era of socialism, there was a promotion using “pre-films” where a short used to be shown before a feature film, nevertheless, that occurs very rarely these days. (...) Hence, short films usually have no other option than to rely on film festival distribution. Festivals provide a possibility to get a film abroad - to an audience truly interested in shorts.”⁰⁸ A selection for foreign distribution as a collection of the given year is compiled by the CFC com-

07 Viktorie Novotná and Hermína Peřičová, Vítězslav Chovanec: O český krátký film je v zahraničí zájem, *Filmový přehled*, 31. 1. 2019. Available online: < <http://www.filmovyprehled.cz/cs/revue/detail/vitezslav-chovanec-o-cesky-kratky-film-je-v-zahranici-zajem> > (cit. 1.3. 2019).

08 Ibid.

→ *Justiční vražda Jakoba Mohra*



→ *Žaludek světa*



mittee. This year's collection contains *Neptun* by Babanová and *Rekonstrukce* by the experimental creators Jiří Havlíček and Ondřej Novák who managed to reach the renowned IFF in Locarno with their minimalistic drama debut based on a true crime story. Last year the collection presented two female directors whose approach to documentary and animated film is based on a dialogue with an experimental approach to moving picture - the film by Viola Ježková *Všechno má svůj čas* (2017) was created in the FAMU production and *Štvanice* (2017) by Michaela Režová at UMPRUM. The CFC collection is selected both from the works which apply for it themselves and from those identified by the CFC team from established competitions such as Fascinations: Expmntl.cz at the Ji.hlava International Documentary Film Festival.

This local competition often shows works by freshly appearing artists. Compared to the established distribution mechanisms, in such cases, the authors accompany the given work to the festival, so that they can take care of its specific installation and presentation. By getting closer to the art operation, the film festivals, including Ji.hlava International Documentary Film Festival, come by an "exclusive" programme beyond the common distribution models. The creators' participation also benefits the Marienbad Film Festival, which has aspired to become the key event in the field of experimental cinematography for 3 years. Its open approach to transcending genre limits while working with moving pictures together with its focus on the Czech competition Theatre Electrique, which included 29 films last year, help the festival on its quest. Last year the prize and the symbolic financial reward of 10 thousand Czech crowns, which is the amount necessary to apply for support by the CFF to produce (even a short) experimental film, was obtained by: Michaela Režová for her animated documentary *Štvanice* covering the golden era of the Czech-Slovak hockey until the period of persecutions in the fifties, by artist Michal Kinderany for a visual essay contributing to dystopic visions and shared environmental grief *Transformace / Výpary / Melanosis* (2017), and by František Týmal for the above mentioned site-specific project *Taran*.

When mapping the Czech experimental moving picture scene, an important place has been held for 12 years by the competition called Jiné vize Přehlídka filmové animace a současného umění (Other visions at PAF—Festival of Film Animation and Contemporary Art). As an original annual curator selection of ten finalists, the competition also provides an occasion to promote, or even open the topics currently resonating in the film and artistic community. In the last three years, thirty shorts were presented by the PAF Aport distribution platform as independent series.⁰⁹ Its 10th anniversary was compiled by a theorist Karel Císař for whom it was essential that the form of the series conjured up a single film.¹⁰ The individual films were interconnected by reminiscences of older aesthetic frames - their formal positions and areas of interest, as their common feature. A year later the ten finalists were selected by the curator Michal Novotný who concentrated on the significantly more burning topic of disorienta-

tion in a flood of digital image hypercirculation.¹¹ Confusion regarding what images we are actually watching was the accompanying attribute of most of the selected films in the competition. Lack of visual anchoring was coupled with other topics: the truth and its shaky status, identity dilution in the virtual environment, loss of traditional values and authorities as well as a generally dystopian mood. The last selection of Other visions made by Rad Ištók, an art critic and curator who keeps his relations with the Czech art scene from his current base in Stockholm, was characteristic by its critical, or even rather "instructional" tone.¹² Ištók used the competition series to make an appeal regarding the topic of differences and deviations from social norms. As he put less emphasis on the level of experimenting in the field of moving pictures, the resulting series seemed unbalanced and it did not evoke formal questions, which had been the case with Other visions up to now. On the other hand, in the year when Michal Novotný had been in charge of the selection, several areas stood out, which may transform the way we think about moving pictures - their character, presentation location, and reception. Computer animation and the internet environment as both the source of themes and a distribution channel "tainted" the visual impression of the selected series openly admitting its "ugliness"; after all, we have grown accustomed to it while living in the virtual environment, and perhaps we have even accepted it. Michal Novotný's selection encouraged reflection on the shift in our aesthetic perception, which shows that harmony and moderation are beaten by eccentricity and extremes in the Internet and social networks environment. Thus, completely new aesthetic criteria are formed. The excess becomes part of visual representation and shared content; it participates in the creation of our virtual identities. Paradoxically, right when physical identity becomes weakened, the art scene renews its interest in physicality. It becomes apparent through visual figuration present in all ten competition films. The eleventh year of Other visions based on Novotný's concept introduced works, which would individually hardly tell the story about the specific phenomena in contemporary visual art. Nevertheless, their proximity and installation make the selected films question the origin of pictures, identity and physicality even beyond the artistic expression rather convincingly. In such cases the curator's role stands above singular films; only his critically detached view allows for the topics, which develop our thinking about moving pictures and the ways it absorbs the common consciousness and underlying problems, to become fully articulated.

An experimental moving picture is defined by its creators who consciously reflect their work as an "exploratory" level of moving picture, and by its curators who are capable of critical insight and contextualization. The degree of openness of these two sides when it comes to exceeding the discursive limitations determines how their audiovisual works will be accepted and assessed by the critics, institutions, and audience.

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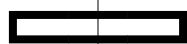
09 More about the intentions and focus of PAF Aport viz: <<http://www.pifpaf.cz/distribuce/about/>>.

10 Finalists of year 10 of Other visions: Dominik Gajarský – *Carausius Morosus* (2016); Daniel Pitín – *Cloud Cartography* (2016); Zbyněk Baladrán – *To be framed* (2016); Jan Brož a Barbora Kleinhamplová – *More Than Lovers, More Than Friends* (2016); Barbora Švehláková – *Umělý horizont* (2016); Miroslava Večeřová a Pavel Příkladský – *Inner Monologue* (2016); Lucie Rosenfeldová – *Polymind* (2016); Martin Zvěřina – *Pillars* (2016); Filip Dvořák – *Matchstick Maker* (2016); Tatiana Nikulina – *Distant thunder from the east won't disturb a morning car wash* (2016).

11 Finalists of year 11 of Other visions Jiří Žák – *Rozštěpený epistemolog* (2017); Jozef Mrva – *Knot Capital* (2017); David Přílučik – *Blind Bidding* (2017); Johana Novotná – *Youu* (2017); Dalibor Knapp – *Ethnographic Study of Algorithms* (2017); Romana Drdová – *Písek* (2017); Markéta Magidová – *V takových časech mysl ustrne* (2017); Aleksandr Martsynuk – *NBA2K17* (2017); Ladislav Tejml – *EGBA3* (2017); Daniela a Linda Dostálkovi – *Extensions* (2016).

12 Finalists of year 12 of Other visions: Mark Ther – *Mitsu* (2018); Radek Brousil – *Red Naomi* (2017); Ester Geislerová a Milan Mazúr – *Tekutá mateřská láska* (2018); Tereza Velíková – *Mezihra* (2017); Sláva Sobotovičová – *La Pernette on Top of Met Gala* (2018); Marie Lukáčková – *Živa* (2018); Ladislav Svoboda a Alma Lily Rayner – *Krychle* (2018); Valentýna Janů a Kryštof Hlůže – *Is Your Blue the Same As Mine?* (2018); Piaoyu Xie – *Kopřiva* (2017); František Fekete – *Autoportrét jako Sinéad O'Connor* (2018).

You must not take it so seriously



Interview with Karel Vachek

Martin Svoboda

Karel Vachek is a prominent personality of the Czech documentary film, not only thanks to his filmography but also as a person with significant influence on the students of FAMU, where he headed the Department of Documentary Film. His provocative and creative approach collides with his life philosophy in almost a six-hour-long “film novel” *Communism and the Net or The End of Representative Democracy* (*Komunismus a síť aneb Konec zastupitelské demokracie*) in which Vachek works with materials he has collected over the course of his life and tries to make the viewer angry once again; to make them think about where the society is going to. During the several-hour-long interview (and a few more during mutual authorization), Vachek analyses approaches which lay the foundation for his work. Social, political and artistic themes cannot be separated in his work; his thinking resembles an interlinked network in which one can easily get lost. Despite that, it is possible to find a “red” thread in it, which mainly lies in accenting absurdity and the faith in humour as necessary tools in search for the truth.



The name of your film is already a bit provocative. *Communism and the Net or The End of Representative Democracy.*

Today's representative democracy is not far from monarchies which have led us to numerous wars; when Putin wants to be accepted by the Russians, he has to behave like a tsar. Gorbachev, who was a European man and destroyed the empire, was hated and had zero chances to succeed, especially since the West did not keep its promises, sent the NATO's armies into the GDR, even though it said it would not, and called itself the winner of the Cold War. And that is how Putin was created; e.g. a different form of Stalin - the system did not change. I can see similar continuity everywhere. The world is governed by people who have had no results, performed no work, and only want to decide in others' stead. I have noticed that, thanks to the net, it is possible to get rid of insane leaders, it is possible to remove them and that citizens can make decisions. The feudal system collapsed with the arrival of the steam engine, the representative democracy will fall as a result of creating the Net with the capital N. Just like it turned impossible to keep vassals in manors when they started leaving for town factories at the turn of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, it will not be possible to stop associating in this Net. All it takes is to fully understand its potential in the matters of administration, decision-making and governance. I see a possibility that sooner or later citizens will begin to demand referenda to all matters. That is what my film is about.

But are referenda not dangerous in many respects?

One of the basic things is that we must not use referenda to look for a leader! It is true, on the other hand, that the majority is wiser than the individual. Believe me. I can prove it by the fact that Mr. Zeman was elected president, because there was no way that a Reich's Prince could have been! And if you asked people whether they would like their children to be sent into killing to various remote places in the world, they would probably say no - and once again, this is the best option. The beauty of referenda lies in the fact that if people make a wrong choice, they can later revoke it. If you make a wrong choice in representative democracy, you will be unlucky for several years. When you elect through referenda, you can quickly realise a mistake you have made and change the direction of things. When we see how the old age has caught up with Miloš Zeman, who now only expresses wisdom through nodding his head, there is nothing we can do about it.

Brexit is a result of a referendum. You do not take a very positive stance to that.

Except the voters have been deceived. And deceived by whom? Again, by the politicians existing in the frames of representative democracy. Decisions ought to be made not based on political campaigns, but rather on experts' opinions. They are supposed to give their opinions, make people acquainted with them, and based on those opinions then make decisions.

Is it even possible to imagine a world without people who would like to assume power and influence others? They can want whatever they like unless we let them.

That all sounds very utopian. To believe people will always want to read expert opinions before making a decision. Alone with the idea of how many such decisions each person would have to do without a representative system.

I am not talking about something we can expect to happen in the next few years or decades. I know it will take some substantial change. And it is unlikely to happen without violence. But I am not proposing any revolutionary schemes or plans. (This world is the best of all possible worlds anyway, as quoted by Voltaire.) I only see what I see. That thanks to the Net we can stop replacing one bad government with an-

other bad government. I do not have a PC myself, and I have only been shown the internet by the students, but the principle itself - it is genius. With the Net, they can learn about anything, get acquainted with everything, learn to be much more independent, and will demand greater decision-making rights. I imagine that after changes in technology and society, which our descendants will have to withstand, people will tend to think more. They will spend some of their time to grow food, some of it to enrich themselves culturally and mentally (doing science, although it is likely everyone will in the future, anyway), and perhaps set aside a day in a week to tick all their choices. I can picture the first steps - today, on the municipal level, people could already decide without representatives whether they want to have a road or bridge repaired.

Are people able to decide which has more priority? And what if a village passes a vote that the Roma cannot live there?

Then there will be another village which will not and the Roma will go there. It may sound awful, but think about it - why would I live in a place where my presence is undesired; why not go somewhere, where I am accepted? And where it will be easier for my culture and language to develop? I also do not know why the Roma should adapt and integrate. Assimilation is wrong! The Roma should stay the Roma!

A big topic for you is language.

One of the greatest feats of the Czech nation was when it managed to restore its language during the National Revival. Because having one's own language means having one's own philosophical base. Thanks to his language, a German can hope to become Goethe, a great genius. A Russian to become Tolstoy, or even better - Dostoyevsky, a person standing before the firing squad which has brought him there only to humiliate and terrify him. And that he will then write *The Idiot*. A Czech can hope to become Hašek, who was able to find a bit of humour in everything (and understood the inexplicability of the world). This is where our languages, which form our nations, are headed to.

That is why we need to learn to move whole nations, not individuals. Because we need to realize that, in a different nation, a foreigner feels stressed and behaves strangely. We will only manage to break this in the third generation. I know what I am talking about since I have lived in exile myself. I have seen things and I know what it is like to try to start a new life. At times when whole nations are beginning to move, we need to think in extremes; not about integrating individuals, but whole groups. And this is best achieved only when we think about nations as such and we do not try to break them up. Each nation and each language need its own environment.

A word you often use in your films and interviews is "humour". And you often refer to Jaroslav Hašek.

From the Austrian army, he deserted to the legions, from the legions to the Red Army and then, disguised as a woman, he tried to flee from Russia - which was the smartest thing he could have done, after all. As a sensible man he came to understand that all the systems were wrong. He was able to see much further than all the half-wits who were fighting for power. (Albeit it was these half-wit legionnaires thanks to whom our Republic was established.

There is only one way of reacting to the world: with humour and extreme. Proust, Kafka, Musil, they all write nice books, but they are only coming closer to the truth because they do not admit humour and are too focused on themselves and their egos. They only have idea of little things, they lack philosophical spirit. That is what Hašek and Cervantes have; the difference in their work compared to others is evident. They see behind the cause and effect, behind an ego, they reveal humour and absurdity which contain the truth.

This is because humour is an extreme reaction - they are needed when we want to save real values. When we are not willing to choose extremes, we will continue to be ruled by the powerful and their “propagationcrazy”. I have always been a man of extreme reactions. When I was offered to shoot a film about Zrzavý in 1968, I chose to go to work to an incinerator instead. I could have stayed in the system but I saw no point in doing so. There were others who said that for the art to survive, it was necessary to do at least something. They were looking for a profitable craft, when they were allowed to. And by doing so, they made it impossible for the art to thrive.

Why do you shoot films, actually? Why do not you choose another medium for spreading your ideas? Or are you not active in politics?

My brother was a great painter. Although I paint too, I cannot express myself as I would like to. And my sister is a much better writer than I am. The film for me is a combination of both - a bit of literature, a bit of painting. By using both, I can camouflage that I am not a master of either of the two. I try to achieve balance among pictures, sounds and texts. I do not want the result to make people feel some particular way. Most filmmakers strive to bring about feelings, an atmosphere of a kind. I admire people like Tarkovsky, Herzog or Kieslowski, who need to hold forth about who is having sex with whom, but most importantly, it has to rain romantically, trees have to rustle and the light has to cast huge shadows. That makes me laugh. I like descriptions; accurate, non-egoistic descriptions of things and people which try to touch the essence. And this gets us back to humour again - because each time I try, I create something which is funny. Humour is the essence of everything. Humour is the essence of balance - I mean, humour comes at times when you realize that nothing can be said precisely and the balance arrives when you realize that Pi goes on to infinity and you will never be able to see its end. And the more you try, the more you will laugh at how this journey cannot be finished!

Some might say it is rather scary than funny.

It is beautiful! In 1958, when I first came to Prague, I bought some book with a foreword in German from the beginning of the twentieth century. The book was approximately fifty pages long and was only about the number Pi as it was known in those days; the mankind at that time got it much more accurate, and yet, it was still beyond its reach. The fact, that the book got a little bit closer to the infinity, is ridiculous. When you look at Pi you realize how the God looks like, or that he does not look anyhow, respectively; that the essence is beyond our reach and trying to uncover it is inevitably ridiculous.

What is your relationship to the audience? Do you want your films to be seen by as many people as possible, or do you want them to exist on principle, to exist to themselves?

I do both. On the one hand, I care for doing my job well - which for me means to achieve the inner laughter, because that is the only way to create without getting sick of myself. On the other, I look around and I really try to find a way to help change the world and to make those who make it worse lose. I work so that there is less suffering in the world, so I have to think about the part the film will play in the world. I hate people who shoot films about suffering only to show it, without proposing a way of getting rid of it. The tears of being moved from a film, which shows suffering, are the worst foul trick; nothing more than feeding one's own ego. Suffering should be used as a theme only if the aim is to try and alleviate it.

What relationship do you have with your female editors? How much do you hold the idea of authorship in your hands and how much do you share it?



For twenty years, I have been editing with Mrs Pařezová; Miss Papírníková and Miss Vřetečková joined us for this film (today, they are married but for me they remain Misses). What I really appreciate about Mrs Pařezová is that it only takes a look at her to see that something is wrong and the scene is not funny. Her face tells you everything. Our younger colleagues helped us get savvy about technology and the combination of film takes shot by all possible ways. They would also bring me new material I could choose from. For instance, I have never recorded my own lectures but they managed to get them and, moreover, they learnt them so well, that they could draw my attention to particular sentences in them. So I rely on their brains and horizons but, on the other hand, I would never use something I do not want to. For example, Miss Papírníková is unusually fond of Mr Knižák - she kept pushing me into different scenes with him. So eventually, I had to tell her to stop. On the other hand, I am grateful when people bring me things because since I do not have the internet, I am a bit limited in my possibilities to search for things. And of course, I am thankful to people like Hauser Kosík, Kokolia and Petříček, who talked in front of the camera and I could steal a bit of their thinking. I also have to mention my cameraman, Karel Slacha, whom I always scold on the spot, how badly he does things, but then in the cutting room I see how brilliant takes he can shoot.

Do you swear a lot?

You bet. I yell, last time I went on like crazy! For a time I was thinking I would hit the deck. Sometimes I have a surge of energy so powerful I have no idea what to do with it. I play the bad guy - it goes with the film. But after filming, we always sit down together and we are happy. We hold no grudges against each other.

I see it quite unusual that you do not use the internet although you put so much faith in it.

But I cannot even write a text. The good thing is that the Net is great for work.

What influence do your students have on you? You have confessed to “stealing” their material.

Without them, I would be done for. I actually visit them daily, or at least as often as I can. You can see that also here in my flat I have laid out a row of chairs and stools - so that they can come and visit me too, while they still want to. And yes, I like stealing from them, for instance when Marcel Halcin showed me his wonderful takes of Mrs Švihlíková, I wanted to use them at all costs. I would not be able to shoot them that way and it is important for one to recognise what other people around him can do better. So take and steal; of course I mean “to steal” in quotes, since the permission is necessary. But for the film, it is just as necessary to keep one centre of thought - as this is where the authorship lies. So although my editors, cameraman and students have a big influence on me, it is still a film with one stable centre of thought.

Documentary film students have a great respect for you, yet you do not seem to have a successor; someone who would try to shoot films in the way you do.

This is because I do not teach them anything - and in no sense to shoot like I do. No one has taught me anything, so neither do I. I only talk about the aspects of the world I see, just like I am doing with you right now. Politics, art, science, sociology, sculpture, it is all the same. It is about “having an idea which is new”. Since ideas can come out of nothing, it



is an amazing physical phenomenon. This is why I often invite different guests to my classes so to that they could speak in front of the students. Not to teach, but to talk about what they do - be it science, religion, or something else, because teaching someone is a pseudo-activity. We need to watch people who can touch something others cannot, and preferably the areas which have not yet been explored.

Your philosophy is hard to grasp. On the one hand, you talk about the high and low art, about things which are, and are not “pseudo”, things which sound like as if they came from the Frankfurt School. On the other, you refer to poststructuralists such as Derrida, who would certainly reject the division between the low and high and the true and false.

I am not trying to appropriate a whole, solid philosophical system, and when I read philosophers, I do not try to fully understand and memorise their propositions. I perceive individual fragments of what I read at some particular moment, and out of them, I make conclusions for myself. I am especially interested in the relationship to metaphysics, about the existence of which I have and do not have doubts. So I am not able to compare philosophers and their worldviews. I do not even largely remember that. I admire Marx, but it was enough for me to flick through his *Capital* and notice some passages, I do not need to read all the hundreds of pages. I love Nietzsche and Plotinus. Various things stick in my mind and sometimes it can be a funny mix. But as we know, thanks to the fun, we are getting closest to the balance.

Let us stay awhile with the division between the low and high art. Where do you see it?

It has roots in the path the artist has taken. Any kind of low art, even circus, can be high in the philosophical sense of the word. It should achieve gnosis, the metaphysical state, with a clear head. No esotericism, no orange garbs, no narcotics. An artist must care for people and not be afraid to be bashed over his head when the powerful notice him, because they dislike anyone who cares for people. And he has to learn to make mistakes and do things incorrectly, because in order to do something right, it has to be wrong at the same time. When an artist is trying to create a masterpiece, something what is pseudo is created - design! When he is trying to find out which “wrong” is right, he is in a fair way. Real art thus lies in inconvenience and not avoiding the wrong.

And if I were to say this at the most basic level, as simply as possible, then real things - art or anything else - can be created only when you are a good person and resist evil.

Such division comes to me as...

...mean? Yes, I have been told.

I am not sure whether I would say “mean” but perhaps too much supported by your personal authority. In order to say all of that you must be very confident of yourself, your taste and your analysis.

You know, I have been thinking about it whole my life, every day. If the things I say are true. I know there are people who can see the truth. Listen to Bedřich Smetana and tell me that he does not know the truth. It is just not possible. Bach himself does not know it but a genius interpreter such as Albert Schweitzer can find it in his work, which is why Bach’s music sounds so differently depending on the one who is rendering it. I spend my time trying to recognise and

identify this, to know at who I should look. Each day, I ask myself whether I am wrong, but at the same time I feel that this is how it is. And once you identify those people, you just have to listen to how they describe the world. If the Germans had listened to Goethe instead of Wagner, they would have recognised when the authenticity changes into falseness and vice versa. And the twentieth century would not have turned out the way it had.

You are talking about genius people and their connection to the truth. You mention Cervantes, Hašek, Tolstoy and Goethe. But wasn't it Tolstoy, who had a reserved opinion about the faith in genius people who change history? Did he not try to prove, at the end of *War and Peace*, that each genius is a product of their time and its result, not the cause? And as for Tolstoy himself, Masaryk in *Talks (with TGM)* describes his disillusionment with how badly Tolstoy managed his manor and how he lived in a pose. From talks with Eckermann, it in turn seems that Goethe was rather stubborn and spent a significant part of his old age by, for example, a strenuous effort to disprove Isaac Newton's physical theories, which probably was not the most effective use of his time.

I love the passage in Eckermann where Goethe shoots his bow and the author is having fun of him, he was also only a human. We know as well about his love to Ulrike von Levetzow in his old age, which was impertinent and inappropriate. Because in such age, love is embarrassing and you have to hide it - I know that from my own experience.

Genius people are always difficult. What they have in common is that they can free themselves from the limitations of the cause and effect, but there are two sides to that. In one aspect of their lives, they can be miles ahead of everyone else; in others they can be very well failing. This often stems from how they come to terms with the reality of their lives. Tolstoy had a quarrelsome wife, he was a count. But how to bring it into accord with one's own beliefs and talent? No wonder he can then give the impression of being a fool from one point of view. From other, he is a genius who discovered something no one else had. Creating the character of Pierre Bezukhov is Tolstoy's most genius deed because it is a person free of ego. And whole Europe was blown away. This does not mean, however, that Bezukhov makes Tolstoy infallible.

It is just like with Karel Gott's funeral these days. I always used to tell my students, to their amusement, that Gott was a genius. The characteristic of his voice is truly extraordinary and unique. His philosophical qualities were on a par with the greatest opera singers such as Luciano Pavarotti, Ema Destinová and Jon Wickers. In his field, he achieved a similar level of balance like Marilyn Monroe or Clint Eastwood - in a specific aspect of the perfect being, whose greatness is instinctively felt by everyone. Gott's voice freed of ego is a miracle. The place, where his ego took him, is certainly no miracle at all. He usually sang bad music, very bad at times. And he was associating with all terrible statesmen we have had. Unfortunately, how people understood it, was that the brilliance of his voice made his political and life choices legitimate. When such a genius voice was able to stay idle in critical moments, it was seen all right when the common people did nothing as well. And now they are joyfully lighting candles because the genius of Gott's voice saves them from their conscience. It is horrible, don't you think?

That is why, when we speak about genius people, we need to know what genius we are talking about, where the genius comes from and what it brings us, because genius must not be linked to the ego of the genius person. Note that the greatest geniuses very strictly separate their genius and ego.

By the way, I once talked to Karel Gott and tried to get him for my film, but it turned out he had no understanding for me and that he perhaps did not understand me at all.

You are known not to be afraid to use bold words for some of your colleague artists, for your “enemies”.

Listen - they are not enemies! The things they do are not their fault. It is about yielding to causes and effects in their lives. Something has led them to those creative choices and I do not want to fight them because of it. The only thing I can do is to watch, wonder and laugh. I have never said, anywhere, that they are bad people, I just do not understand them, I do not comprehend what drives them, how they became who they are. I might have been like them if I had been influenced by the same causes as they have been. I was lucky though, to have a wife, brother and sister like I had. They were more clever and creative than I was in many respects and in their proximity I have become the person I am today. Thanks to them and to what they have taught me I believe there have been several occasions in which I was given a perception of a kind, thanks to which I can sometimes see with a clear mind. It is something everyone can do but most people miss the moment and then they lose it forever. This is a tragedy. But I would never say that I hate people who let those moments slip away. When I hate something, then it is particular works of art, but that is something different. When I think of, for example, *The Cremator (Spalovač mrtvol) [1968]* by Juraj Herz, then, although I hate the film, I would not say it about the people who worked on it.

Why do you hate *The Cremator*?

I hate it because it is only a silly way of how to arouse feelings; moreover about death and fascism. Fascism is a stupidity and death is ridiculous - I do not need to have any feelings of those two. Feelings only make them smaller. One moment you are here, the other you are gone, that is funny, isn't it? Getting moved by it can only make it worse. Nowadays, we inter all the time, but we try to do it without getting moved, when possible. Now it is my turn; luckily we have my father's (tomb) stone with his name on it "Karel Vachek", so most of the work has been done already. We just need to add one more date. You must not take it too seriously.

Do you have a particular procedure you follow during your production?

I always act differently. It is important to kick the film up high at the beginning - that is the scene with my granddaughter running around the picture - and then keep it there. That is a challenge, especially if you want to keep it there for five hours and twenty minutes. I have struggled a lot with its structure, but in the end I got four parts of their own accord, each exactly 72 minutes long, and the appendix, which is 27 minutes. That is a beautiful number! It has a closing value! It is thus the ideal number for my ninth.

I am going to ask you a bit provocative question: Is separated Department of Documentary Film necessary? The Poles, for example, do not have it and it does not seem to be detrimental to their documentary films.

I have always said I would like there to be only one Department of Directing, without having the Department of Documentary Film separated from it. My whole life, I have been watching how curiously these two institutions work. After all, I got to FAMU because my uncle, who was otherwise persecuted by the regime, put on his old general's uniform and went to the archive to find out what my personal file contains. They did not dare to block his way so he went in, had a look into my files and took what they had on me - only thanks to that I was eventually enrolled. In the nineties, I applied for a teaching job and got it, because they did not expect I would take part in the open competition and did not see to the composition of the decision-making commission. That is why I know how ridiculously and randomly an institution can sometimes work.

So to your question whether we need a separate Department of Documentary Film at FAMU: Of course we don't! But the things are as they are, so it is separate.

The proponents say it allows for creating a community of like-minded people where the documentary film can evolve in its own way.

In my opinion, it would have been better if the documentary film students had the chance to develop in a standard department of directing and were part of its community there. Years ago, I was thinking of proposing to shut down the Department of Documentary Film myself. I graduated from the only Department of Directing there was at the time and I do not feel I lack specialization. There is only one film! It is about pictures shot in some way and whether there was acting involved, or there were situations from real life, it almost does not matter. It is true, on the other hand, that with crazy things happening at FAMU, it is perhaps a good thing that there are two Departments of Directing. In case the administration goes bonkers with it one day, which is not that unimaginable, there will be a backup of a kind. (Directors, who used to be child actors, can appear and teach at the Department at some point!)

Since we are talking about communities, a frequently discussed topic today is the “social bubbles”. In *Communism*, you were let out in a bubble to go down a Prague's stream - Botič. Does it allude to the limited perspective we all have?

Of course it does. Although it took us quite a lot of time to do it. It was ladies Papírníková and Všeťečková who turned my attention to the plastic spheres and originally I wanted to use them to let Muslim women go down the river Vltava. But eventually, I abandoned the idea and we came up with something even more absurd - I put on a swallowtail coat, got into it and set out down the Botič stream. It was in a place I have been very fond of since the fifties, with a beautiful crumbling factory towering over it. It felt amazingly peculiar, incomprehensible, in that sphere and it was a great moment for talking about my life, which is also peculiar and incomprehensible in many respects. Full of wars, conflicts and fights you do not want to lead, but you have to. (Because there are people here, who want more than they have, and other people, on whom the people, who want more than they have, have something.)

Some of the strongest scenes in your film are those of burnt Josef Hlavatý.

I have never seen anything as dreadful in my life. But in fact, if you think about it, human torches were never meant to get what they wanted. In each system, people will always try to live in a way to survive. We have all collaborated; even I have in a way, when I was producing heat for the pipes which led to the Communist Party Central Committee. You cannot want people to behave differently than the system allows. First, we have to change the system so that it is possible to behave differently in it and only then we can want others to behave differently. That is why it is necessary to spread power and wealth with the net, because this is something new. It has always been about a small group of power-hungry people replacing another and, as a result, people turned into torches.

The year 1968 is one of the fixed points in your film you keep coming back to.

I like 1968 because it was a year of extremes. It was a critical point of the biggest importance; I put it on the same level as the establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic, National Revival and the Hussite Movement. People back then tried to change the system. A lot of chumps, sorry for the word, today say how weak and indecisive Dubček was. They probably have no idea what was really happening at that time and what significant changes were acceded to. When in 1989 then celebrated as some revolution, I have to laugh



because of the things I know from experience and from what I have heard. It was no revolution at all, only an attempt to restore the things as they had been.

Was it for you a matter of course to use the scenes with Hlavatý, or did you think twice?

When we give them meaning, we even have to use them. And as soon as I found Smrkovsky's speech, he gave after his return from Moscow where he had been abducted together with other Central Committee members, I knew the contrast between the devastated body and broken spirit will give it a new meaning. It is not about getting people moved, there is more to it.

I would say the best things about your film are especially the moments when it creates similarly strong or funny juxtapositions.

By doing so, I try to show that nothing has only one meaning and that it is possible to look at things from different points of view, which are all valid. And even if I sometimes mix, for example, names like Knížák and Michelangelo, it is because our world stands on such people in both good and bad times.

Have you ever had the ambition to shoot a fiction film?

Yes I have, but I did not manage to get funding. The scripts are still lying somewhere here, who knows where. The closest I got was in 1967 when the film *Who Will Watch the Watchman (Kdo bude hlídat hlídače)* with Oldřich Nový was approved for production. But they stopped it. And today, even the dumbest actor's film costs twenty-five million crowns - I cannot imagine somebody would give me that much for something which would convey the same message as *Communism and the Net*.

How do you see the growing tendency of young documentary filmmakers to abandon the Czech setting in respects of topics and distribution?

see various emissaries coming from Europe acting as if they knew how a proper documentary (and not only a documentary) should look like. They organise various pitches where they want to form and develop films and where they turn interesting ideas into rubbish. I am not looking for saviours among foreign experts; the Czech film needs two things. First, it is a studio where graduates will be able to occupy themselves with a post-gradual production. Today, there is only the Czech Television which has its own cycles and requirements. In respect of what we need, it is insufficient. Nothing of artistic value can be created under the Czech Television requirements, they are just products. If you could only see the dumb heads who make decisions there! I had better not talk about it anymore.

And what about *Český žurnál* (a TV series)? It is quite unparalleled, at least in the Central European area.

Is that the thing produced by Klusák? I am glad the students are doing something but I am not sure it is exactly the right thing. By doing so, they only legitimise institutions which should not be responsible for creating art. But it is probably better than nothing. I see Klusák as a great filmmaker thanks to the supermarket, the *Czech Dream (Český sen)* [2004]. I am unsure whether, since the revolution, someone has done as much for the Czech cinematography as Klusák when he filmed the mob running to that supermarket stage set. I am really envious of that. The fact that he then shoots some cooking shows is his business. I appreciate he gives students a possibility to start and gives them work, although it should be within the framework of independent self-study which aims for quality only. Long ago,

I tried to persuade minister Dostál to preserve the Short film, but I was unsuccessful.

So, if a student strives for his film to be screened, for example, in Amsterdam, does that mean it is a wrong thing to do?

It does not matter what they strive for. If the film is good, it will find its way, unless it is being prevented from doing so. I used to be said at one point that if *Moravian Hellas* (*Moravská Hellas*) [1963] had been in English and allowed to go abroad, it would have been a great success. Juráček, with his *Joseph Kilian* (*Postava k podpírání*) [1963], was a bit luckier, but he was a surrealist after all.

You have mentioned there are two things the Czech documentary film needs. Which is the second one?

The whole Czech society needs to start to move towards a change. The sixties were drawing their strength from the motion driven by the society at that time; from the desire to do things differently, to explore. When a society is not going anywhere and is just maintaining the status quo, no real art can be made. You can see it everywhere. The Russians have had their revolution and a whole generation of geniuses appeared looking for the new world. Unfortunately, some of them fled to Europe, some were killed by Stalin. In our country, it now seems that the best thing to do is to buy our daughters horses worth a quarter billion (crowns) and put them in motion over hurdles, that is the only motion we are capable of. Every effort is made so that the same people could hang onto power and everything stayed the same - both in politics and in the film.

What I have noticed about your films is that you are seen as if from the perspective of the “-er” form. That you tend to play more a character that is seen from the distance, rather than having a monologue.

That is right. When I watch the material recorded, every now and then I cannot but stare at myself in amazement. Every so often, when I hear myself speaking, I am surprised at what I have just said. If I want to be able to use something from that I must not take myself seriously. On the other hand, that is why I am still interested in filming, because the moment I stopped being surprised with myself, there would be no point in thinking, speaking and listening to myself. If I was unable to surprise myself, what would I even to try to achieve? If I did not say all those insensible things, what would be left of me?

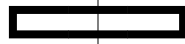
I do not wish anyone to be old because I know what it is like. On the flipside, thanks to my age I can say silly things as I just have to you. A young person would not be able to afford that - a sensible young person would not think the things I think. I have been here for eighty years now. I am not going to be here for much longer, nor am I going to take anything with me, I just laugh and I am amazed by the small opportunity to have a look at the world I have been given. Luckily, I have no influence and I do not even want to. I want to talk nonsense and perhaps make people think about it. I describe what I see. I film what I see. There is nothing else I can work with; I cannot work with anything else. And I talk rubbish. Because only when you talk rubbish you can come up with something people have not heard yet. Only thanks to silly things one can believe in some cognition.

We have talked about geniuses, about people who can see, and people who don't. Do you think you are one of them?

I would love to, of course I would. Who wouldn't? But it is not for me to decide, others will have to, depending on what opinion they form of me and what use they will have me for. (I hope I will be new tripe.)

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So that the viewers don't feel deceived



Interview with Bohdan Karásek

Martin Svoboda

After the films *Lucie* (2011) and *Love songs* (2013), Bohdan Karásek brings another “apartment movie”, *Karel, Me and You*, one that has grown into a feature-film format and will be screened in theatres. All of the author's works - created in very humble conditions and independent from all institutions – introduce the phenomenon of mumblecore into the Czech context.

You direct your films, you write the screenplays, you often appear in them and sometimes you even act as editor. They emerge outside any structures that would require dramaturgic supervision. During the creative process, do you have anyone to challenge your opinions and contradict you?

I'm not forced by any institution to work with a dramaturge, I however still hired one. It was my classmate from screenwriting classes, Džian Baban. As a trained screenwriter, I consider dramaturge to be very important and I would never dare to make a film completely without it. In the case of *Lucie*, however, my first "apartment" film, I took a risk and asked for help only after the first cut.

On the contrary, in *Karel, Me and You*, I took advantage of the dramaturge process to the fullest, from the screenplay to all of the stages of cutting; it was quite understandable as the feature-film structure of the movie made it more demanding. Dramaturge, nevertheless, has to be interconnected, organic. It cannot be that a producer hires someone who will then just mechanically do their job. The dramaturge should be part of the team, they should be as involved as any other member of the crew. In my case, it had to be someone I knew and trusted and who would be able to tune into my creative process. That is why I consulted with Jiří Soukup on *Loves Songs*; he is one of the most sensitive men I know.

There is a lot of dialogue in your films. Is it about expressing your own attitudes? Do any of the characters actually say what you think or do your real opinions hang only over specific dialogues?

The suspicion likely relates to the character I portray in *Karel, Me and You*. But even there, I do not literally speak for myself, or so I like to think, even though this is probably the closest I've come in all of my films.

The beautiful thing about action characters is that they can easily be braver than you or that you can, through their mouth, push some ideas to greater extremes, extremes that in real life would be too absurd, even for you. This simple effect comes in handy sometimes. However, the truth is that characters rather serve the fictional world they are subordinate to; each of them fulfills their function in relation to the whole, rather than expresses opinions.

At the same time, it is true that you always try to avoid the inevitable fact that all of the characters that you write are products of your mind. There is a risk that they will use the same words and structures and will emerge from the same inner state of mind – that is something all screenwriters struggle with. Sometimes it can be a conscious stylistic choice, but most of the time you are trying to fight it. You want to come close to the ideal of creating a self-sufficient world that is somehow bigger than you.

I have noticed that, when a character in your movies brings up politics or some social issue, they come across as awkward or inappropriate. Is this your way of speaking up against civic engagement?

It is not my intention or message, but you will certainly find a few of these moments in my films. I, of course, do realize that my films are very withdrawn. They defy any engagement, transcendence or addressing anything that lies beyond one's personal space. It is hard to express why, but I have a theory that a person has to deal with himself/herself first and only then they can head further. And my films are, precisely, about this act of dealing with oneself. About small, subtle problems. The big ones are around the corner and I can't see them yet. That may be the reason why, when someone brings up a so-called big problem, they seem inadequate, who knows.

This shows, however, that the characters are surrounded by a whole different world to which they expose themselves rather passively. It is important for me that we find if only a hint of this world in all of my films – the big topics

appear at least in small roles. So, it actually definitely doesn't mean that I'm disrespecting these issues, or people who deal with them in the right way, I value them very much.

Yet, I do not actively put any of this in my films, I only realize that retrospectively. Primarily it is about the way the characters are embedded in the present day. I want my movies to breathe, to give the impression that they are rooted in the real world. From a different point of view though, the disproportion of the big and small paradoxically exposes their sort of withdrawn and isolated nature.

Do you belong to the FAMU (Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague) community? Your films seem to be connected to it.

It may seem that way if you only look at the surface and you see Petra Nesvačilová, Vít Klusák or Petr Marek on camera. I naturally know more people, my production manager Eva Pavličková is a student there, but that doesn't mean there is a real connection. The truth is my films are very distant not only from FAMU but also from any other structure. Institutionally, there is therefore almost no involvement; except for *Karel, Me and You* for which I received a grant from the Czech Film Fund.

It is not just about an institutional link. You did study at FAMU after all.

Yes, I even lectured there for two years, but that was quite long ago, about ten years. Also, I didn't study direction but screenwriting and that puts you in a rather different position. When you graduate from directing, your path towards the execution of your projects is easier and more open; with a screenwriting diploma, the start can be bumpier. After all, you are supposed to sit on a chair and write for others – no one expects you to direct as well since you do not have the degree for it. But I've been looking from afar and it has been improving in the last years – screenwriting students make actual movies during their studies, so their chances to break through as directors increase. When I was a student, that was not possible, unfortunately, and after that I was no longer a student of the school so I made the first parts of the "apartment trilogy" at home, with whatever I could find and using my own money.

Were the conditions better when you were making *Karel, Me and You*?

Strangely enough, no. Only in the sense that I had, overall, a larger budget to work with, however, the entire project was considerably more demanding, more than the difference the extra funding made. My two previous films were less than an hour-long, only now I made a real feature-film. And the costs grow disproportionately quickly to the footage. I had thirty thousand to make *Love Songs* and three hundred and thirty do shoot *Karl*, but it didn't bring more comfort, rather the opposite. More scenes require more settings, more actors, more days of shooting and, before you know it, you are lying on your face and you have no idea how you got there.

It doesn't seem like you limit yourself though, considering the "apartment film" format. For example, what about the montage of the exterior settings, where we see several different locations within a few seconds?

That was the least of my problems – I just went out into the city with my camera and spent a few hours shooting everything I saw. I walked the streets, took the tram and the metro and looked around. So, the costs didn't pile up there, unless one of the random passers-by sues me. It was punk – a filmmaker with my budget can't afford to respect all of the rules.

Do you consider your films to be mumblecore? Aren't they stylistically too lively? Besides the montages, you



↳ Karel, já a ty

also work with nondiegetic music. Maybe your films are too little dull to be actual mumblecore.

Purity of style is certainly an interesting question – this in no Dogme 95, music is not forbidden in mumblecore! If I took your question literally, I'd say that my films are likely not mumblecore enough, which is a shame because mumblecore is not boring at all. I love these movies and devour every word!

Does the stylization of the apartment trilogy represent your handwriting as a director or is it just a concept you used for this particular project and you will continue discovering other techniques?

I work primarily with the means that I have at hand. Rather than a specific concept for these screenplays, I discovered a concept suitable for the little money I managed to put together. The fact that I shoot as I shoot doesn't mean that these are the only films I like. For instance, I am drawn to movies that are extremely organized from the visual and editorial point of view, but I can't make them myself yet. My journey to film has been specific, I started out quite late and I've been climbing from the bottom. Each step I rise is a change I welcome – so far, I am still managing to move forward, step by step. When I get higher, I will be able to experiment with a different film language. At this time the question is irrelevant, though.

How long was the shoot of *Karel*?

We had 40 days of filming, which is not few for a Czech film, but they were of course very scattered. Thanks to the grant we were able to pay the actors this time, but not in a fancy way, so I couldn't be their priority.

This is the second time you've mentioned the grant. Did you collaborate with anyone else besides the Czech Film Fund?

Actually, I only received money from the Fund – five years ago I was granted some support for the creation of an experimental short film. It was a newly created call, only the first year it was opened. It is considerably less than what was offered in the big grant but thank God at least for this. Back then I was not in a position to ask for more money, there

was no point, so I took what was available. The sound studio Bystrouška was also very accommodating, they allowed us to use their equipment for free. And that is really all.

What is your relationship with the audience like? Your films are very specific.

I don't want to make elitist films, in any sense of the word. I see my viewer as a real person, flesh and bone, even though the person is not a majority one. The opposite of majority, however, is not elitism, it shouldn't be – or is it something I naively believe? I would like for my films to be in regular distribution so that normal people can go see them. Thanks to the planned distribution under Marienbad Film I will get closer to this ideal than ever before – *Karel, Me and You* will be screened outside festivals in selected, likely more independent theatres, which is a very nice prospect. I know I will never get into multiplexes, but traditional town and city theatres – why not?

What about online distribution? Is the idea of viewers looking at a monitor enough for you?

I am not offended by the idea of a monitor, because, for starters, my films are quite obviously not primarily defined by their visual aspect. That said, I'm still one to believe that films belong on a movie screen. Not only because of the image quality but also because of the principle of the audience collectively sharing an experience.

Is there an economic reason behind the efforts for a widespread theatre distribution, or is it more of a principle?

The latter, for sure. If the film makes some money, it would be only fair, since I ran into debt because of it, but you cannot count on that. The only reason why you strive for the movie to be distributed in cinemas is that you want to make it available for all potential viewers.

How many of these viewers do you think there are?

I cannot quantify it, of course. Most people go to the cinema to unwind. I aim at those, who want to concentrate, which is the opposite of distraction. I realize that films are,

besides art, also an industry; we sell people products and services. For some, a visit to the theatre means the same as a Thai massage – a kind of paid relaxation. That is, naturally, not exactly my kind of audience.

When you say you want people to come to the theatres to see your film – do you think about them also when you are filming? Do you mould your films at least partially according to what you expect the public will appreciate?

I make movies that I would like to watch myself, with the hope that there is still a relevant group of others who are 'like me'. Thanks to my situation and to the fact that I do not collaborate with organizations that try to interfere with the filmmaking process, I can actually afford to shoot this way. I'm not saying that genre directors don't make movies based on their ideas, but with this kind of cinematography the industry factor is much stronger and that requires a calculation; and by that, I mean a calculation different from the genuinely personal one. For me, that would be unacceptable, I am unable to think this way.

And can you imagine that you would, as other directors do, alternate more commercial projects with personal ones?

To disengage from oneself and fully apply the impersonal calculation, approach storytelling purely as work – you need a special talent to do it. I learnt that when I was studying screenwriting, this principle is even stronger there than with directing. You have the opportunity to write screenplays on commission for different tv shows. But how am I supposed to do that if, as a viewer, I am not interested in this kind of shows? How am I supposed to write something I do not watch myself? It may be easy for some, but I have not been able to solve this puzzle yet.

As I said, I am interested in getting viewers; but they must be viewers of a film that was created from a fundamental interest of mine. I may be experiencing a bubble syndrome, but I am convinced that there are enough of these viewers, more that it would seem.

What are your bubbles like? Do you come from an artistic background? I am asking because, if that is the case, you could be inclined to overestimate the interest of a broader public in rather specific works, like your films.

Art wasn't particularly fostered in my family, although it certainly wasn't a worker's household. I do not carry my bubbles over from my family, I slipped into them by myself when growing up and during my studies. I am aware that the environment can cloud one's vision. But I am still convinced that there are more viewers for this kind of films. I think that we haven't yet utilized all the potential channels and there is still a big audience to address that would appreciate if they just had the chance to see my films. I draw also from my experience in music. I play in a band that is actually similarly deviated, full of odd harmonies and there is not even singing! Wherever we arrive, we encounter, say, three people out of the fifty that come, that are completely thrilled and had never heard of us before. No matter how much we think that, in a world connected by TV, internet and fast transportation, everyone has access to everything they are interested in, there are still blank spots to fill. That gives me hope. It's not that people are not interested in art; art just doesn't always know how to find its way to people. Because of the number of sources of entertainment there are today, we cannot rely on people actively searching for us – we must take the first step. That is why I am so happy to finally step outside of festival programs into normal cinemas.

How do you approach publicity? I suppose it is not easy to sell your films.

I definitely want to be as transparent as possible in terms of what film is being offered. Distribution in cinemas

comes with the risk that someone who the film is just not intended for will end up seeing it. It happened with *Love songs* and *Karel* at the Karlovy Vary Film Festival where people tend to go see films when they have a free slot in their schedule, or they didn't manage to get tickets for anything else... Afterward you find comments on ČSFD (the Czechoslovak Movie Database) written by horrified people who feel almost robbed after having seen a film with such "rudimentary" aesthetic, without the outer glitz they are used to. And everyone keeps talking and nothing happens – what a betrayal! I then feel sorry such situations happen; I don't blame the audience, their response is understandable.

I am not insensible to negative criticism; I am interested in every opinion and such useless discontent is hard for me. That is why we need to be responsible and advertise my movie in the right way so that viewers don't feel deceived. It is actually good that all the bigger distributors that we approached rejected us. If they didn't, they would need to come up with a campaign that would disguise some of the film's features, they would need to force it onto people it is just not intended for. I do not strive for a maximum audience; I strive for a maximum of "my" audience. That is a big difference.

So far, we've talked about Czech distribution. What about going international?

I'm a little sceptical about it. The film is so talkative that it would be problematic for any foreign language festival. To watch it abroad means to spend two hours reading English subtitles, which most program directors view as an issue. As a matter of principle, English speaking audiences accept English subtitles only reluctantly and for a non-English speaking audience, it is too much of a burden. We may get into a few festivals, but they won't be many. After Karlovy Vary, some salesmen contacted me, they were captivated by the synopsis of the film and its introduction at the festival. After we send the screener, they however usually answer unanimously that they actually really like it, but they are not right for the commercial distribution of such film...

It seems that you have some kind of complex system of working with non-actors. In *Love songs*, for instance, one of the three main characters is portrayed by František Host who is, like the character, a philharmonic player in real life.

I don't think I have a system or a dogma I would base my search for actors on, but there is a story or a reflexion behind every casting. I knew František Host before the shoot and while writing *Love Songs* I moulded the character based on my memories of him. At the time it didn't even occur to me that he could play it too. I wasn't even that inspired by specific events in his life, it was more his temperament and character. And then finally I realized: who could be possibly better at portraying a character than the person it is based on? His casting, naturally, only came after camera tests were done. It was not an intellectual decision, that only a musician can play a musician – if I couldn't convince František or he wasn't natural in front of the camera, I would have started looking among actors. Of course, since it worked out like this, I was happy for the overlap of reality and film and I tried to exhaust it to the fullest. It is also wonderful to observe the dynamic of a great professional such as Taťjana Medvecká acting next to a non-actor. I like to work with this contrast. I happened again in *Love Songs* where the young couple is composed of Miloslav König, a professional theatre actor, and a non-actress.

What does his dynamic mean for you?

It brings originality to the film. I however always strive for it not being too evident during the shoot – the way I work with actors and non-actors is almost identical because even with non-actors I look for the latent actor in them. It is also

true that “non-actor” is a very broad term. Forman, for example, allegedly pre-acted scenes for the non-actors; in his Czech films these roles usually weren’t too psychologically complex, it was more about finding the right type and after that, it was possible to work “mechanically”. If you need psychological acting, to choose a trained actor is always a more reliable option, because they have what could be called acting self-awareness, and they are more independent – or they should be.

Some directors cast an actor among non-actors so he or she can guide them. Recently it was done by Olmo Omerzu in *Winter Flies* (2018).

In this case, it was reinforced by the fact that Eliška Křenková was actually hired to act also as an acting coach for both protagonists; they were teenagers too, so the teacher role was even more relevant. But otherwise, I do not believe that it should be about an actor guiding a non-actor. I think we more often see it as mutual inspiration. It is likely about the right split of roles within a team composed of actors and non-actors. For instance, I think that in the recent FAMU film *Sugar and Salt* (directed by Adam Martinec, 2018) you can clearly see that Leoš Noha, the only trained actor, portrays a character that is, after all, more psychologically layered than the others. It is not always visible at first sight though, so it creates an impression of some kind of organic symbiosis.

On the other hand: if you choose to cast professionals such as Tatjana Medvecká or Petra Nesvačilová in you intimate and civil film, aren’t you worried that the viewers will project too much of their knowledge of the actors onto the characters?

This would be an issue if the actor was cast “against type”. Either against roles that the audience is already accustomed to seeing them in or against their nature in some way that the director perceives. I know that many filmmakers like to take up this challenge, but I see it as an unnecessary complication and something that steals too much attention. Or maybe I am just scared, who knows. Petra, actually, was just now cast against her type in *Snowing!* (directed by Kristina

Nedvěďová, 2019) and I am curious to see how the audience will react. I believe that, when acting, actors should draw from themselves, from what is inside them. And by that I do not mean a complete identification with a character or inputting one’s biographical elements, just acting in the direction of their nature. I am not denying that the best actors are shapable, I just believe that all the shapes come out from what is inside.

We can’t expect to see any Henry Fonda in *Once upon a time in the West* equivalent in your films? Isn’t in one of the most memorable moments in cinematography?

We can only hope that Henry Fonda was as big of a hero in real life as the characters he used to play. In any case, the shock of seeing an actor who had been a prototype of a positive hero play a murderer is more suitable for a western than my film. I don’t want the audience to think about the actors too much. By casting a famous actor against type, we make the process of “acting” more visible. If I cast even a very famous person into a role that is natural for them, I don’t see any issue. Sure, I respect Bresson’s purism when he wanted actors to only act once and then, ideally, never appear in front of the camera again. But, first, not all filmmakers can afford to do that and, second, I don’t think it’s really necessary. For me, it is more of a nice philosophical ideal than something that really impacts how the film turns out or the viewer’s experience. I think that you simply need for the character to be well written, understood and portrayed.

And directed.

I am not very fond of the expression “directing actors” and I am not sure that I “direct someone”. A well-cast actor with a quality text in their hand, assuming they understand the role, doesn’t need instructions on how to do something, because they just automatically show the best and the most natural that they can at that moment. What does it even mean to “direct actors”? I could ask Bresson, he would know. But even if I didn’t work like him, I would still fully respect him because his method is consistent and permeates through all of the components of cinematographic expression. And all that is consistent is good.

↳ 2× Karel, já a ty



You have to rely on theatre actors a lot – as a film director, do you see it as a problem? It has been viewed as an issue of Czech cinematography since its beginnings.

There were times where the Barrandov studios had their own ensemble of actors who were supposed to dedicate themselves exclusively to films; by doing that, they were trying to end the practice of stealing theatre actors. I am not sure how the idea worked in practice, but as a concept, it was certainly great. For an actor to only focus on film roles would be beneficial, but I realize that if it didn't work out back when we had state cinematography, today it would be even less likely. I don't want to complain, so far, I have never struggled to find good actors. Film acting training is, for sure, still being underestimated in our country and someone should give it more focus, whether at DAMU (Theatre Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts), FAMU or somewhere else. We will never reach an ideal status, we are too small of a country for that, actors will always have to go back and forth.

Is there space for improvisation in your films?

Much less than you'd think. In the individual parts of the "apartment trilogy" there was less and less space; in *Karel, Me and You* we stuck to the screenplay quite strictly. For one thing, with my budget, I cannot really afford to deviate much from schedule and, generally, I am not one to dare to make big decisions on the spot. Of course, you can discuss details about the phrasing of a specific sentence so that it comes more naturally to the actor, but I am otherwise more used to stick to the plan.

It is actually quite strange because I've been long attracted to the element of improvisation. Maybe it comes as no surprise considering that the three films, we are discussing are getting more and more challenging in structure. If you want to compose different motives in a film, put together different, even very tiny moments or motives across the entire structure, the space for improvisation that is left in each of these moments gets smaller. In *Lucie*, we sometimes finished writing the dialogues during rehearsals, things came up even one day before shoot or directly on the spot. The thing is *Lucie* takes place in one place and one time. In

Love songs, these coincidental elements got muted and now I have pulled back almost completely. Possibly I realized that I have to choose - I can either let improvisation run or focus on composition. To put them together is something else, for that, I guess you need to be a bit a magician.

Why did you actually study screenwriting instead of directing?

The easy answer is that there is where I got accepted. But I think it was for the good because I wasn't mature enough for directing, I wasn't mature in general as a matter of fact. I may not be able to back it up properly, but I somehow feel that immaturity can backfire much more when you are trying to direct a film than when you are trying to write. Or that was at least my case for some reason. Maybe because directing is a very complex task with many crafts involved that you need to be good at, or at least hold your own; also, it possibly reflects your social experience, you have to convince someone about something in real time... And everything has to fall into place in the end. Writing, on the other hand, is still an activity that is clearly defined, one that you can focus on that much more, with all the slowness that is so natural for me. And the focus you have, even if you lack experience, will capitalize itself in the end. In screenwriting you can mature with time without having to suffer any consequences of your initial immaturity; in the department of direction on the hand, it can easily crush you.

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FEELMS SMITEE

Communism and the Net or the End of Representative Democracy	(Komunismus a síť aneb Konec zastupitelské demokracie, Czech Republic – Slovakia 2019)
Written and directed by	Karel Vachek
Cinematography	Karel Slach
Editing	Renata Pařezová, Helena Papírníková
Runtime	335 min.
Distribution CZ	Background Films
Release date	5 November 2019

World according to Vachek

In his four-chapter film *Communism and the Net or the End of Representative Democracy* (*Komunismus a síť aneb Konec zastupitelské demokracie*), Karel Vachek analyses the philosophical-religious aspects of the society existing in the Czech Republic prior to the Velvet Revolution, as well as the post-revolutionary one. A spiritual dimension - an invisible layer, which, metaphysically speaking, exists both morally and transcendentally, stretches itself as a backdrop to the historical and political processes. Vachek's epic piece of work shows how these spiritual layers affect the perception of freedom.

In his view, when we approach the divine substance, we find out that in the predestined world, liberty is nothing but an illusion, that absolute knowledge is impossible, and that absolute truth is unknowable. Vachek himself is confronted with this dilemma, when creating a kind of Gesamtkunstwerk, a multi-layer complex piece of art, which uses diverse art disciplines, but can never be complete. Not even when its length stretches from the originally intended two and a half hours to almost six, as it was the case for his ninth film that he only declared as finished when feeling that he had said everything he wanted. Like his audience, he also faces the schizophrenia of this life, as described in the platonic myth. We are aware of the layer of reality, but we cannot perceive it, we cannot be

in the world and out of it at the same time. However, Vachek claims that we can, and tells us how to do it.

In his book *Theory of the matter* (*Teorie hmoty*) he makes a distinction between people of fate, who live in the train of predestination and are unable to break free from the string of causes and effects, and people of core, who, unlike the former, are able to change the story of their lives, who have the chance to break free by living in the light, by approaching the divine substance. It can be achieved through dissolution of emotion, which is in itself unhuman, void of meaning, but omnipresent. Musicians like Pavarotti, Rubinstein or Chopin had the ability to enlighten a music hall with their dissolved emotion. Creative inner laughter is also a dissolved emotion, dissolving egos and helping people to get "above" the happenings of fate, to stay in and out at the same time. Vachek brings about inner laughter by means of alienation, he deforms the image with fisheye, he chooses grotesque motives, he depicts absurd moments. He tears the audience out of the embrace of the centripetal force of the film medium and helps them to keep a critical distance. Among those moments: a scene with Chaplin impersonating Hitler, cut, a shot of Vachek floating on a river in a zorb. It is presidents turning into comedians: Václav Havel peeping out of a pool in an clipping from his film *Odcházení* (*Odcházení*, directed by Václav Havel, 2011), Václav Klaus stealing a pen during a state visit



in Chile, Donald Trump hitting a rival in a box ring. Or the other way round, a comedian turned into a president, like Volodymyr Zelensky, the new leader of Ukraine.

The metaphysical struggle between the fate and the light is reflected both in the society's politics and history. At the center of this fight, there are "magicians" who lead political parties, secret services or churches. Their worlds of magic, however, have nothing to do with transcendence. They represent power structures that individuals have been fighting endlessly from time immemorial. In Vachek's view, the representatives of institutions only pretend to know more than citizens do, and only play mysterious in order to inspire fear and doubt. In *Communism*, they play an important part in society transformation and are defied by three categories of characters: the martyrs – such as dr. Milada Horáková, living torches Jan Palach and Josef Hlavatý, or Martin Luther King –, who lost their lives in their fight for freedom; the mystics, among them Ladislav Klíma, Jaroslav Hašek, Edvard Beneš and Alexander Dubček; and a separate category of politicians such as Andrej Babiš, Donald Trump and Emmanuel Macron, who represent the symptoms of the representative democracy's failure.

Dissolved society

Not only emotions should be dissolved, but also the lines between political parties, the mental states of Vachek's brother Peter, who paints overly magical paintings, or advertising with its manipulative techniques, says the philosopher, pedagogue and documentarist. In a world where adverse powers always fight each other, dissolution could be a variation of the incessant fluid transformation, where roles and positions flow one into another, looking for new structures. All structures partly are and partly are not at the same time. The story of Marie Švermová, a member of the Communist Party Central Committee who supported the case against dr. Horáková in the 1950s and was an advocate for her capital punishment, only to be imprisoned by her fellow party members herself and become a signatory of Charter 77, is a story of communism devouring itself. Footage of protests at the Wenceslas Square tells the story of democracy devouring itself. While in 1968 people got to the streets to support their elected representatives, today the civil society defies its own leaders and puts the old slogan "Thank you, now leave!" back to use. According to Vachek, the revolution of 1989 didn't introduce capitalism as a society of gangsters and global oligarchies, where there's atmosphere of fear and judges and journalists are a target.

Vachek shows history as a series of fragments, and visibly so in his collage of footage from protests, funerals, invasions or Wenceslas Square marches. As if the world were not continual, but rather a collection of spots-monades, i.e. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's fundamental units of existence. However, the world only appears to be chaotic and discontinual; it abides by the invisible principles of predestination, its nature is metaphysical. The creator imprints a clear order to the apparent chaos, a process that is fittingly reflected e.g. in the motive of a storehouse. The "store man" organizes and processes reality into orderly aisles and shelves stretching all the way up to the ceiling. The forklift and the conveyor belt are the metaphysical tools to establish order, to plant ideas to the right spots. Ideas are also put into right places by means of image flow and word flow, where there are the encyclopedically ordered lists of wars and genocides, names of Czechs for whom the revolution made it possible to become thieves, enumerations of religions, writers or bad films. It creates a dense net in which references to literature, theatre and visual arts are juxtaposed to those of politics, philosophy, history and religion, or to works both by oneself and by others.

Even though *Communism*, consisting of an exposition, a collision, a crisis and a catharsis, takes on a literary form and makes an impression of a dramatic construction, it doesn't create a metanarrative, but a metatext. Vachek's multilayer film essays are characteristic for their transtextuality and their

appropriation of texts, which they put into new contexts. If the work is supposed to reflect reality, which is unintelligible, it must be in itself incomplete, or infinite. That is why it doesn't offer any complete story or soothing answers. Using fragments of specific events, it depicts general phenomena and elicits their interpretations. In spaces in between words, images and ideas, it gets to the light. In spaces where there is nothing, it finds the unseizable and the invisible.

Citizen in the net

The discontinuous organization of the world and its unknowable nature is best reflected in a net structure that continues to grow, to generate new questions and create more nets in the minds of the audience. In Vachek's view, it is the function of an art work to confront, to disturb, to astound, in order to tear down the static mind structures and allow to see the continually transforming, fluid reality. The structure of *Communism*, introducing a net of images, words and ideas, is a dynamic organism similar to the human mind, or the society of social media. Figuratively speaking, the internet is a representation of the contemporary world's nervous system; its virtual character, its effects beyond or above the matter are an imitation of the metaphysical world.

According to Vachek, technologies will become a means to save democracy. Yet he makes contradictory comments on them. He is critical to cryptocurrencies, to the lack of transparency and the anonymity of corruption on the one hand, and the loss of anonymity on the other.

Face recognition technologies or swarms of drones falling from airplanes instead of ammunition are reminiscent of the Orwellian Big Brother, the internet and television made an ineffaceable effect on the life of civil society. It be the very same internet structure that will allow people to rule themselves without representatives or leaders, without violence or oppression some fifty or a hundred years from now. But until then, he says, there terrible things will happen and a free society will be bought with revolution and blood.

Vachek confirms his dark prognosis with the examples of several events from the last century. The fourth and final chapter deals with questions about the meaning of evil and suffering. Footage of Josef Smrkovský announcing to citizens that their country is being occupied, followed by oppressive and harrowing images of a living torch, the heavily burnt Josef Havlíček in his hospital room. When the president of the National Assembly announces to the population not to criticize the Soviet occupants and announces what restrictions of civil rights will be put in place by the government, there are cut ins of Hlavatý's tracheostomy and hands full of blisters. His reaction to the state of emergency is in direct contradiction with the standpoint of the state and the communist party representatives. The hospital footage awakens us from the metaphysical spiritual world into the painful physical reality. Despite the dark prognosis, however, it seems that Vachek still has faith in humanity and in a free and just society.

× Janis Prášil



The Painted Bird	(Nabarvené ptáče, Czech Republic – Slovakia – Ukraine 2019)
Written and Directed	Václav Marhoul
Cinematography	Vladimír Smutný
Cast	Petr Kotlár, Stellan Skarsgård, Udo Kier, Harvey Keitel, Julian Sands, Lech Dyblik, Aleksei Kravchenko and others
Runtime	169 min.
Distribution CZ	Bioskop
Release Date	12 September 2019

A Way Too Pretty Bird

The admirable zeal with which Václav Marhoul – director, screenwriter and producer – fought for his project *The Painted Bird* certainly deserves respect. It took several years to produce the film inspired by a controversial novel and the cast can boast world-renowned actors in supporting roles. Thanks to an admirably patient and daring sales strategy, the film was included in the Venice film festival main competition which only affirmed its place as a cinematic event of a scale Czech cinema is not used to.

Thanks to the director's obligingness, this text is being written before the film's world premiere at a time when there is no consensus regarding its quality. Despite that, *The Painted Bird* has already become a household name. The mainstream media are thrilled by a Czech film "conquering the world" and devote an above standard attention to it. Nevertheless, regular film viewers are a bit confused – legitimisation of a Czech film through its success at a prestigious festival is in our cinema a long-desired dream that seemed almost unreachable in the last few decades. Václav Marhoul as a producer can make the most of this anticipation. In one of the interviews, the project was introduced with the following words "epic film *The Painted Bird* will not hit the theatres for another month, but it is already clear it will rank among the most successful films of Czech cinema," and Marhoul just contentedly nodded.

In a certain sense it seems that it would be best if the project was never screened and we could be forever enchanted by an abstract notion of an epic work that is already nominally successful. We wanted a film competing at a prestigious festival – we got it! Why spoil the joy by watching it and exposing ourselves to the risk that we won't "like" it? What is our "liking" even worth in contrast to official and objective success that the film is celebrating? By the time this text reaches its first readers, the film will have been seen by many people and everyone will have decided whether they "like" *The Painted Bird* or not. But one can't get rid of the feeling that however certain it is the film will find satisfied viewers, it won't be able to reach the absoluteness and grandeur it is showing before the premiere. Not even the best film could.

Literal Opposite

Media circus aside, what is *The Painted Bird* actually like? First and foremost, it is a beautiful film. Black and white photography by winner of seven Czech Lions Vladimír Smutný fills the entire running length of 169 minutes with images you simply can't take your eyes off. One cannot say that the film passively submits to the mannerism of 1960s as some people were concerned after seeing the trailers. Some concrete solutions may remind of *Markéta Lazarová* (dir. František Vlácil, 1967), *Diamonds of the Night* (Démanty noci, dir. Jan Němec, 1964) and *Coach to Vienna* (Kočár do Vídně, dir. Karel Kachyňa, 1966), but at other times, Smutný doesn't hesitate to circle the film's heroes with his camera in a modern manner. The 77-year-old cinematographer simply uses his know-how and utilises all the experience gathered during his career spanning more than 50 years. His black and white palette is a sufficiently binding element for the chosen style to look compact. Smutný doesn't discover anything new, but within the film's concept, he does an incredible job and carries a big part of the film's positive experience on his shoulders.

His performance, however, is also a curse. "Beauty" is after all a word not many would expect to hear in connection to Jerzy Kosiński's novel. The novel is known for its brutality, chapter after chapter it reveals more terrifying episodes from the journey of a young boy witnessing the darkness of the 1940s somewhere in Eastern Europe scourged by Nazis, partisans, antisemitism and eventually by mere human malevolence. The child's narrator voice (even though it operates with certain detachment – as if an adult reminisced about how he perceived the world as a child) does not use many comparisons, metaphors and "embellishments", but cold-bloodedly lists one atrocity after another. It is this straightforwardness that forces so many readers to put the book aside. And it is also the reason why so many people have thought it inadmissible that *The Painted Bird* – contrary to the original claims by its author – is not only not autobiographical but likely also plagiarizes other published Polish testimonies from the war that Kosiński used for his book written in English. *The Painted Bird* doesn't come across as a "work of art" but rather as something "real". That's why so many readers perceived the



doubts about Kosiński's historical accuracy and truth as nearly a personal betrayal.

Václav Marhoul's approach to this delicate work is interesting in that it almost analogically transfers it to the silver screen and his adaptation to a certain extent resembles literal format. Its episodic structure is emphasized by being divided into nine named chapters. Except for necessary cuts, it changes very little. But with regards to the treatment of the story, it cannot be much more distant. Each moment of the film makes the impression that Marhoul primarily want-

ed to create a beautiful work of art. Pans of landscape covered in mist, silent but sculpturesque characters. All drastic scenes are filmed in the most considerate and delicate manner and are quickly over, we stick to silent landscapes rather than the atrocities happening in them. As mentioned above, Václav Smutný's photography is something that we cannot take our eyes off – but the essence of the novel makes it difficult for us not to avert our inner sight from the portrayed. In the film, it is not necessary to avert one's eyes, the film does it for us.





Where the novel was crushing, tormenting and merciless, Marhoul's film is mournful, sad and piteous. All the atrocities are still present, but it is almost remarkable how gently they are portrayed. A man hit by a sniper just falls to the ground with a tiny dot on his chest and that's it. One must allegedly suffer for beauty. In case of *The Painted Bird*, it is forbidden to suffer too much for beauty. Comparisons to *Come and See* (Idi i smotri, dir. Elem Klimov, 1985) and *The Red and the White* (Csillagosok, katonák, dir. Miklós Jancsó, 1967) can be drawn while recounting the plot, but not watching it. Many ethical questions come forward – was it sensible to adapt the novel with such a strong emphasis on fulfilling the notions of “beautiful film”?

By principle, it is definitely not a mistake when a film adaptation decides to treat the original material so distinctively and with an original artistic intent. But the problem is when such approach breaches the integrity of the original construction. The plot of the novel is structured as it is because the resulting effect should be disturbing, shocking and cruel. The meaning of the book's episodes lies in their naturalism that leads us all the way to the point. But Václav Marhoul's adaptation tones down a book that uses descriptions of utmost brutality to communicate. It would have been an interesting concept, had it not seemed that the only motivation for this change was to make a beautiful film.

Hard to Understand

Marhoul's second inorganic choice is the decision to omit the entire inner monologue of the main hero and most of the dialogues as well. In many respects, the book's main protagonist disappeared. The camera prefers adult characters, adapts to their height, follows their movements and often assumes their point of view. We see the events happening even though the boy is unconscious or not present in the scene.

The film's “artistic” appearance is far from a child's view of the world. Petr Kotlár is a talented boy, but the film doesn't single him out as the main protagonist.

The book is narrated by him, we see the events only through his eyes and we know most of the characters' motivations only because he says them out loud. And furthermore, when the hero loses and later regains his voice, it belongs to important plot motives. In the film, some viewers may not even notice that the boy stops speaking at a certain moment. Even when he could speak, he only said a few words anyway. It is rather humorous that in the book, the regaining of his voice was a triumphant moment of restoration of his identity – in the adaptation, the hero simply doesn't have the need to speak even when he can.

In search for ways how to communicate the plot, Marhoul needed to find methods how to create visual shortcuts for a complex text. One of the moments not anchored in the novel is a scene in which the boy uses his finger to write his name on a foggy window to indicate that despite everything, he hasn't forgotten who he is. In other scenes, Marhoul is not afraid of ostentatious gestures like when the hero laying on railroad tracks spreads his arms in what is an evident paraphrase of Jesus. At the beginning, the boy seems to be purer and more kind-hearted – he frees trapped birds, he brings crippled labourer his eyes (in the novel, he was too afraid to do it). At the end, on the other hand, he seems to be more aggressive and “shattered”, he even personally shoots a vulgar market vendor (in the book, instead of shooting, the main hero only watches as his friend derails a train in which the market vendor is supposedly travelling).

The book has no need for big gestures because we have enough information from the narrator to discover the “lesson” ourselves. Marhoul needs to be more resourceful. Some of his solutions look clumsy and lack nuances, but in the end,



non-ideal solutions are better than no solutions. The real problem is, however, that most of the commentary in the film is not accompanied by a visually interpreted equivalent. Only through the narrator, we find out that the main hero tries to be obedient at one moment, later pleads for God's mercy, then starts to believe in a children's version of Communist ideology and eventually is consumed by vengeance. Individual stops along his journey enable him to go through these phases. The film interprets only his final desire for revenge – until then, all his thoughts are hidden, and individual events form a sequence of unrelated scenes (this impression is underlined by frequent usage of fade-outs separating some scenes).

The main hero's thoughts not only often remain unknown, but it is often hard to comprehend what's going on. Bizarre is also the detail that individual chapters are named according to the characters the hero meets, but these characters are not named or addressed in the film in any way. An effort to overcome the narrator and voiceover is typical for a film adaptation, but *The Painted Bird* fails to do it. In some moments, it resembles an illustration, an incomplete visual guide for reading, rather than an individual piece of work. You can only understand deeper context when you know the book. That's why this article focuses so much on comparing the film with the novel. It is worth noting that apart from some minor changes, the events in the book and the film are identical. In the book, they took place in the context of a noticeable narrator and naturalistic scenes, the film, however, is missing these elements. Several inserted visual shortcuts put together a framework, but the rest of the film is composed merely of a sequence of scenes. Similar thing was done by David Cronenberg in *Cosmpolis* (2012) that also faithfully adapts a novel but ignores all the descriptions of the inner state of the characters. But the plot of *Cosmpolis* is much more self-contained and works well with dialogues.

The Painted Bird is a thin and seemingly straightforward book. But it makes a clever use of several elements built around its narrator. Marhoul's *The Painted Bird* is a heavy and monumentally looking work. It consumed the novel entirely and turned it into a film that is as beautiful and artistic as possible. And that is the reason why the film lacks the very reason why the book exists – the narrator, a young child lost in an inhuman environment. Marhoul's *Bird* doesn't have a point of view nor a real protagonist. It doesn't have the hallmark of "genuineness," it is an "artwork".

Reviews tend to be negative as they unfortunately reach the conclusion that *The Painted Bird* doesn't succeed in being an artwork. Mainly because it tries so much to be one and nothing else. But it is nevertheless successful as a "project", as a "task". The presence of a Czech film in the competition section a prestigious festival is undoubtedly positive. And in no sense can we expect it to perform poorly. It has an excellent cast, is skilfully shot and it shows an evident personal care about the result. There will surely be viewers who couldn't bear the harshness of the novel and who will be moved by the film as Marhoul's delicate approach will be an intensive and yet a bearable experience. At times comically accommodating interest of the media has an unpleasant aftertaste, but on the other hand – when was the last time we saw mainstream media interviewing a film sound engineer? In this case, it was possible. Václav Marhoul managed to prove that it makes sense to want to make a big and important film and if the distribution is handled right, it is possible to place it on the European festival market. And that's not given. *The Painted Bird* may not be a film that will change your mindset with its message, but it can maybe do so with its principle.

× Martin Svoboda

Karel, me and you	(Karel, já a ty, Czech Republic 2019)
Director and writer	Bohdan Karásek
Cinematography	Zdeněk Eliáš
Music	Miroslav Faderholz
Cast	Jenovéfa Boková, Miroslav Faderholz, Miloslav König, Marie Švestková, Petra Nesvačilová, Lukáš Bouzek, Petr Marek and others
Runtime	111 min.
Distribution CZ	Marienbad Film
Release date	14 November 2019

–How are you? –I don't know

Dušan, a musician, likes cooking goulash. All he needs is a big pot. He saves both energy and money and prepares several days' worth of food. The same efficiency can be seen in Bohdan Karásek's films (see the interview in the *Film a doba* magazine 3/2019). His moderately long films *Lucie* (Lucie, 2011) and *Love Songs* (Milostné písně, 2013) and the new feature film *Karel, me and you* (Karel, já a ty) are intimate tragicomedies taking place in an apartment, starring the director's friends, and rooted in apt dialogues. As is the case with Dušan's goulash, these are no emergency solutions, and unlike in the above-mentioned gastronomic metaphors, the result is not tacky but a work of somebody who can make effective use of the tools at their disposal. At the same time,

the limited number of the tools contributes to the compact final product.

For a viewer longing for a film full of problems and solutions, it can be frustrating to watch Karásek's successful attempt for a Czech mumblecore where almost nothing happens and more or less nothing is solved. This lack of "fulfillingness" is one of the things thanks to which *Karel, me and you* is a true reflection of the lives and thoughts of the contemporary young urban intellectuals. They are unsatisfied in their relationships and jobs mainly because they have too many (not too little) opportunities. Despite its minimalism and the small scale of the generation Y, the film deals with many universal topics – similarly to the "philosophical" walk-and-talk films by Eric Rohmer and Richard Linklater. The key



aspect is the constant existential anxiety that we could be missing the “right” life.

The main character, linking together all the participants of the constantly changing interwoven relationships, is Saša. She is about to be thirty and pass her bar exam. She lives with Karel, a teacher of mathematics and physics. They understand each other the best when at least one of them is drunk. When sober, Saša realizes the relationship does not give her what she wants. Yet she is not sure what exactly it is she wants. On the other hand, she cares about Karel too much to leave him. Her breaking up with him is typical for all the “solutions” the film characters choose for their problems – it is only a partial break-up. She moves to her friend Iva. One evening, she bumps into Dušan, her old flame and the first of her true reminders that she could have chosen a different path in the past and been happier. Or maybe not.

Uncertainty is the state of mind characteristic, with only short breaks, for all the people in the film; the only exception is Iva who has no doubts and no self-reflection and who is always in a good mood, apparently because she does not focus on herself but rather on the others. For example on Saša's too fragrant perfume. This highlights the introspective nature of her friend and Dušan who, unlike Iva, both know that they do not know. They cannot reach permanent understanding because they are constantly seeking the certainty, inherently impossible due to the nature of their relationships. This mind-set of theirs prevents them from ignoring certain things in the pursuit of their happiness. They can be neither together, nor without each other, they break up and start again over and over, look for themselves and for somebody who will allow them to be themselves.

Having expected that they will be wise and awaken when they are mature, the heroes are still as lost as they were in their first teenage relationships. But would it not be resignation to accept the things as they are? What if the life is really just about the never-ending “flitting between work, depression, and therapy,” as Dušan summarizes it? The constant dissatisfaction with the chaotic human existence may be exhausting, yet it may be the motif for the attempts to expand one's boundaries and develop. The ceaseless critical examination of one's states and relationships that the characters can name but not solve is the driving force of the narrative.

Karásek captures the unstable nature (not only) of relationships both in his natural dialogues speaking of his ex-

traordinary sense for rhythm and other nuances of human speech, and in the natural links between the situations, precisely learnt through observation. The situations pile up without any fabricated twists, huge conflicts, and overly affected relationship changes. *Karel, me and you* captures the lives of the characters in a seemingly unorganized manner, without meeting the common demand for a clearly organized dramatic work with developing characters and a strong conclusion. It is a work of an artist of such a huge talent that one does neither hear nor see the screenwriter behind the dialogues and the events thanks to which the characters meet. The authentic Prague locations and the naturally-playing actors, offering the viewers parts of themselves, contribute to the spontaneity and fortuity preventing the two-hour-long film from becoming predictable and clumsy. Each of the characters verbalizes their fumbling in their own way, with their own gestures, dictions, and sense of humour. They do not speak in a common voice, which is why the film does not seem to be a work of an author managing everything.

This genuineness, so sporadic in the Czech film industry, is an exceptional value of its own. Yet there is more the film can offer. By imitating reality, Karásek speaks about the fleeting nature of relationships, dreams that have not come true, and the never-ending life cycles, without blatantly presenting us with those “big life truths.” One of the life cycles comes to an end when Iva returns a hair-dryer that her friend has left at her place. Saša has already bought a new one. “Well, you'll have two then,” says Iva, amused by the birth of a hair-dryer collection. In the light of the previous events and with no explanation needed, this exchange works as a metaphoric commentary of the relationships we tend to change like the hair-dryers, in the same matter-of-fact, impatient manner. And this is just one of the numerous proofs of Karásek's ability to skilfully tackle something universal with something seemingly trivial.

× Martin Šrajer



The Sound Is Innocent	(Czech Republic – France – Slovakia 2019)
Director	Johana Ožvold
Writers	Johana Ožvold, Lukáš Csicsely
Cinematography	Šimon Dvořáček
Music	Martin Ožvold
Runtime	70 min.
Distribution CZ	Cinémotif Films
Release date	3 October 2019

Sound Is Innocent. And whose fault is it?

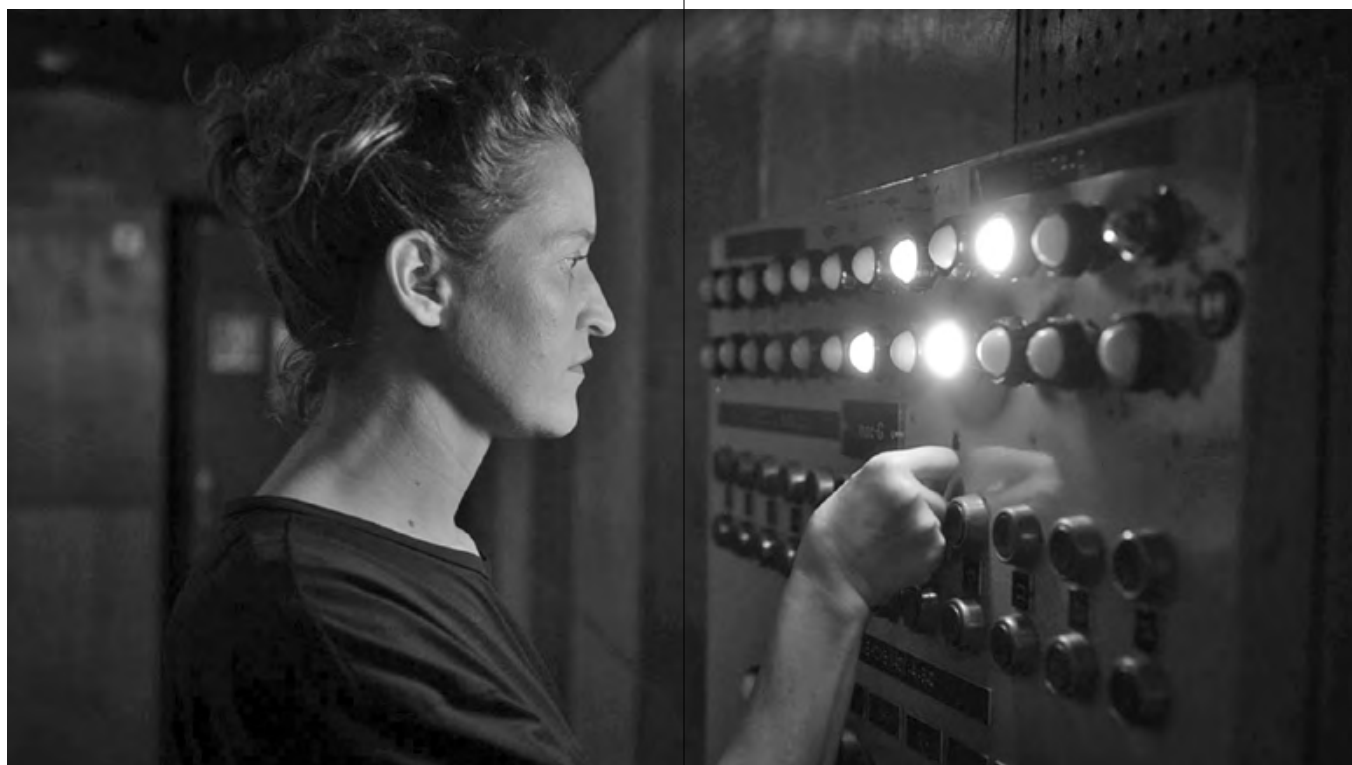
The modern age requires a deconstruction of the old times. Analogue is replaced with digital. Physical presence is replaced with language. Beautiful machines suffer from painful falls into the pit of history, making place for new ways of sound perception and creation. To keep their magic beauty in the world for just a little longer – as a remnant of the gorgeous visions of a future once possible. To record the times when pioneers were changing the world. This is the desire the new documentary by Johana Ožvold (Švarcová) tries to convey.

That is why there are old TVs and computers talking through the eminent names of both the past (Pierre Schaeffer – the founder of the Parisian research centre GRM) and

the present (Julian Rohrer from Robert Schumann Hochschule Düsseldorf, François J. Bonnet, John Richards from Dirty Electronic, Alberto de Campo, and Steve Goodman aka Kode9). Some of them even work side to side in the rooms where the televisions are located.

The shooting of the co-production of the Czech Republic, Slovakia and France started in 2017 and had been preceded by many months of research. The deep knowledge of the topic is the greatest strength of the film which takes place in the best venue possible - in the RTVS⁰¹ building (The Pyr-

01 Radio and Television of Slovakia.



amid), a magic museum open to stories. A labyrinth revealing the hidden, the forgotten, the usually unavailable. The empty offices become a mystic space seeking for a new purpose, thus reflecting the notion of overcoming the traditional concept of music.

The form follows the function. In this case, it is a thoroughly thought-through, multi-layered piece of work, based on the relationship between the man and his machines.

The prominent figures talking are not just the usual "talking heads." The camera records the world that is captured by lens circled with other heads, simulating common work process. Each figure represents certain innovative approach to their work with sound and is met with a slightly different formal attitude. Despite that, everything follows the elementary wires. The process of change is gradually culminating, climaxing with the most important turn of all that comes along with Johnny Richards, the dirty man who is not afraid to build beautiful new machines from parts originally intended for a different purpose, and to play with them as if they are the rarest object of communication. He only speaks to us via the medium of television, plunging into work. It is for the first time the TV picture is accompanied with sounds produced at the same time – not as the primary goal, but as the result of a social engagement.

The formal sound work by Adam Voneš and Martin Ožvold is very important as well, of course – for example the voice resonating in the space when Kode9 starts talking about resonances, Johana's voice emerging from the magnetophon tapes played by François J. Bonnet, and many other instances. The dot matrix printer introducing the creators might be perceived as a kind of aesthetic fetish at the first glance but then you realize that is actually a perfect fit for the environment.

The sound is innocent on its own. The commentaries of the narrator/director sound just as innocent. The truth is, though, that they rather harm the film as a whole. It is as if someone has torn them out of the embrace of the naïve girls paraphrased in the Ivo Radio and misplaced them in the rhizomatic links of the otherwise very fine documentary. Is she supposed to be a muse? A guide through the unseizable world she puts every effort into creating so that it would be available for the wide public? An artist lost in her own questions, looking for answers by quizing the masters of the art? One thing we cannot say is that Johana Ožvold has not been enthusiastic about her topic for a long time, both from the

practical (artistic) and the theoretical points of view.⁰² Nevertheless, this feature documentary seems to reflect certain inability to see beyond the enthusiasm since it is on the verge of the impossible to offer something this specialized to the public. An audience of the same enthusiasm could see her as naïve Alice lost in the world of sound perceptions. Fortunately, the idea that hard historical facts must be counter-balanced with a poetic approach may be enough for a less critical audience.

But the sound is truly innocent on its own. It is always the question of who tries to grasp it. It can be used for searches, games, and military purposes alike; it can both move and paralyse the body. Steve Goodman (Kode9) knows this very well and his comments are accompanied with the sounds of breaking glass and with sound mirrors projected in the background. There is also a new medium: a mobile phone on which the talking figure can watch recordings of what precedes (or will precede in the edited film) their part.

The sound is innocent on its own, and the film culminates towards the final point: the disappearance of the man. A hot question about the future: Can music exist when men cease to exist? They may become invisible – parts of pre-programmed numbers controlling all the originally distributed works, both kept and re-materializing in their creations. An education will be necessary, though. And it is necessary for this documentary as well. It is almost indispensable to have a previous knowledge of the topic and the industry before going to the cinema or turning on the television if the viewers want to grasp the film as a multi-layered whole. Otherwise, they can easily get lost in the secret passages or entangle in the seemingly unapproachable snarl of cables.

× Štěpánka Ištvánková

⁰² Among other things, she has shot a 13-episode-long TV series of the very fine *Interviews about the Sound* (Rozhovory o zvuku) with Michal Pěchouček, Zbyněk Baladrán, Roman Štětina and many other artists.



A Certain Kind of Silence	(Tiché doteky, Czech Republic – Netherlands – Latvia 2019)
Director	Michal Hogenauer
Writers	Michal Hogenauer, Jakub Felcman
Cinematography	Gregg Telussa
Cast	Eliška Křenková, Jacob Jutte, Monic Hendrickxová, Roeland Fernhout, Sigrid ten Napelová and others
Runtime	96 min.
Distribution CZ	Aerofilms
Release date	3 October 2019

The rules of pliability

Where are the long-awaited hopes of the Czech film industry? Director Michael Hogenauer has been often considered one of them in the recent years after his graduating film *Tambylles* (Tambylles, 2011) premiered in the Cinéfondation at the Festival de Cannes. There was some commotion about the news that his long-awaited feature film debut was co-financed by the Czech Republic, the Netherlands and Latvia – under the motto that “co-production is a way of doing it.” Hogenauer has repeatedly proved himself to be a film-maker who understands film as a construct stirring emotional, physical, and cognitive responses. This definitely does not exclude the possibility of searching for and finding hidden meanings, though, especially of the ever-favourite socio-political nature. Before mapping them, one should focus on how it is that *A Certain Kind of Silence* (Tiché doteky) arouses all those confusing and unpleasant emotions.

When the film was screened at the Karlovy Vary Festival, it was believed to follow Michael Haneke’s aesthetics. This notion was the result of Hogenauer’s comments, the topic of his bachelor theses (*Film Language and Fear in Michael Haneke’s Films*), and the clear tendencies palpable in his previous works. Both directors are seditious in their abuse of the core of the viewers’ experience – the psychological

processes which can be both complicated and automatized. Haneke is considered to be “a Stanley Kramer of the European film art” by the festival enthusiasts, mainly for his focus on the viewers’ empathy and the ways in which we identify with and absorb feelings and model situations. He has proven that these relationships work even when reflected from distanced stories and unusually construed plots.

This were the methods of film narration Hogenauer has been interested in since his university studies. He puts himself into the role of a manipulator with the viewers’ perception and sympathies. His *Children Watching Night Trains* (Děti sledující noční vlaky, 2008) are an unpleasantly fragmented story full of flash-forwards, mysterious in the very beginning. His film *Tambylles* is a mockumentary questioning the essential beliefs about the film text perception. In their fragmentarity, Hogenauer’s student works might have been inspired by Haneke’s *The Seventh Continent* (Der siebente Kontinent, 1989) or *Code Unknown* (Code inconnu, 2000). His new film is closer to Haneke’s recent works, such as *The White Ribbon* (Das weiße Band, 2009).

A Certain Kind of Silence follows young Míša (Eliška Křenková) who has left her home in the Czech Republic to be an au-pair. She finds a job with a wealthy married couple who is very demanding about raising up their nine-year-old



Sebastian (Jacob Jutte). The second narrative layer shows Míša being interrogated at the police station. Even though this layer is not re-visited very often, the interrogator's questions about Sebastian cast a sinister light on the past events.

Because of that, it is important for Hogenauer to manage the questions we ask ourselves and the thoughts we have. He does that using dead ends, omissions, and postponed exposition. One of the first and most stifling questions is the reason behind Míša's interrogation. We wait for the moment when everything gets clear, and we are left with at least two disappointments. On a more general level, we may ask about the family's behaviour. Why are other locals from the suburb so weird? What is their code of conduct? Is it supposed to be a metaphor since everything looks like a dystopia from a parallel world? The director deliberately leaves us to our own thoughts.

The uneasiness culminates at the moment when Hogenauer deprives us of the structures of empathy. In the beginning, Míša is presented as the viewers' ally. When she Skypes with her boyfriend, we see her past and hear about her plans to become independent. Her efforts and energy are in direct opposition to Sebastian's parents. Their confrontation arises from their inhuman behaviour – their need to schematically repeat the daily chores – and their overbearing control over the whole household. They start calling Míša Mia, which is only seemingly innocent, and disturb her personal space. The director also makes us wonder how Sebastian fits into all of this since he is disobedient when it comes to the rules, yet he breaks his au-pair's laptop and calls her names.

On the other hand, Míša is not just a poor girl; she transforms throughout the film and her attitude towards her employers and the governing rules changes. The initially indifferent girl becomes defiant and, later, submitting – and each of these turns happens after half an hour in the film. In the last thirty minutes, we do not feel to be allied with her any more – there is an ambiguous relationship between her and the viewer, just like in Hogenauer's older works. It may sound too rushed for Míša to turn into a strict governess, but only if you (wrongly) consider *A Certain Kind of Silence* to be a psychological study. In the end, we also see Sebastian in a new light as he becomes our main ally. An unexpected twist makes us question even this relationship, though. There is no

reward for our empathy towards the characters. Such a step has not been taken by many in the Czech film industry since the Velvet Revolution.

The disillusion does not even allow us to enjoy the fact that we have finally learnt all the mysteries. The epilogue then shows us that Hogenauer does not want to present us the gloomy events as if they were the natural rules of the world in the way Haneke does it. Despite this "compromise," *A Certain Kind of Silence* is not a film that will leave you at ease, which might be a proof of the speculations mentioned in the beginning of the review.

× Marek Koutesh



Old-Timers	(Stařici, Czech Republic – Slovakia 2019)
Director and writer	Martin Dušek, Ondřej Provozník
Cinematography	Lukáš Milota
Music	Matouš Hejl, Miroslav Srnka
Cast	Jiří Schmitzer, Ladislav Mrkvička, Dušan Kaprálik, Milena Steinmasslová, Michal Suchánek and others
Runtime	90 min.
Distribution CZ	CinemArt
Release date	17 October 2019

Is there any sense in revenge?

The directors of the debut feature film *Old Timers* (Stařici), Martin Dušek and Ondřej Provozník, may be known to us for their award-winning documentary *A Town Called Hermitage* (Poustevna, das ist Paradies, 2007). They have now once again proved their talent for human fates full of ironies, for peculiar characters, and for dramatically effective stories, this time in the form of a highly intimate drama. The story follows two old men (Jiří Schmitzer, 70, and Ladislav Mrkvička, 80, both look similarly decrepit), former political prisoners, who have decided to punish the communist criminal who had sent them to prison for a long time in the end of the 1940s.

It is obviously not the only film of this kind; Pavel Göbl's dialogue-based tragicomedy *Sunrise Supervising* (Odborný dohled nad východem slunce, 2014) presents us with a similar topic, but *Old Timers* are unique in the unprecedentedly fierce protagonists, the two coffin dodgers, so to speak. Schmitzer's Resistance fighter who always takes his full dress English uniform with him is even a wheelchair user – and despite that and his friend's recent death, he still executes the sentence.

The two men travel in an old caravan and look for the address of the men who hurt them so profoundly (and

caused deaths of many innocent people) – an ideal base for capturing the limits of the old age. Mrkvička's hairy pensioner accompanied by two dogs is somewhat deaf and sometimes rash in reacting (for example when he meets with a daughter of the wanted criminal); Schmitzer's hero is still a soldier able to give strict orders and endure many difficulties, for example with urinating, being in the wheelchair, and transporting it. He has even flown over with a huge suitcase with a rifle. Surprisingly, the rifle only gets confiscated at the Prague airport...

The story is rather predictable and it can be said that the two protagonist can find a solution to any situation. They are especially resourceful when it comes to locating the wanted person. The directors (and screenwriters) try to lighten the story with various funny, awkward things, often in the form of curt acts and terse comments when the characters talk to each other and comment their health states and possibilities; to name one of these things, there is their ironic self-reflection when it comes to their forgetfulness that may cause them to forget an important piece of information should they fail to write it down immediately. Starting a car without a key, peeping inside court files not available for public (the villain was acquitted!), going through old places and new addresses – everything is grotesquely exaggerat-



ed and helplessly embarrassing, especially in the character of Mrkvička; Schmitzer's avenger acts in cold blood and can wait for the right moment.

There are two events showing us the differences in their self-control: When the villain's daughter asks what harm her father has done to them, Mrkvička's hero pushes her in an almost frenzy manner and she breaks glass door. At this moment, it is not clear whether she wants to protect her father or just to know his dark past. Schmitzer's character is far more purposeful: in the old people's home where the wanted villain lives, the avenger hides for many hours and even pacifies a young policeman guarding his room to get to the most-likely demented man who does not seem to understand the crimes he is accused of...

Lukáš Milota, the cameraman, presents us with a rather gloomy and bleak view with no sun and several night sceneries; he fully submits to the concept of giving as much space to the two main protagonists as possible – and both Schmitzer and Mrkvička, with an emphasis on the latter, are very impressive in their roles. That is why we often watch only their acts and talks, with Dušek and Provazník not attempting to make the story more dynamic or special. There is even an almost TV-production poetics: the shoots are long and mainly static and the camera moves mainly when the characters

move, for example when they are looking for the dogs who have escaped from the caravan, or when the wheelchair is on the move.

What else is there to say about *Old Timers*? The ethos of the story should be appreciated, pointing out that some (criminal) acts cannot be neither passed over without any punishment, nor forgotten because beyond a limit of some sorts, it is impossible to forgive. On the other hand, the author's approach is needlessly lecturing and despite everything mentioned above, almost flat in all the descriptions. Both the humour of exaggerating and the moving scenes are rather a camouflage for the tragic and serious, but overly schematic and straightforward message.

× Jan Jaroš



Over the Hills	(Dálava, Czech Republic 2019)
Director	Martin Mareček
Writers	Martin Mareček, Tomáš Bojar
Cinematography	Jiří Málek
Film Editing	Josef Krajbich
Runtime	76 min
Distribution CZ	AČFK
Release date	7 November 2019

Seeking a balance

“This is sooo stupid,” says 16-year-old Gríša in the beginning of the second half of the film, confronted with the absurd situation he and his father Vít just got into. They have been travelling from Brno to Russia to see Gríša’s mother and sister. They have made it, but the picaresque journey to the female members of their family has not come to an end. As it turns out, the distance between Vít and the mother of his children was not only a physical one. To overcome this emotional distance will be even more demanding than to cover several hundred kilometres with an apathetic teenager sitting in the car. The difficulties Vít faces when trying to find a common ground with his son is a proof that the greatest distance often separates us from the ones around us.

With its almost detective structure and natural development of the motifs, the intimate documentary road movie by Martin Mareček reminds us of staged films. And the story of the former financial advisor who became father at the age of twenty was actually originally supposed to be a staged film. Having written several versions of the screenplay (together with Tomáš Bojar and Marek Šindelka), though, the author of *Source* (Zdroj, 2005), *Auto*mate* (Auto*Mat, 2009) and *Solar Eclipse* (Pod sluncem tma, 2011) decided not to shoot a complicated bildungsroman and to focus only on one level of the remarkable life of Vít Kalvoda in the form of a slightly staged documentary. Despite that, the film takes into account the protagonist’s past and the narration is not solely linear. The home videos, the family photo album, and the



letter Vít writes to his “lost” daughter take us back in time. Yet the family mosaic is not presented as a whole but rather in pieces, which is more effective when one wants to enhance the viewer’s curiosity. One photo for example shows Vít standing on his head. It seems that this was inspired by his partner who is also present in other situations when Vít stands on his head. The financial world Vít used to be part of materializes in his emphasis on polished shoes – a symbol of a status of a kind.

When free-spirited Vít met his girlfriend among the Russian hippies and started a family with her, he started focusing on his career. Even though he started working to take care of his family, he grew away from his beloved ones due to the demanding work schedule, and his wife and daughter left him. Since then, he has awakened and found his inner piece thanks to Zen Buddhism and Carl Gustav Jung. Despite the fact that there is a short quotation from Jung’s *Red Book*, there is something archetypal in Vít’s odyssey. On his journey towards an unknown – possibly a metaphor to a journey into the depths of one’s soul –, he strives to find what his wife seems to have found thanks to her religion: salvation and forgiveness.

He wanders around, often at night, but does not find what he is looking for. He is only met with silence, ignorance, and empty houses. The locals, his torch, and his Sat Nav are of no help. The pieces do not fit into the picture. Similarly to the game of Tetris Vít plays in one of the poetic, yet matter-of-fact night scenes on his laptop. It is as if he is so focused on meeting his daughter again that he does not notice how his son is changing. The suspenseful search for the mother they embark upon in Russia is an adventure and a game for the son, an opportunity to use the strategic thinking and knowledge gained through films and computer games. Finally, he spends time with his father doing what he likes, and he feels useful.

When looking for his absent mother whose face is not clear even in the family photos and videos, the father and the son become unknowingly closer – only in a foreign country full of people speaking a foreign language. Even though the females who are the reason behind the journey remain a mystery and there is little hope of reconciliation, it does not mean that the two protagonists have not found anything and have not developed. There is still hope that Vít will take upon himself his father role and that at least one relationship will improve.

Mareček had thoroughly studied the behaviour of the social actors before the shooting, meaning that he could then focus on those gestures, comments and situations that speak about the relationship of the two protagonists towards the world most clearly and that capture the changes in their interactions in great detail. The apt moments of which the dramaturgically compact film consists contribute to the smooth narration without any blind spots and superfluous excursions. Both Vít and Gríša strive for the same; nevertheless, it seems throughout most of their journey that they are both heading in their own direction, and Mareček manages to capture this with their positions and movements within the frames. During one of the refreshments stops, the annoyed son is sitting in the car, eating a pickle while the father is standing outside, eating a sausage, and unsuccessfully trying to persuade the son to get out and walk around. In other scene, we see Gríša going back and forth on a curb while Vít is calmly leaning against his car. It is only in Russia this “skewness” changes into a parallelism of both moves and thoughts, at least seemingly.

Mareček’s frank, sensitive, funny, and gloomy documentary shows us what a long and complicated process it is to find a balance in our relationships. Similarly to a handstand, a slight imbalance is all it takes for everything to crumble down. Yet it is worth it to try it again and again – just for the moment of total happiness about which Vít sings with his Russian friends.

× Martin Šrajter



Owners	(Vlastníci, Czech Republic 2019)
Director and writer	Jiří Havelka
Cinematography	Marek Žiaran
Cast	Tereza Ramba, Vojtěch Kotek, Dagmar Havlová, Jiří Lábus, Pavla Tomicová, Ondřej Malý, Klára Melíšková, David Novotný, Kryštof Hádek, Stanislav Majer, Andrej Polák, Jiří Černý, Maria Sawa, Ladislav Trojan, Halka Třešňáková
Runtime	97 min.
Distribution CZ	CinemArt
Release date	21 November 2019

Our own

Since it is generally acknowledged that the greatest weakness of the Czech film tends to be the screenplay, it is not surprising that film-makers recruited from the theatre scene tend to be relatively successful as their works usually offer quality on the levels of screenplay, dramaturgy, and direction. This could also apply to the stage director Jiří Havelka who has made his film debut with an adaptation of his play *The Fellowship of the Owners* (Společenstvo vlastníků). The production of Havelka's theatre company "Vosto5" has been awarded with the Mark Ravenhill Award and the Theatre Newspaper Award and the play has been produced by other theatres as well.

Having been created along with the theatre one, the film screenplay only differs in small details enabled by the

means of the film. The dialogue-based tragicomedy follows all the three classical unities – the simple story takes place in a closed room in real time. The author was inspired by his own experience of a member of an apartment owners association. He comprised the years of experience into a single meeting of the apartment owners association, with the fundamental dramatic situation being an attempt to deal with the serious disrepair of the association's building. The initially absurd farce gradually turns into a drama leading to an inauspicious end as the motivations become clear and both old and new grievances are revealed.

Havelka labours under the belief that many of us know such meetings and recognize our beloved ones or even ourselves in his conforming characters. The fourteen participants



can be seen as work as *pars pro toto*; the somewhat schematic characters, reacting in a predictable way, represent various segments of the society: avid idealists, practical dabs, lame simpletons, sly conmen, mistrustful gossipmongers, fans of the socialist order, and disassociated philosophers. The heterogeneous group cannot agree on a solution because the attempts to save the building get overruled by selfish interests of the artful fellows who only care about their personal gains.

Even though Mrs. Zahrádková, the chairwoman and a young mother-of-three (Tereza Ramba) and her wimpy record-keeping husband (Vojtěch Kotek) try to push through the repairs and reach a compact, their thought-through attempts get drowned in the hysteria that negatively affects not only the meeting but their marriage as well. The pedantic representative of an inspecting authority, Mrs. Roubíčková (Klára Melišková) slows the meeting down with her bureaucratic notes. The strict compliance with the legal barriers causes the voting for a scrutineer to end in a *Catch-22* dilemma: Who will count the votes for the one who will then count the votes? The numerous repairs that should be carried out are an opportunity for the jack-of-all-trades Mr. Novák (Ondřej Malý), a protector of Mrs. Procházková (Pavla Tomicová) who increases the value of her property by letting it out profitably. Mr. Švec (David Novotný) whose naivety borders with dullness turns out to be quite useful for the sly hustler-brothers, the Čermáks (Kryštof Hádek, Stanislav Majer), and their hanky-panky of power. The slow-witted but nose-pettifogger Mrs. Horváthová (Dagmar Havlová) notices every suspicious rustle in the hallways. She is constantly humiliated by her ex-partner, Mr. Kubát (Jiří Lábus) who misses the allegedly “better times” when “people trusted each other” yet is angrily opposing everybody. Thanks to the skilfulness improved during the communist regime, he has more or less managed to seize the flat of the taciturn professor, Mr. Sokol (Ladislav Trojan) who only sits throughout the meeting, being miles away. The new-coming Mr. Bernášek (Jiří Černý) and his pregnant wife (Maria Sawa) shyly support the plan of the Zahrádkas but can be easily manipulated in any way and watch the course of the events passively. The obliging Mr. Nitranský (Andrej Polák) gets driven out by the constants attacks against his ethnicity and sexual orientation.

The constructive proposals to order new water meters, build a lift, and sell the attic to get money for the repairs are not reflected since everybody is disgusted at the hollow haggling. Even though we repeatedly hear the characters

asking for jovial neighbours, the atmosphere is full of hatred and poison and the verbal slaps turn into real ones eventually. The varied group has only two things in common: xenophobia and lazy unwillingness to take over responsibility. The narrow interests of the characters without any common goal and the escalating conflicts are an opportunity for the strong-handed and sly crooks, the twins who promise to solve everything. How come that the so-far circumspect apartment owners lose their good sense and sign a blank cheque for the twins? Finally, somebody is going to “manage it like a company!” These are the words of Dagmar Havlová, starring as a comical character after a long break from acting, that become a bitter memento in the end.

The attractive cast was a good decision not only from the commercial point of view. The ensemble of the great solitaires participates in a skilfully homogeneous concert with nobody overshadowed and nobody standing out, and thanks to the fitting dialogues and improvisations, it reminds us of the naturally-behaving non-actors. Attempting not to shoot a “theatre performance”, Havelka maintains the main theatre dimensions of the play but his film language is not always successful. The long shots are more dynamic thanks to the cut-ins into the individual households (cinematography by Marek Žiaran), a visual aid adding some details about the owners of the apartments and also serving as a brief epilogue. The slow motion technique is more or less acceptable in the scene with the false baby alarm but not so much in the opening scene. The seemingly alien, opulent music of the Czech baroque composer Jan Dismas Zelenka is in a great counterpoint to the just as Czech small-mindedness of the characters and their behaviour, though.

In his attempt to capture this smallness, Havelka sometimes creates caricatures, and one must stay on top of things when it comes to the forced and shallow, wannabe-humorous lines. Despite that, I consider *Owners* (*Vlastníci*) the most distinctive comedy of this year. They are straightforward in portraying the situation and are more than just a “community satire.” Overlapping into more general aspects of life, this simple allegory captures the milieu of a society that underwent the Velvet Revolution thirty years ago. The climactic scenes follow in the tradition of Stroupežnický’s play *Our Swaggers* (*Naši furianti*), the absurd drama, and the films by the screenwriter Jaroslav Papoušek.

× Zdena Mejzliková



BOOKS

A milestone of Czech writing about films

Petr Gajdošík's monography dedicated to František Vláčil, published by Miloš Fryš in his publishing house Camera obscura in Příbram, was first introduced in a selection of bookshops last year just before Christmas. It amazes at first sight with its volume of nearly 900 pages, not to mention the voluminous and thoughtfully conceived photographic material, which eventually didn't make it to the book because of the startling attitude of the heir of the copyright. The damage is particularly grave for Vláčil, who got his nickname of the "poet of the silver screen" mainly for his original directing signature, consisting in great part of the visual quality of the image, a separate theme in itself, symbolic and emotionally impressive. Where there could be excerpts from his mythical screenplays, in which the visibly talented Vláčil made sketches of shots or even whole scenes, or comparisons of those sketches with the final form of the films, photo documentation of their making, or selected items from his estate, there are no more than eight photographs accompanying the text. With the exception of two minor ones from behind the scenes, these are full-page portraits of Vláčil, documenting the constants and the transformations of his face from his boyhood until old age, inviting the reader to examine with a questioning look the adding wrinkles, carved by his complicated and in many ways bitter fate.

In this optics, the portraits are closely related to one of the three levels on which it is possible to read Gajdošík's book. First of all, it is an account of a drama lived by an artist to the bone, whose obsession with work, along with significant pressure he put on himself as well as his co-workers, constantly drove him into stressful situations and even conflicts: the ones he had with his co-workers, or those fuelled by the atmosphere of the era, or eventually the conflict he got into with himself. The pages of the book progressively bring Vláčil back to life as a human being who is able to generate incredible strength and energy when fulfilling his film visions, but whose fragile soul suffered hardship and withered away under the weight of pressures that came from the outside. Gajdošík doesn't take recourse to excessive psychological analyses, he is very restrained and moderate in depicting the director's private life, yet it is possible to gather from the text, without it being put explicitly, that



↳ Petr Gajdošík: *František Vláčil. Life and work* (František Vláčil. Život a dílo). Příbram, Svatá Hora: Camera obscura 2018, 875 p. ISBN 978-80-903678-9-0.

Vláčil was going through episodes of depression and desolating loneliness and that it was both his strain from work and mainly the bleak twenty years of political normalization, setting in when Vlácilil was at the peak of his creative energy, that greatly contributed to the breakdown of his marriage, the estrangement from his sons and his sinking into alcohol addiction.

At this point, the book shifts from a powerful personal story to another important level of Gajdošík's text. This second level allows the author, who is mainly interested in the circumstances under which Vlácilil's position changed in the Barrandov studios, and the specifics of how the realizations of his films went, to use a large amount of thoroughly verified and documented facts and conclusive testimonies to compose an extensive treatise about the functioning of the state sponsored film studio during more than three decades (1956–1989). The normalization era occupies more than three hundred pages filled with a detailed account of totalitarian practices, party directives and all kinds of "measures", based on which directors, writers and workers of other film professions were almost systematically prevented from doing their jobs. The text also implies that incompetence and despotism of those in charge played an important part in wasting all that creative potential. One can unreservedly nod to Martin Šrajer, stating in his review of Gajdošík's book that the production practice in Barrandov during the normalization era "has never been examined in detail in a publication until now, except for the *Kinematografie zapomnění* by Štěpán Hulík, and especially not with use of concrete examples."⁰¹ But the depiction of the conditions in the Barrandov studios is not always so gloomy. The book section entitled "Barrandov", with years specified in the brackets (1956–1970), offers a somewhat more favourable image, especially when talking about the late 1960s. There's no talk of complete creative freedom, as often related by false myths of the "golden sixties" still today: even then, the authorities in power exercised ideological control, the film production process was submitted to a multi-level approval procedure, and after that, there were still obstacles on the film's way to distribution. Vlácilil's projects from that decade did not essentially encounter such hindrances, but in his detailed description of their creation, Gajdošík still compiles a long list of complications that made practically any stage of the filmmaking difficult for the director, especially when making the generally challenging *Marketa Lazarova* (*Marketa Lazarová*, 1967). And yet, the reader cannot lose the impression that people were closer to each other while working, that they shared common ideals, and that the "handmade" production benefited the work at least as much as advanced technologies do today. The author's accounts of the dealings during the approval sessions over the first and second part of *Marketa Lazarova* inspires outright nostalgia: the then ideological-artistic counsels expressed their appreciation in such a way, one would think the members were rather poets spiritually kindred with Vlácilil than ideological controllers and censors.⁰²

01 Martin Šrajer, „František Vlácilil. Život a dílo“. Filmový přehled, 6. 3. 2019. Available online: <<http://www.filmovyprehled.cz/cs/revue/detail/frantisek-vlakil-zivot-a-dilo>> (cit. 6 May 2019)

02 Gajdošík uses the favourable assessments of the screenplay for *Marketa Lazarova*, written by Ladislav Fikar, Břetislav Pojárk, Josef Träger, Karel Kraus and Ota Hofman, and quotes the latter on page 152 as follows: "What a pale and languid impression civilisation makes compared to the robust characters of this story, who have blood and presentiment, and anger, and passion, and revenge. Until they perish. No, until they are crushed. Until they crush themselves. I cannot analyse my own feelings. (...) There are mountains that you can never ascend, but you can watch and admire them from a distance. For me, that is the case of this film ballad. It would be ridiculous to delude myself that I am able to write a dramaturgical analysis. I read humbly and I will be a humble spectator."

The conditions in which Vlácilil made films for four decades are of course inseparably connected with his work, but on its third level of reading, Gajdošík's book reconstructs in a focused and complex manner how much effort and exhausting work, regardless the pressure from the outside, was invested in each of Vlácilil's projects, whether they were eventually finished or not.

The way the author outlined his book confirms the viability of the traditional scientific method, which is based on arranging the examined works by chronological order of their origins. The text is divided into five sections defined systematically by a given time stretch. The first two (shorter) parts deal with Vlácilil's studies and his "coming of age" with respect to his next course. The second part, however, is already closed by a chapter entitled "Glass clouds" ("Skleněná oblaka") after a mid-length film made in 1958, when Vlácilil was still working for the Czechoslovakia's Army Film studio (ČAF). In this film, Vlácilil's inclination towards idiosyncratic poetic stylization of the film form was clearly manifested for the first time. From that point onward, all chapters are named after each of his projects (both finished and unrealized) as a rule. Step by step, it is possible to follow Vlácilil's approach to his themes as well as the progressive formation of his specific directing style, put into work in its top form in his films of the late 1960s. Such a structure also allows to organize an unusual summa of source material and information in an orderly manner, in order to provide the convenience of easy orientation in the text, serving well both the reader and the future Vlácilil scholars. In this respect, it is also worthwhile to notice and appreciate the two-hundred-page documentation at the end of the publication, as well as the body of annotations containing 2500 items, conveniently distributed as footnotes throughout the text.

Gajdošík, led by his resolution to set up a detailed account of "how the phenomenon that everybody knows in its final form was originally brought about",⁰³ takes a uniform approach in all his chapters: he captures the development of a film from the first drafts to the work on screenplays and its versions, if there were any, from the director's demands on finding suitable locations and cast, to his purely creative work with cinematographers, editors, designers, sound engineers, composers, etc., to the progress of day-to-day work during shooting (including difficulties caused by weather and production bumps in the road), while literally every director's step is documented with a searched out archive or a bibliographical fact. When possible, Gajdošík compares the information he got with his collected material, develops on it further, and gives it more precision. He confronts the creative intents, as described, with the forms they were given in the final works. The chapters are concluded with data about the distribution and audience reception for each of Vlácilil's films, and most importantly with extensive summaries of critical response in both local and international press. Where there were certain later reinterpretations or attempts of reassessment, Gajdošík never omits to mention them, as it is the case of *The White Dove* (*Holubice*, 1960) or *Marketa Lazarova*. And if, on occasion, he finds the critical conclusions of the time to be incomplete or disputable, but still unrevised, he takes the task himself. This is mainly the case of *Smoke on the Potato Fields* (*Dým bramborové natě*, 1976), *Concert at the End of Summer* (*Koncert na konci léta*, 1979) and a few medium length films from the 1970s, for which he looked out relevant material to document his arguments with delicacy and knowledge, inviting the reader to see these films from

03 „Přečíst Vlácilila (Ondřej Koupil's interview with Petr Gajdošík about his unfinished book *František Vlácilil: Život a dílo*)“. Revue Souvislosti 28, 2017, no. 4, p. 42–52.

a new perspective. His opinions are all the more convincing for being free of any hint of imposition, giving the reader mere incentives to go beyond commonplace assertions and give the film another thought. In other places in the book, he gets critical, quotes reviews with relevant objections, and makes his own thorough analyses of apparent artistic shortcomings and of the causes for the director's uneven performance. The oscillating quality of Vláčil's films starts with the normalization era, when he wore himself off when working on screenplays only for them to be repeatedly rejected, and when instead of making something of his own, he was forced to work on subjects that he struggled to connect with. And all that in a hostile climate, when the Barrandov studios treated him almost as an unwelcome filmmaker.

It was to be expected that his opus magnum, *Marketa Lazarova*, would take the most space (90 pages) in the book, as it should as a summary of Vláčil's refined stylistic methods, and a sovereign proof of the depth of his thought. It was less expectable that the same scope of pages would be dedicated to the chapter Interlude (Mezidobí, 1970–1975), concentrating on Vláčil's shorter films and vain attempts to turn into a film some of the surprising amount of subject matters he had been working on to varying extent (the list of these entries in Vláčil's filmography still goes on in the following chapter). The research the author carried out in the Barrandov archives, in the department of written archives of the National Film Archive (NFA) and in Vláčil's estate, as well as the copious spectrum of secondary literature (specialized studies, publications, reviews and interviews both in magazines and in diaries, memoirs, letters, etc.) and other sources, is very revealing, and so are his meticulous descriptions of Vláčil's works such as *The Legend of the Silver Fir* (*Pověst o stříbrné jedli*, 1973) *Sirius* (*Sirius*, 1974), or his poetic documentaries about Prague, all more or less missed out by the then critical reviews. Even there, Gajdošík meets the same high standards and provides complete, broadly based explanations and a body information, a great amount of which is not mentioned in any commonly available sources about Vláčil.

František Vláčil couldn't have got a more knowledgeable and conscientious author than Petr Gajdošík. An author who grew and cultivated his admiration for the Master for over three decades. The eight-year period dedicated to material collection and writing is mostly reminiscent of bygone scholars and their characteristic enthusiasm and devotion to their subject matters. While working on the monography, Gajdošík became an ideal combination of keen interest, defined by a certain emotional quality, and a rational distance of a historian and an archivist (the fields of his professional occupation), accustomed to classify and assess endlessly the material he collects and studies. On the one side, he delights in pedantic documentation of the least of details (like the fact that the protagonist's dog in *Shadows of a Hot Summer* [*Stíny horkého léta*, 1977] was Daisy, a dog of breeder Georg Pokrovský, and that Vláčil used her also in *Sirius*: see more in note 1757), as if to spice up the text, on the other, he curtails the laboriously gained material without regret, and reduces it to only a few particular details that he puts precisely in the required place. Gajdošík must have spent countless hours by preparing for interviews with contemporary witnesses and former Vláčil's co-workers, by travelling to meet them and subsequently, by processing of what he found out, but not once did he give in to the temptation to take from their testimonies anything more than a handful of facts that he considered essential. It is well illustrated by the fact that out of twenty-two name index mentions of Theodor Pištěk, the costume and artistic designer for many of Vláčil's films, only two refer to the author's interview with him, and those are footnotes (!). The annotations also contain a great number of short, profession-focused biographies of those who in any way participated in making Vláčil's films, regardless of their position.

Gajdošík's monography entitled *František Vláčil*, furnished with a simple subheading *Life and work*, dedicated to one of the most significant personalities of Czech cinema, stands out among other works of local filmographic literature as a monument beyond comparison.⁰⁴ Its structure is positivistic, but the author's research method is at the same time analytical and synthesizing; the completeness and complexity of collected facts allow to conclude that it is hardly possible to do better in this respect. It is certain that the book will be appreciated mainly by scholars and experts in Vláčil's work, but it can be without hesitation recommended to broad public interested in the filmmaker, as well. The author indeed succeeded to write his book in an absorbing manner, to use the above-mentioned summa of facts to enrich it and not encumber it, and to give his research a touch of an intriguing adventure and joy of learning.

× Zdena Škapová

⁰⁴ Thanks to the endeavour of its publisher Miloš Fryš, all published reviews of and comments on the book are available at <http://www.cameraobscura.wz.cz/vlacil/index.html>. Gajdošík himself appreciated Fryš's approach to himself and his work as follows: „Miloš as a publisher contributed greatly to the book. I really don't know who else would be willing to wait for years for an ever-expanding manuscript and to publish a substantially technical book of such magnitude.“