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FILM

A DOGBA

2020 — SPECIAL ENGLISH ISSUE — FOR FREE



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Recovery in the cinema

Remarks on domestic films of the past season

Jaromír Blažejovský

The Czech Republic is doing better with the gross domestic product growing, unemployment falling and wages increasing. Hundreds of thousands gather to protest Prime Minister Andrej Babiš filled with joy of the right of free assembly, and not so much with social demands. The merrier the perceived harmony at the demonstrations, the graver the crisis is for established political parties including the opposition ones.

The media exacerbate the cultural war. Scared coryphaei of the conservative contra-revolution, as the documentarist Apolena Rychlíková called them,⁰¹ call their opponents, ecologists, vegetarians, non-smokers and cyclists names that quickly lose their lustre. The stigma of Neo-Marxism has worn down; now it's progressivism that is in next to "genderism" and climate alarmism.⁰² According to a survey, Czech society thirty years after the restoration of freedom is divided into six classes: established middle class, emerging cosmopolitan class, traditional working class, vulnerable class, class of local

ties, and impoverished class. The author of this text is proud that based on an on-line test, he is a member of the traditional working class. Accounting for 14% of the population, this class works blue-collar jobs and has above-average income.

Art and media elites are desperate about the preferences of the people. Some propose that tests for voters should be introduced⁰³ or that the right to vote should be extended to 16-year-olds. The actress Barbora Hrzánová demands that an equivalent of the driving licence should be a prerequisite for access to the ballot box. The surrealist František Dryje embodied his wrath into his essay *The Age of Idiots* (Věk kreténů).⁰⁴ According to the TV dramaturgist Jan Štern, it's the minority, capable and liberal "us" facing the failed "them" who stopped listening to "us".⁰⁵

Free elections are the fruit of the Velvet Revolution thirty years ago. More than by its decennial anniversary, the

01 Apolena Rychlíková, "Další hráz nezávislých institucí padá. Stanislav Křeček se stal ombudsmanem". *A2larm*, 12.02.2020, see <https://a2larm.cz/2020/02/dalsi-hraz-nezavislych-instituci-pada-stanislav-kreckek-se-stal-ombudsmanem/>, cit. 16.02.2020.

02 We can already find the label of progressivism in the infamous *Lessons from the Crisis Development* (Poučení z krizového vývoje, 1970): "Aggressive groups of so called progressivists were silencing and terrorizing honest editors and journalists trying to truly and objectively assess the situation in our country." *Poučení z krizového vývoje ve straně a společnosti po XIII. sjezdu KSČ*, Praha, Svoboda 1978, p. 28.

03 Jiří X. Doležel, "Půl milionů voličů-penzistů má kognitivní problém. Ovlivňuje výsledky voleb i snížené IQ?". *Reflex*, 18.04.2018, see <https://www.reflex.cz/clanek/komentare/86481/pul-milionu-volicu-penzistu-ma-kognitivni-problem-ovlivnuje-vysledky-voleb-i-snizene-iq.html>, cit. 16.02.2020.

04 František Dryje, "Věk kreténů". *Analogon*, y. 31, No. 88 (II–2019), pp. 97–108; "Věk kreténů II". *Analogon*, y. 31, No. 89 (II–2019), pp. I–IX. In addition to the term "political idiot", Dryje introduces the *terminus technicus* "bastard" for the politicians elected by these idiots.

05 Jan Štern, "My máme pravdu, ale jich je víc". *Lidové noviny*, y. 32, No. 39, 15.02.2020, p. 12. Put in reverse order, it's the minority "them" facing the majority "us" who stopped listening to "them" when "they" cannot listen to "us". Now who is the failed one here?



↳ Dálava

country was hit by the death of Karel Gott. People were praying and crossing themselves at little improvised alters, as if their singer were a god not only by his surname. Thousands of mourners came to Prague to attend the Žofín funeral in early October. Those who openly questioned the Master in those days were disgraced for ever.⁰⁶

18.3 million viewers visited the cinema last year, which is the most since private TV stations started broadcasting (1993) and by 12% more than in the record year before. Officially, around 60 domestic feature films premiere every year, but only two thirds achieve a broader distribution. For more and more films, tickets are sold out several days in advance. Czech films managed to break the international “blockade”. Václav Marhoul’s *The Painted Bird* (Nabarvené ptáče) competed in Venice and the Russian student Daria Kashcheeva is laurelled for her short puppet film *Daughter* (Dcera). She brought much-needed satisfaction to the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts divided by dispute. The radio, TV, magazines, festivals, web portals, annual awards, and generationally diverse critics help strengthen the reflection of audio-visual production. The conditions for a dialogue through moving pictures have never been better. It again makes sense to talk about films and have fun with them.

Idiots and communism

Karel Vachek came up with a giant thinking machine in his longest “comedy” so far, with his disappointment over the government of the people embodied in its name: *Communism and the Net or The End of Representative Democracy* (Komunismus a síť aneb Konec zastupitelské demokracie). He calls the current regime a “zorbonaut advertisecracy”: thoughts and ethics are losing ground; what matters most is marketing. Vachek revises his work up to

know and his experience with the Earth. Considering the reform year of 1968, the peak of our modern history, he sees the development after 1989 as a failure. The four dynamic parts (the first one with an addendum, the last one with an epilogue) gradually gain in intensity. You must tough it out and wait for the last act which will leave you breathless. A fan of Bedřich Smetana, Vachek tries to be crystal clear like *The Bartered Bride* (Prodaná nevěsta); however, he doesn’t make it easy for the audience. He claims the viewer’s time, offering him his time in return – not only those six hours (including three breaks) in the cinema, but repeated viewings, hypertext digressions, thinking. No matter that our mystic rejects Andrei Tarkovsky as a magician; the shaping of time brings Vachek close to him.

In their essay *Universities and Freedom* (Univerzity a svoboda), Vít Janeček and Zuzana Piussi discuss about the conflict between the intellectual mission of universities and their standardized mode of operation. In her documentary film *Illusion* (Iluze), Kateřina Turečková reflects on the *a priori* rejection of the “illiberal democracy” of the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, trying to mobilize the viewer through a computer game.

It is nearly a spiritual effect that Martin Mareček achieves in his road movie *Over the Hills* (Dálava): father Vít is travelling with his son Gríša to the heart of Russia to visit his ex-wife and daughter. The family was broken up by the wife’s conversion to Orthodoxy some time ago. Even though the Moravian is both literally and figuratively willing to come to the temple, the door remains closed to him. You don’t get a chance to look at the story from the other side. You feel that the seemingly failed trip might have some meaning after all. Someone got lost on the ways of God. The only thing that is not clear is whether it’s her who got lost or him, who – as God the Father, as mentioned in the dialogue – should protect his family. *Over the Hills* is also a reflection on our relationship with Russia. Every nation around has a relationship with Russia and has to live through it or even suffer through it. Vít’s grammatically correct but phonetically still Czech Russian reminds one of the “announcement in Russian” in *Kolya* (Kolja, 1996) by the father and son Svěrák. *Over the Hills* is not as far from *Kolya* as one might think.

⁰⁶ The debates about Karel Gott’s contribution to the cultural decay of the normalization period forgot to mention that three jewels of the “golden sixties” would be unimaginable without his voice: *Lemonade Joe* (Limonádový Joe, dir. by Oldřich Lipský), *The Hop Pickers* (dir. by Ladislav Rychman), *If a Thousand Clarinets* (Kdyby tisíc klarinetů, dir. by Jan Roháč, Vladimír Svítáček) – all from 1964.



↳ Nabarvené ptáče

In their blockbuster *Caught in the Net* (V síti), Vít Klusák and Barbora Chalupová uncover pure evil, determined, as Jan Němec puts it, “to lift a rock under which insects are swarming”.⁰⁷ The first thing that deserves praise is the marketing campaign. The last time I saw so many grinning girls with buckets of popcorn in a multiplex was at the screening of *Fifty Shades of Gray* (dir. by Sam Taylor-Johnson, 2015). Watching the film, the viewers sometimes laugh but during the closing credits, they leave with their heads down – probably not just to watch their step. The educational documentary uses elements of fairy tale and horror – three beauties provoke a crowd of monsters with digitally blurred faces showing black eyes and greedy teeth and seeming to be saying: “we will just warm up a little bit and then turn the computer off”. One girl defies the basilisk and gets him on the run. I have doubts about the surprise confrontation with the guy from Ústí nad Labem though: even though it’s interesting to find out that the despicable instructor is a racist at the same time, the team of filmmakers feels superior and chaotic at that moment.

One can look forward to *Caught in the Net* being another film after Silvie Dymáková’s *Greedy Monsters* (Šmejdi, 2013) that will actually change something in society. May no girl and boy be drawn into Internet traps ever again! May the predators lose their appetite. It would be worse though if the film increased relationship anxiety. That’s why the moment is precious when one of the monsters talking to the virgin regains his face and turns into a prince. The film only briefly touches on some questions, e.g. the growing sexual frustration or technologies changing the way we find our partners. Once the poets were writing verses for their idols, these days they send them pictures of their penises. Experts speak of a new social norm.⁰⁸

07 Cit. based on Jaroslav Boček, *Kapitoly o filmu*, Praha, Orbis 1968, p. 216.

08 Cf. Petr Třešňák, “Venku to má špatnou grafiku. S psychologem Martinem Hofmanem o půvabech a nástrahách digitálního dětství”. *Respekt*, 2019, No. 19, see <https://www.respekt.cz/tydenik/2019/19/venku-to-ma-spatnou-grafiku?issueId=100399>, cit. 29.02.2020.

The theatre author Jiří Havelka’s film debut *Owners* (Vlastníci) was welcomed with enthusiasm by the critics, praising the fact that our authors haven’t lost their ability to cover a small, well-observed sample of population and turn it into a parable. We can repeat A. J. Liehm’s exclamation “Finally a Gogol!”, he once made to welcome the satire *The Firemen’s Ball* (Hoří, má panenko, dir. by Miloš Forman, 1967).⁰⁹ The comedy draws on house meetings almost everyone has ever been to and on the development of society reflected in the standardized stances of the neighbours. The most accurate one is comrade Kubát played by Jiří Lábus, a hypocritical nostalgic man claiming that until 1989, “people had been closer to each other”. The film maintains the perspective of the dominant “us” thinking that the majority “them” get into trouble because of their stupidity and fall prey to fake saviours. It demonstrates the malfunctioning of voting procedures and adds to scepticism about democracy. In contrast to Miloš Forman’s non-actors, this is a “concert” of excellent actresses: Tereza Ramba, Klára Melíšková, Dagmar Havlová. More than a quarter of million gradually coming viewers made the modest *Owners* a blockbuster.

Whereas *Owners* are an open pamphlet, Michal Hogenauer’s *A Certain Kind of Silence* (Tiché doteky) offers a hidden parable – if you don’t just see it as an adventure of an au-pair in the clutches of a sect (which is actually only revealed to the viewer at the end), but as a metaphor of the subordination of Eastern Europe to the proud supremacy of the West. As confirmed by the Bronze Pyramid Award at the 41st Cairo International Film Festival, the message of Hogenauer’s film is understandable internationally as well. What has remained submissive is unfortunately its distribution marketing.

The standardized “idiot”, as imagined by the frustrated elites, is presented nearly in a pig skin in *National Street* (Národní třída), made by Štěpán Altrichter based on a novel of the same name by Jaroslav Rudíš. Played by Hynek Čermák, the outsider Vandam embodies the qualities the minority “us”

09 A. J. Liehm, “Konečně Gogol”. *Film a doba*, y. 13 (1967), No. 11, pp. 591–595.



↳ Pražské origie

condemn: he was on the wrong side during the Communist era, he grew up on junk food, worships physical strength, is lost in free society, inclines towards the far right. But it seems to me that depicting one's opponent this roughly, letting him be played by a Dejvické Theatre star, getting moved a bit by his simple-minded sense of justice and asserting one's social superiority is too easy a victory. It is not the Vandams that liberal democracy fights the main battle with. The fact that the guy is based on a real person doesn't change much here. The critics accepted the humiliation of the enemy but according to them, the authors were too empathic to their anti-hero, so that other baldheads could identify with him. Should the surprisingly high number of viewers (over 100,000) be an attest to this? After his exceptional art debut *Schmitke* (2014), Štěpán Altrichter jumped into mainstream with both feet. Moreover, the sound in *National Street* is not mixed well and the music drowns out the intentionally blurred dialogues.

The murder of a tyrant is not a crime

In the most dramatic scene, Vandam beats up a nouveau riche hurting the girl of his heart. Violence in the name of justice dominated the season. Three contemporary feature films are linked by the desire to carry out an extrajudicial execution. In Radek Bajgar's *The Lady Terrorist* (*Teroristka*), a comedy filled with blood, a retired teacher wants to shoot an

entrepreneur exploiting the town. In Martin Dušek and Ondřej Provozník's drama *Old-Timers* (*Staříci*), two former political prisoners plan to kill an equally fragile judge responsible for the execution and imprisonment of resistance members from the 1950s. Petr Zelenka's new film *Droneman* (*Modelář*, 2020) shows a Czech avenger plotting an assassination on the former U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney for his crimes in the Middle East.

The well-crafted *Old-Timers* earned the most recognition. Even though the film failed in the cinemas, at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival the viewers warmly welcomed the scene in which the handicapped Vlastimil (perfectly played by Jiří Schmitzer) cunningly ties up a young policeman. Does the laugh in the cinema mean that the current regime and its uniformed protector are considered as illegitimate? The rifle the hero has brought from the USA is confiscated at the Prague airport, but in the end the plotters literally scrape out a functioning gun from the wall.

The abolition of capital punishment is one of the achievements of the Velvet Revolution. None of the three murderous films is as primitive as to recommend death sentences. It looks like all three intend to open a discussion. The *Lady Terrorist* was the least successful in this respect: the villain becoming a human torch brings more embarrassment than satisfaction. Gently yet naturalistically, *Old-Timers* por-

↳ 2× Karel já a ty



tray the limitations imposed by an advanced age. With their handicaps, both teacher/terrorists and Vlastik with Tonda make a connection with the audience. The fact that their old age is not defenceless is an effective dramatic counter-move.¹⁰ It's different with the *Droneman*: Pavel is a guy at full strength and the author makes him observe a cold distance. For a long time, you don't have a chance to understand the young man; even his relation to women, who immediately fall for him, is strange and utilitarian. In the end, he is overwhelmed by a moment of compassion followed by a counter-terrorist unit. And Petr Zelenka is the only one articulating his concern about the future: there will be new dronemen.

An international orgy

Great expectations were connected with three projects with an international dimension, based on English-language best-sellers and engaging international actors. *The Painted Bird* was a partial success. The author of the novel of the same name Jerzy Kosiński was accused of weaving someone else's motifs into his stories. This can be either dismissed as plagiarism or accepted as postmodernism. In his adaptation, Václav Marhoul did something similar. The artificial language of the film is composed of different Slavic languages, and its inventor Vojtěch Merunka calls it inter-Slavic.¹¹ It is used to shed darkness on the specific locations of the horrors, so that no nation feels offended. In the end, however, everyone can be offended as traces of Polish, Russian, Ukrainian or Serbian are clearly present in the dialogues. And there cannot be many objections to this as no community is innocent of a pogrom of some kind.

A cinephile feels the urge to name the films alluded to in the scenes of *The Painted Bird* or openly quoted there: *Marketa Lazarova* (Marketa Lazarová, dir. by František Vlácil, 1967), *The Red and the White* (Csillagosok, katonák, dir. by Miklós Jancsó, 1967), *Ivan's Childhood* (Ivanovo dětstvo, dir. by Andrej Tarkovskij, 1962), *Come and See* (Idi i smotri, dir. by Elem Klimov, 1985), *Andrej Rublev* (Andrej Rubljov, dir. by Andrej Tarkovskij, 1966), *Satan's Tango* (Sátántangó, dir. by Béla Tarr, 1993); the reviews also mentioned *Diamonds of the Night* (dir. by Jan Němec, 1964) or *Carriage to Vienna* (dir. by Karel Kachyňa, 1966).

As if the inter-Slavic aspects were not only related to the language, but to the narration and style as well. Strictly speaking, it's a broader Eastern European style rather than an inter-Slavic one as masterpieces by Hungarian authors are among its sources as well. And maybe just his limited knowledge prevented Marhoul from using motifs from Romanian cinematography. As such, our fellow countrymen will feel at home in *The Painted Bird*. Not that we would lie with goats and billy-goats in our sheds; it's because what we see here is a reflection of old Russian, Polish, Hungarian, Czech poems..., an imaginary anthology of the most beautiful and cruel creations of our sister cinematographies, often in a black-and-white, widescreen, chaptered format. However, by using such style, the director buried it at the same time. What you see is a solemn requiem for our beloved modernism. The reincarnation of these local creative principles might be surprising especially for Václav Marhoul who hasn't shown such tendencies in his films so far. He started in the Sklep Theatre – in one of the pioneering post-modernist theatres – together with the rest of the Prague Five.

The attractiveness of this style for new generations of filmmakers is evident from the semi-amateur *Saint Se-*

bastian's Cry (Pláč svatého Šebestiána) by Milan Cyroň and Tomáš Uher – almost not screened in the cinema, this film is a widescreen historical spectacle about medieval anti-semitism. This time, it's no stylistic inter-Slavic but a living attempt to apply asceticism of expression in contemporary low-budget conditions.

At the end of the 1980s, Marhoul was a member of the A. Z. K. ALONA group together with Ondřej Trojan, Zdeněk Tyc and other schoolmates and also together with Irena Pavlásková, the author of another ambitious project *The Prague Orgy* (Pražské orgie) based on Philip Roth's novel of the same name. In the subject matter, the director felt her strong theme: the power struggle between the genders. Similarly to the explosive *Time of the Servants* (Čas sluhů, 1989) and *Photographer* (Fotograf, 2015), it's women who get the long end of the stick despite being disadvantaged, with their main weapon being their vagina. The alcoholic Olga has very little time to pick up the American writer Nathan, and that's why she has to show her vagina as soon as possible, with no courtship preamble. In *Caught in the Net* terms, she must behave like a predator.

The film is well thought out and Irena Pavlásková managed to keep up the high bar of her style. The overblown depiction of the depression and oppression in the normalization period is part of the unreliable narration: after all, we don't witness reality, but fiction by an American writer having come to the city of Franz Kafka. The dialogue with the Minister of Culture is also artistic licence; it gives rise to a plausible assumption that had Nathan come to Prague as a "progressive Western writer", his reception could have been warmer. Similarly to Roth, whose works are on the verge of erotic literature but never cross the boundaries of good taste, the director offers rather decent interpretation: we won't see anyone vomit or (unlike Nathan) anyone's vagina. Only logical is the adding of the meeting with dissidents to the story considering it actually happened and was reported.

The Prague Orgy did find its viewers, but there were not many of them. I am afraid that the film became a victim of sexual contra-revolution: orgies aren't a drag anymore and those who come up with them can only hope for disdain. Roth's books lie around in cheap bookshops for many months. She already burnt her fingers in a similar way with her *An Earthy Paradise for the Eyes* (Zemský ráj to napohled, 2009) about free love between dissidents. Life is elsewhere. There are also fewer viewers willing to be reminded of the anxiety of the former regime: none of the films commemorating the anniversary of the November 1989 revolution became a box-office hit.

The incredibly kitschy "international" way Julius Ševčík made his *The Glass Room* (Skleněný pokoj), based on Simon Mawer's novel, makes one literary laugh. The shallow, mannerist, nearly exploitative effectiveness of the director's previous films (*Restart* [2005]; *Normal the Düsseldorf Ripper* [Normal, 2009]; *A Prominent Patient* [Masaryk, 2016]) turned into an overcooked sentimental sauce in the Tugendhat Villa. Ševčík is on the way to gigantic European projects in the style of István Szabó. But while the Hungarian master has always included personal reflection in his works, our director doesn't have his own theme. Considering his youth (*1978) and staging talent, he can still make many great films; however, what he needs is not only a sure-fire and original theme, but also an intelligent screenplay.

Boring, boring

A qualified screenwriter, Bohdan Karásek is a month older than Julius Ševčík. He only debuted last year with his feature film *Karel, Me and You* (Karel, já a ty). It tells the story of a time-worn relationship, surprisingly secured by marriage but postponing having children. I can imagine female and male critics wishing very much for a success of such a film – for a Czech mumblecore. The female critics were praising Karásek for having exactly described the feelings of millenni-

10 The final shot in *Old-Timers* is followed by a visual euphemism like the one at the end of Jan Procházka and Karel Kachyňa's old drama *The Nun's Night* (Noc nevěsty, 1967). However back then, the ideological direction of the bullet was quite the opposite: it was the chairman of a co-operative pointing at the chest of a kulak.

11 Magdalena Slezáková, Petr Koubský, "Ljudirazumějut bez velikogoučenijsa". *Deník N*, 10.09.2019, pp. 14–15.



↳ Příliš osobní známost

als. But don't be so theatrical, dear millennials! Éric Rohmer's low-budget conversational films were also all talking about relationships, but these were highly artistic films full of sentences of female lovers and friends I remember to this day.

Bohdan Karásek cast himself under the pseudonym Miroslav Faderholz, which was a good casting decision as he is indeed very photogenic. Unfortunately, his Dušan doesn't have much to tell. The film is surprisingly non-physical: the characters don't talk about sexuality; it's not their topic. Ok, the film might be valuable even though not much is told and not much happens in it, if it can attract attention with its eyes, atmosphere, rhythm. The obvious present here seems to be its sincerity. Something similar happened with Václav Kudrnka's *Little Crusader* (Křižáček, 2017): the mere joy that a certain type of film was made here paralysed the discussion about its value.

A year after the excellent interpretation of Josef Formánek's autobiographic novel *The Smiles of Sad Men* (Úsměvy smutných mužů, 2018) directed by Dan Svátek, David Vigner walked into the alcohol rehab with his feature film debut *The Abstainer* (Abstinent). The hero is not a worn loser, but the 19-year-old Adam. His model story teaches us that the demon lurks for everyone, even for those who are young, educated, talented, intelligent, from a better family or as non-assertive as Josef Trojan in the leading role. The weak

spot of the film is its neat civility: *The Abstainer* is trying too hard to be a nice film, without pointing out the embarrassing consequences of drinking. The personality change due to a narcotic substance is only suggested here: those who drink, steal and choose a drunken party over the company of their partner. Compared to the sovereign gesture of the Polish director Kinga Dębska, striking the chord of female alcoholism in three generations in her *Playing Hard* (Zabawa, zabawa, 2018), *The Abstainer* is shy and bashful. The author doesn't want to take hope away from the unfortunates, averting his gaze and video camera and focusing on making things visually interesting.

The tendency to try and make things special is also symptomatic of Kristina Nedvědová's multi-generational family portrait in her debut *Snowing!* (Sněží). It shows the life of women in a country house as one of permanent boredom, anxiety and care, with occasional moments when the water surface flashes with dreaming or memories, and one of men being as remote as Yuri Gagarin. Wedding at the beginning, loneliness at the end – it is not easy to leave the woods. It is hard to say something negative about the lyrical still-life as it feels just as drowsy as its author, the cinematographer Klára Belicová and the actresses probably intended.

After Marek Najbrt's *The Magic Quill* (Čertí brko, 2018) with nearly 400,000 viewers, another prominent author

↳ 2× Národní třída



tried to revive the genre of classic fairy tale: Jitka Rudolfová. However, her *The Watchmaker's Apprentice* (Hodinářův učeň) didn't enjoy a comparable reception. For the director, the main couple Urban and Laura are just functions of the story; she didn't manage to develop their characters in an interesting way and she didn't make lucky casting choices either. The film is dominated by the evil Fate Lichoradka played by the grimacing Jana Plodková, just like Jan Budař playing the fraud Klouzek overshadowed others in *The Magic Quill*. But still the most important character in every fairy tale is a girl – that's why *Ruffiano and Sweeteeth* (Lotrando a Zubejda, 1996) and *An Angel of the Lord* (Anděl Páně, 2005) have remained so popular. Cinderellas and princesses need to have a spark for female viewers to identify with them and for boys to want to make friends with them. Zdeněk Troška tries a different way. Aninka from his new film *Enchanted Feather* (Zakleté pírko) is pretty as a picture but nothing more. However, she is accompanied by a confused water sprite played by the comedian Lukáš Pavlásek. A good idea, but sadly just one.

Made by Ivan Pokorný based on a screenplay by his wife Iva Procházková, the Czech-German co-production film *The Scent of Oranges* (Uzly a pomeranče) is an attempt to return to the tradition of realistic films full of problems for young people, as once cultivated by Jan Procházka, Karel Kachyňa or Ota Koval. The film had its world premiere at the Zlín Festival accompanied by an atmosphere of a great event. However, it came to the cinemas during summer holidays when it simply couldn't get much attention. It boldly presents the Czech borderland as the home of the vulnerable and impoverished class. Having a dynamic start and unsettled end, it stagnates in the middle section.

Female bear at the peak

Accounting for nearly a third of motion pictures, romantic comedies attract two thirds of all viewers of domestic films. At the same time, this genre is the most despised one. Maybe it's time to start taking them seriously. What is poor from the critic's perspective, is desirable for romantic comedies: similar stories, predictability, product placement. They are like fast-food in the shopping malls where these films usually achieve the highest sales. And then you can go and buy branded goods just around the corner. Similarly to sonnet, the genre has its fixed rules. It is for instance useful to surround the heroine with female friends so that they can go shopping for clothes together. Romantic comedies contribute to gender balance in the film industry as their authors are often women.

This is not true though of *Summer with Gentleman* (Léto s gentlemanem) by two 70-year-old debutants: Jaromír Hanzlík wrote his first screenplay and the experienced TV professional Jiří Adamec directed his first motion picture film. An innocent, naive romance of mature years, it tries to follow up on the popular *Summer with Cowboy* (Léto s kovbojem, 1976) made by Ivo Novák based on a screenplay by Jaromír Kolářová with the then 28-year-old Hanzlík in the leading role. With a feeling of slight embarrassment, we watch what the respectable actor sees as a good joke and what character he devised for himself: half Fanfan, half Pepin from *Cutting it Short* (Postřižiny, 1981).

Obviously trying hard to become a holiday TV classic, the belated comedy from the restitution period *The Last Noblewoman* (Poslední aristokratka) was made by Jiří Vejdělek based on the allegedly popular comic book series by the castellan Evžen Boček, a laureate of the Miloslav Švandrlík Award. The result is a Christmas kitsch with characters riding white horses in a fairy-tale snowy landscape in an attempt to remind the viewer of *Three Wishes for Cinderella* (Tři oříšky pro Popelku, dir. by Václav Vorlíček, 1973). Interested in buying a castle, the moneyed yet undesirable persons are mischievously driven away in the end by the fact that the owners use china decorated with a swastika. What do those who find this funny have in their heads and cupboards?

The already former hitmaker Karel Janák made the dull *LOVEhunt* (LOVEni): with the help of her friend, a spurned bride is looking for a date on social media, only to find out at the end what has been clear to the female viewers from the beginning. The complete absence of spirit is also reflected in the often-used annoying word-for-word translation of the English "What do you think you are doing?" An entirely different league is represented by the screenwriter Petr Kolečko who authored several successful works of the past years, such as the series *Sunday League* (Okresní přebor) and *Most!*, and who debuted last year as a director with his volleyball comedy *Over Fingers* (Přes prsty) with Petra Hřebíčková. The brisk game offered juicy situations, tinkling dialogues and attracted 380,000 viewers.

Thanks to the connection with sport, at least something is moving in front of the video camera. Staying in the cinemas the entire winter and attracting more than half a million viewers in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, the Czech-Slovak co-production film *Happy New Year* (Šťastný nový rok) was made by the former rebel Jakub Kroner based on a screenplay by his mother Adriana Kronerová as a kind of a sequel to their successful TV series *Mistresses* (Milenky). The Christmas mountain soap-opera comedy, in which not much happens besides the encounter with a female bear, owes its success to popular faces (Gabriela Marcinková, Emília Vášáryová, Táňa Pauhofová, Zuzana Norisová) who make the film a hit by merely smiling in the snow. Despite its trivial plot, *Happy New Year* represents decent filmmaking. Unsurprisingly, the Slovak media appreciated the film more than the Czechs did.

In her unfunny mountain drollery *Novel for Advanced Readers* (Román pro pokročilé) based on her own screenplay, Zita Marinová mocks men's vanity. The working titles *Angel in Temptation* (Anděl v pokušení) and *Devil in the Mountains* (Ďábel na horách) give us an idea about the snow-covered paths the author's creativity was walking. With the title she picked in the end, she pretends to follow up on the comedies based on the books by Michal Viewegh, but besides the shallowness and Marek Vašut, the film doesn't have anything in common with them. The confrontation and growing closer of a modern woman of the city and a tough guy from a chalet was directed by Lenka Kny in the family comedy *Women at the Peak* (Ženská na vrcholu); Hana Cielová was involved in screenwriting. The only thing funny is the name and the little Zuza played by Emma Voksová. The renowned theatre artist Radek Balaš lent himself to directing the sweaty, alcohol soaked *Spindl 2* (Špindl 2), which fell the hardest on the butt going down the slope. Directed by Petr Zahrádka, *Man on Rotation* (Chlap na střídačku) is a remake of the French *Joint Custody* (Garde alternée, dir. by Alexandra Leclère, 2017). Even though the theme is not original, the musky odour is present anyway: male weakness versus female manipulation, vindictiveness, and cynicism.

Based on a story by Eva Urbaníková, Marta Ferencová's *Far Too Personal* (Příliš osobní známost) is a film from "Evita" – a modern Slovak soap opera series. It was Eva (Evita) Urbaníková who founded the Evita series in her publishing house Evita Press. Both authors already scored with female audiences with their melodrama *All or Nothing* (Všechno nebo nic, 2017) with charming Poles playing lovers. *Far Too Personal* feature hot South Slavs. It is symptomatic of this genre that unlike female characters, men don't have developed minds and only represent certain types: the protector, the macho, the ravisher. *Far Too Personal* is not an exception with its sanguineous women, and men like from a catalogue of psychotics: a depressed alcoholic, erotomaniac... only the third one is a gentleman. The creatively staged story surprises with its twists in moods and characters. What is also surprising in a lighter genre like this (but what genre it actually is?) is the open depiction of unpleasant sexual stories. What suffers most is the vagina.

The motif of domestic violence links *Far Too Personal* with another adaptation of literature for women (well, this term shouldn't be used any more – the correct one here is



↳ Příliš osobní známost

“beach literature” now): Libor Adam and Hana Hendrychová made *My Story* (Můj příběh) based on Zora Castillo’s book *Calaway*. Recovering from a mutilation by her jealous husband, a ballerina finds a gentle admirer. The male characters are shallow in this clumsy melodrama as well: there is a brutal conductor on the one hand and a lyrical golfer on the other, who very much reminds one of the “Poets” film series – he is even played by Pavel Kříž. *Far Too Personal* and *My Story* have cheap endings in common: the right one goes straight, and nothing stands in the way.

Gleet, gunk and gunge

The critics vainly look forward to a romantic comedy finally being a failure with the audience. This won’t happen though. It’s the testosterone films that are at risk of bankruptcy, and the disappointment is even greater when the intention and trailer looked promising. Based on a screenplay by Petr Pýcha (a winner of the Czech Lion Award for the unoriginal road movie *Winter Flies* [Všechno bude, dir. by Olmo Omerzu, 2018]), Vladimír Michálek made the action comedy *Eel Squad* (Úhoři mají nabito) about a fake rapid reaction force aiming to right the wrong of the world. The story drowned in cramps and spinal fluid. In his *The Case of the Dead Deadman* (Případ mrtvého nebožtíka), Miloslav Šmidmajer wanted to make fun of the inflation of TV detective stories. Ultimately, however, the missing humour is replaced by grimaces. When something tries very hard to be funny, it is not fun at all.

Unfortunate is Matěj Pichler’s *Daria*, which was probably supposed to become a cult film made for night screenings. The author can create a vast and romantic fiction world on the border between thriller and horror. There is of course a noir plot, old and new machines, a crazy inventor, and dream logic. Everyone smokes like a chimney and the opening title sequence is simply perfect. One cannot help but quote the famous line from *Cosy Dens* (Pelíšky, dir. by Jan Hřebejk, 1999) here: “Oh, wow, that must have been a lot of work. And yet it’s such a stupid thing, right?” For Matěj Pichler and his producer Michal Theer, this film is a business card allowing them to apply for funding for their next crazy ideas.

Selling out cinemas completely, the hour-long teenager farce *Party Hard* (Párty Hárd) by the rapper Martin Pohl a.k.a.

“Butcher” (Řezník) obtained the desired status of a cult film in a flash. The fireworks of gunk and excrements make one blush: is it really me who is laughing at this? The Butcher’s cold cut reveals the toilet aspects of human existence and his lines burrow into your brain like worms.

The balance of new films hasn’t been this positive for a long time. It is worth going to the cinema, the lines at the box office grow longer, people discuss their film experiences in means of transport. Art cinemas, multiplexes, terrestrial, cable and web TVs effectively complement each other. With their acting, stars like Jenováfa Boková or Tereza Ramba unite artistic, alternative and independent works with consumer comedies and series. *The Painted Bird* and *Daughter* succeeded in international competition, with the elaborateness of both films being highly above average. For a Czech film to attract attention at festivals, it needs to be the product of above-standard energy investment. The times of simple ideas are over. And what’s more, the ideas are rare as well. The list of projects in progress raises doubts – there will be another wave of biographical films and portraits of recent past, having been preferred by the Czech Film Fund for a long time.

The shortcoming remains though that the majority “them” don’t have a visible representation in the new works. With all due respect, it’s not Vandam from *National Street*. The opposite of films engaging in a dialogue from the position of the minority “us” is romantic comedies. However, the maximum engagement and courage we see is usually the confirmation of gender stereotypes and mocking vegetarianism like in *Women at the Peak*.

The tenth year of the Czech Film Critics’ Awards came with a bonus of a poll about the best domestic film of the past thirty years. The predictable victory of the world-famous comedy by Zdeněk and Jan Svěrák *Kolya* (1996) provoked comments of discontent. Was it another film that should have won? What is the name of the ingenious work the critics wronged in their poll? *Satan’s Tango*? Wait, but this is not a Czech film but a Hungarian one, right? In that case, *Kolya* can very well win.

Genre Metabolization of History

Contra-Velvet November 1989 and Subsequent Social Changes in Series *Rédl* and *Sleepers*

Luboš Ptáček

The last radical historic change still affecting the current political arrangement of the Czech society was initiated by events related to the fall of the Communist regime in 1989. The date of 17th November is the only national holiday which doesn't suffer from a wreath laying syndrome but spontaneously attracts the attention of a significant portion of our society including citizens who were only children at that time or were even born later. The political changes of 1989 were naturally portrayed in many films and television series. The first two decades after the revolution were reserved primarily for films interpreting the changes unequivocally as a liberation from totality and the beginning of a new and better period in the development of our country (for instance *Kolja* [dir. Jan Svěrák, 1996], *The Wonderful Years that Sucked* [Báječná léta pod psa, dir. Petr Nikolaev, 1997]). But social unity and optimistic expectations were gradually disrupted by social and ideological differentiations and economic and political problems. But in film and television, the myth of 17th November as a symbol of the preceding regime's fall endured. Recently, two noticeable television series tried to reinterpret historic events connected to the Velvet Revolution: *Rédl* (2018) and *Sleepers* (Bez vědomí, 2019). The series use crime-related genres (*Rédl* is presented as a thriller, *Sleepers* as a spy drama), but their critical approach to history is different.

Sleepers follow HBO's big and engaged projects *Burning Bush* (Hořící keř, 2013) and *Wasteland* (Pustina, 2016), which had also considerable artistic ambitions. Until the premiere of *Burning Bush*, such miniseries were made only by Czech Television, a public service broadcaster with cultivating cultural identity embedded in its statutes. After the premiere of *Burning Bush*, Czech Television faced criticism for

rejecting its script written by Štěpán Hulík. But in the same year, it broadcast the first episodes of its series *The Czech Century* (České století, 2013) which triggered rather heated debates about the history of our country. And even before that, Czech Television achieved success with genre series depicting historic events. A favourable response was received by its adventure series with elements of western *Land Gone Wild* (Zdivočelá země, 1997 – 2012) set between 1945 and 1989, and nostalgic comedy series *Policeman's Humoresque* (Četnické humoresky, 2001 – 2007) set in the interwar period. *The World Under Your Head* (Svět pod hlavou, 2017) is a series combining the pre- and post-Velvet Revolution history with elements of crime series and comedy.

More than a half of ambitious series produced by HBO and Czech Television combine history and crime genres. A question suggests itself – is genre production involved only to make the topic attractive for a wider audience or is it a symptomatic manifestation of the change of perspective on historic events characterised in increased criticality or even questioning the post-revolution development?

Genre films and television series with a crime plot are definitely more popular with the audience than serious historical titles. The combination of both genres should ensure a symbiosis of the advantages of audience's interests and social prestige. Both *Sleepers* and *Rédl* were nominated for the Czech Film Critics' Award in the category Best Television Title. Private television companies release such titles to increase the awareness of their brand and raise their cultural capital, which is subsequently used for advertisement or expansion. *Wasteland* depicted the social situation in Northern Bohemia, *Burning Bush* and *Sleepers* explored serious his-



↳ 3x Rédl © Česká televize

torical topics. But the combination of genre approach with a serious historical or social topic doesn't have to be merely exploiting a production opportunity. With some exaggeration, it can be said that each narrative (even a historical one) has in itself the nature of a specific detective story as it explores what led to the depicted event, who was behind it and what consequences it had. Crime and its investigation can form an explicit or symptomatic parallel in the search for the meaning of a historic event.

Audience Favourites

There are several reasons why audiences love crime shows. The genre offers adventure and suspense and brings pleasure from solving a mystery; viewers can be happy that the law and justice prevailed and punishing the criminals can increase their feeling of safety. But crime shows (just like horror shows) can have secondary ambivalent effects, encourage to alluring and scot-free participation in crime and they can imaginarily fulfil the desire for wealth and power. In this, crime shows create an improper hypothetical alternative to ordinary life. But at the same time, they offer several possibilities how to draw attention to negative (as well as positive) social phenomena. Crime (and the fight against it) is generally defined as unlawful conduct and it forms a significant element codetermining the nature of a society. Law

isn't unchangeable, it develops in time, succumbs to ideology, individual social systems define crime differently in some respects; law is a reflection of the given society. The clash of crime and law creates tense and frequently critical situations, often with a chronically sociopathological nature which reveals society's weak spots. Criticism or analysis of concrete manifestations is often accompanied by an assessment of the entire society from ideological positions. That can confirm the scepticism of some viewers (the Police are corrupt and cover up crime) or even support some conspiracy theories (they mask conspiracies, the society is actually controlled by mysterious and dark forces in the background). The method of investigation and the attitude of investigators towards enforcing or bending the law reveals the attitude of state power towards its citizens.⁰¹ The course of the investigation reveals whether a certain group of people is privileged whereas another part of society faces restrictive measures.

The fiction of crime shows is quite radically different from the world of real crime and law. Artistic portrayal of crime includes deformations manifested in exaggeration,

⁰¹ For instance, in his book *Discipline and Punish* from 1975, Michel Foucault focuses on the transformation of Western penal systems.





↳ Rédl © Česká televize

unwanted conciseness and substitution; genre stories transform (metabolise) crime and history in a way similar to the matter exchange in a living organism. Artistic crime assumes a conventionalised form just like other genres. Conventions urge viewers to be more tolerant to a referential level of the inhabited world and manipulation with facts and let their ideological guard down (it's just entertainment). Viewers can distinguish real and fictional worlds but they often get the impression that the portrayed story more or less reflects reality; the nature of artistic approach is identical – it's not the perspective of authenticity that's important, it's the artistic persuasiveness.

Historical crime shows were produced and popular even before 1989. Individual episodes of *Thirty Cases of Major Zeman* (Třicet případů majora Zemana, 1974), a show conforming to the Communist regime, mapped the development of public and state security in Czechoslovakia. The attractiveness of the genre was supposed to balance the unpopular regime defence whose effectiveness was diminished by individual narrative preferences stemming from the narrative and historical context. But despite identification with likeable regime-supporting characters and participation in the investigation, the preferences enabled the viewers to reject the imposed regime ideology. According to regime ideologists, the series held up a critical mirror to the Western society (see also a parodic reference in *My Sweet Little Village* [Vesničko má středisková, directed by Jiří Menzel, 1985]). The viewers may have watched the plot connected to crimes of capitalism, but they also explored a higher economical standard and free lifestyle.

Individual episodes of *Adventure of Criminalistics* (Dobrodružství kriminalistiky, 1989 – 1993) introduced the origins and history of criminalistics. Episodes were set in various countries with various political systems. The series gave the impression that it reconstructed technological and social development of criminalist methods. But its style and narrative devices were based on genre conventions.

Another significant presence in historical crime shows are nostalgic titles. During the Iron Curtain years, a strong and unofficial nostalgic myth of the First Czechoslovak Republic established itself as a counterpart to the Nazi and Communist

regimes. For instance, series *Sinful People of Prague* (Hříšní lidé města pražského, 1968-1969) still enjoys immense popularity. Its nostalgia stems mainly from its kind humour, music and songs imitating period hits, retro costumes and props and also genre elements: Police teams are presented as families, investigators behave familiarly, perpetrators follow a "thieves' code", detectives and criminals respect each other, good and evil is clearly divided and justice always prevails. Its sequel *Prague Underworld* (Panoptikum města pražského, 1987) inherited nostalgic elements, but its historical background was presented in accordance with the dogmatic ideological interpretation.

The mentioned types of historical crime series work with a good and bad side of history created by their own – usually ideological – criteria. *Major Zeman* differentiates history from a class point of view, nostalgic series present the past as the correct side of history and *Adventures of Criminalistics* on the other hand focuses on the criterion of progressive development.

Rédl's Melancholy

Both analysed historical crime shows differ from the abovementioned titles with their approach to the interpretation of history. They focus on critical revision of the perspective adopted after 1989. As far as television titles are concerned, this changed perception is demonstrated only in Robert Sedláček's series *Czech Century* (České století), which complies with the statutes of high (serious) art. Apart from criticality and the portrayed time period, *Rédl* and *Sleepers* are also connected by their perception of Czech history within a broader European context. Both series are characterised by their conventional style and simple narration using transparent retrospectives. Almost identical is also the relation of elite investigators to ordinary policemen who are overlooked. The criminalist in *Sleepers*, to whom Marie reports her husband has gone missing, looks resigned because he knows that this case falls under the jurisdiction of State Security. Rédl expresses agitation and arrogance towards local policemen and he also often refers to his function which he uses as a tool of power, particularly when he finds himself in trouble.

The efforts to revise the established concept of Czech history lead to different interpretations. I believe that these differences don't stem as much from the opinions of authors and producers, but rather from using various crime sub-genres which are subsequently reflected in the characters, plots and law enforcement methods. History is not seen as black and white, it is metabolised. I have borrowed the term "metabolization of history" from Sanja Bahun⁰² who uses it in the context of melancholy. Bahun attributes two meanings to melancholy⁰³: 1. It's a symptomatic cluster allegorically expressing the crisis of the society, and 2. It's a practice which helps to moderate this crisis by metabolising the history created by characters, chronotopes and language. The mentioned titles revolve around characters determined by history in a specific chronotope (spacetime) of pre- and post-revolution changes.

Differences are apparent already in the names: *Rédl* emphasises the protagonist while *Sleepers* have a double meaning – historic events took place (take place) without the society even knowing. Characters (and symptomatically also the entire society) are literally asleep (as emphasised in the opening title sequence), meaning they lose consciousness (temporarily), and also symbolically asleep as they lose their ideological orientation.

Jan Hřebejk has been focusing on crime shows since 2015. His cut-and-dried *Crime Scene: Pilsen* (Místo zločinu, Plzeň, 2015) is apparently inspired by popular and conservative crime series from the 1990's (such as *Inspector Rex*). His three miniseries from the pentalogy *Detectives from the Holy Trinity* (Detektivové od Nejsvětější Trojice) based on books by Michal Sýkora about inspector Marie Výrová are much more ambitious projects. But *The Case of the Exorcist* (Případ pro exorcistu, 2015), *Five Dead Dogs* (Pět mrtvých psů, 2016) and *Living Targets* (Živé terče, 2019) were overshadowed by the two remaining miniseries directed by Viktor Tauš, *Blue Shadows* (Modré stíny, 2016) and *Monsters of the Shore* (Vodník, 2019), which were filmed in a very distinct style (that is also atypical for Czech Television). Hřebejk's miniseries are weakened by an imbalanced combination of serious and comedic elements which arbitrarily disrupt the seriousness of the investigation and the psychological credibility of the characters. His *Rédl* is different; it adheres to a homogenous directorial intent and there are no arbitrary disruptions of the unity of characters setting and plot. The relation between the reinterpretation of history and genre stylisation also seems balanced.

The character of military prosecutor Roman Rédl was inspired by the fate of Alfred Redl (1864 – 1915), officer serving in the Austro-Hungarian army, who, despite his promising career, committed suicide because the secret service of the Russian Empire probably blackmailed him on account of his homosexuality. Adopted elements are used mainly to form the protagonist's character, not to create a historical parallel of the fall of the Communist regime in 1989 with the situation in collapsing Austro-Hungarian empire. The television character is connected to the real one with a timeless question: why would someone in the frame for a successful career choose to commit suicide? Lieutenant Rédl represents the state in the case of General Ferenc, who issued the order to shred State Security's "live files" after the revolution. The antagonist explicitly alludes to a real person named Alois Lorenc, who was in charge of State Security's central counter-intelligence division between 1985 and 1989 and who had its live files shredded after the Velvet Revolution.

The series introduces two interconnected cases: Ferenc's abuse of power and a theft of weapons. The first copies real events, the second is based on speculation. Rédl is offi-

cially assigned to the first case and the second – organised thefts of weapons and ammunition from Russian Army special trains from Germany to Russia – he discovers "accidentally" while searching for his neighbour's grandson on his own.

Both characters move on inverse social tracks negating the principles of poetic justice. Honest Rédl commits suicide and Ferenc, who has been put into collusive custody and faces bulletproof charges, can easily (and with a cynical elegance) adapt to new circumstances as he relies on old contacts and information. Even in prison, he enjoys considerable privileges because he knows what the prison director did before the fall of the previous regime.

Rédl is a capable investigator who notices details and their connection to the case, and yet he acts rather naïvely when he asks Ferenc to help him decipher a military cipher, which puts him into a conflict of interest. Rédl becomes and outlaw, three people are murdered because of his private investigation and he himself brutally kills two gangsters who are after him. In the end, he puts Ferenc in touch with a mob boss named Milič.

Rédl isn't a typical member of society (he has no family and is a lonely melancholic), but at the same time, he is its product and victim. He acts as a solitaire outside of the current political situation and thus his opinions don't reflect the majority. His position of an outsider creates some distance, viewers don't have to identify with Rédl, but they have enough space to create an empathic bond. The reasons behind his state of melancholy and his nature are gradually explained by personal motives (particularly by the death of his lover in 1980s). His loneliness is underlined by homosexuality which is presented from the point of view of 1990s. Rédl isn't anxiously trying to conceal it, but most of his colleagues – including a female colleague who is attracted to him – are surprised by his sexual orientation. Rédl has no family and his current lover, whom he doesn't have time for, is murdered because of him. His superiors, general Ferenc and the mentioned colleague all lead content family lives. The absence of family may be one of the reasons Rédl starts searching for his neighbour's grandson.

Rédl's implied motivations are logical and don't contradict each other. He's not a schematic psychological construct acting as vehicle of the story and explicit arguments of the authors, but a plastic character. His melancholic attitude is supported by music and the performance of Ondřej Sokol, who, for instance, doesn't show a single careless smile throughout the whole series.

The series doesn't work with a complicated narrative, it merely uses a simple narrative loop: in the introductory scene, Rédl is shown setting a car with the victims of his vengeance on fire, the storyline then circles back to its beginning. Shorter retrospective scenes represent the testimonies of witnesses. References to Rédl's past are hidden in the deductions of two criminals involved in gun trafficking who analyse Rédl's stolen personal archive in order to find out where he's hiding at the moment.

Condensing the plot into several days enables concentration of its dramatic line and the story, set in 1992 right before the dissolution of Czechoslovakia, has an explicitly symbolic nature with mechanisms for moving forward. The Military Prosecutor's Office tries everything to extend Ferenc's collusive custody, even on the edge of lawfulness, but the judge dismisses their propositions as unfounded.

One of the early scenes in which Rédl undergoes a preventive military exam induces considerable disillusion. The doctor's office is rather bleak: central heating doesn't work and the doctor uses a portable electric heater he bought with his own money. During the examination, he strongly criticises the current state of the society. The protagonist doesn't react. Disintegrated or dilapidated infrastructure and the increasing disenchantment of the society don't challenge the new system parameters, only draw attention to situations which are hard to deal with. Changes in the society are ex-

⁰² Sanja Bahun, *Modernism and Melancholia Writing as Counter-mourning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

⁰³ Melancholy is usually defined as a mental condition (contemporary medical terminology substitutes it with the term depression) which may lead to suicide; unlike sadness, its source is not evident.



↳ 4× Bez vědomí © HBO



explicitly expressed by the structure of secret service members (dissidents, people active in the Prague Spring of 1968, former State Security officers who obtained clearances because they only performed technical and support duties). Old structures of power were forced out of the state apparatus and are now looking for new professions. Director of the Security Information Service brands the shredding of live files as the biggest problem and that is a rather naïve substitutionary notion of how one individual act transformed the formation of an entire society.

The series openly admits the problems of the new regime, some of which are practically unsolvable. Its basic parameters aren't challenged, nor are the formal and poetic principals of justice. Ferenc's seeming social success is underlaid by the change of his social status – a practically unpunishable representative of state power becomes a criminal. According to some standards, unscrupulous individuals can be successful (power, money), but that doesn't take the mark of criminals off them. Rédl isn't suspended from active duty because he goes against his superior, but because of a naïve conflict of interest. Following events don't present him as a victim of the new regime, but rather as a hostage of his own problems.

The judge's decision not to extend collusive custody is presented as objective and indisputable. The series points

out changes in society after 1989 including the formation of organised crime, but it doesn't show how it subsequently infiltrated political structures. The Military Prosecutor's Office isn't a puppet of the new regime, it just tries to comply with political instructions within the limits of the law.

The series shows disillusion from the post-revolution development and indicates that the situation is insolvable. Even though the protagonist's melancholy manifests itself primarily in his personal feelings, it also becomes an allegory of society's mood as described by Sanja Bahun. Connection to the real Redl brings solace. The protagonist would most likely find himself in an analogic personal situation even without a regime change.

Mutated History in Sleepers

Sleepers combine realistically portrayed historic events with a speculative spy plot. Its historical motives include the persecution of dissidents, emigration, relations within state authorities and the rise of new political elites. Police forces act repressively. Dissidents are wiretapped, subjected to Police inspections and bullied at work. Marie fails in a music competition because her father is a dissident. Officers of State Security destroying the property of dissidents are above the law. Ambivalent attitudes of the Czech society towards emigration are expressed in the relation between Ma-





↳ Bez vědomí © HBO

rie and her sister. Joy from their reunion after a long time is soon replaced by reproaches. Both sisters are brought closer together only by an outside threat.

The second layer is formed by genre elements adopted from political thrillers and spy films. British secret services and Russian KGB fight for maintaining their influence in post-revolution Czechoslovakia. In British secret services, there two group openly fighting for the influence. On the other hand, conspirators in KGB act in strict secrecy, predict the fall of the Soviet regime and therefore prepare members of opposition who will help to secure their influence even after the coup. The historical layer is in line with realistic conventions (believability of the portrayed events and characters), but the speculative layer reminds of novels by Dan Brown and their film adaptations which work with rather incredible speculations and often also disconnected narrative sequences. This genre oscillation particularly affected the character of Marie Skálová, whose realistic nature and motives were most elaborate in the historic layer. Both genre modes are practically incompatible as far as the style is concerned, and their contradictions tore apart the compactness of the protagonist who is suddenly like a superhero who gets into a secret Russian army installation near Milovice without any problems. Similarly unrealistic is the portrayed border crossing and the kidnapping of Viktor Skála and the elimination of his competitor.

Marie gets into the gears of history only indirectly, which is emphasized by a conservative gender perspective (unlike in *Burning Bush* and *Wasteland*). To a great extent, her life is influenced by her father and husband who are “by coincidence” both dissidents. With the exception of playing the violin, she has no interests of her own, her life is determined by her husband. After his disappearance, she is helpless and scared. She disregards the recommendation/order of the embassy and obstinately continues to search for her husband. Her infiltration into the top-secret Soviet military installation is reminiscent of the style of socialist spy films from 1950s and at the same time, it challenges the previous construction of realistic references. In the end, Marie finds out about Viktor’s dark past, but instead of an expected reaction (breakup), she yields to threats, falls into melancholy and

continues to live with her husband. Her resignation doesn’t correspond to an exposed character and becomes a too visible symbol of disillusion from the staged Velvet Revolution.

Sleepers is filled with more female characters than *Rédl*⁰⁴, but their roles are rather passive in the structure of the story. Unlike *Burning Bush* and *Wasteland*, they are treated within gender stereotypes. The mayor in *Wasteland* loses a referendum just like lawyer Burešová in *Burning Bush* loses a staged trial. But their losses strengthen their inner integrity. Gender stereotypes in *Sleepers* are represented in particular by secretary Miluška. She doesn’t care about politics, has no career ambitions and longs for a simple life with a partner. But she is unlucky because she attracts “cursed” men. Both her partners were murdered by the KGB conspirators as they were standing in the way of their efforts to install their agent into the government.

Sleepers have several criminal layers observed from different points of view. The characters act according to different motivations lacking a general unifying element. Actions of State Security against dissidents show regime repressions against its political opposition as descriptive reconstructions of history. The most psychologically elaborate relation is the one between Marie and her sister who are both presented as victims. Lots of space is given to workplace relationships in State Security, which affect personal relationships and sympathies and antipathies of bosses who are trying to keep and extend their personal influence. Miluška helps her colleague (she forges the signature of her boss) because she is in love with him. High ranking State Security officer Vlach, working simultaneously for the KGB, loses his vigilance because his wife is seriously ill. Deformations of his character caused by his work manifest themselves in his relationship with his son. Implied family and workplace relations are not as schemati-

04 Ivana, the only woman in an otherwise male collective, is seen by others as an equal colleague, there are no innuendos and incorrect humour. In an ironic gender way, it is clarified why she, as a former State Security officer, obtained her clearance: she was on maternity leave. After Rédl’s suicide, she assumes his position and decides to serve the new regime.



↳ Bez vědomí © HBO

cally black and white as depicted in *Chains* (Pouta, directed by Radim Špaček, 2009). Fictitious speculation only increases at other levels connected to the activity of foreign secret services, characters on this level are presented schematically without personal interests, social classification and motivations. The kidnapping of Skála by a British agent of Czech origins, his transfer to a secret installation in Germany and his interrogation are presented as paranoid fiction. Unlike other British agents, Gerald Lloyd is much more vigilant because he has a direct experience with the Communist regime due to his Czech origins. The leader of the conspirators within the KGB, Vladimir Volkogonov, has no personality and is very schematically presented as a ruthless pragmatic technologist of power. Lloyd is exposed, Volkogonov continues to work in the new structures of Russian regime.

This (imbalanced) genre mix might have involuntarily contributed to a reinterpretation of history. Unlike in the balanced *Rédl*, in *Sleepers* prevailed a speculatively paranoid layer, crime won against law and the antagonist isn't formally or politically punished. The series presents a clash of Western and Russian secret services in a reversed perspective than history itself. The Soviet Block might have politically collapsed, but the cloak and dagger battle of secret services was won by the Russians. The Czechoslovaks were manipulated and are presented as powerless pawns of foreign powers. Those, who resisted, were eliminated.

Lloyd's illegally conducted investigation only confirms the viewers' paranoid notion which is, however, rejected by the British secret service. Two domestic obstacles are removed parallelly to that: the investigator who is close to a big revelation and Skála's political opponent are murdered. Russian secret services make up for the historic disadvantage (the fall of the Soviet empire) with brutality and ruthlessness. Skála, as a KGB-disciplined replacement, assumes the post of the Minister of the Interior and secures Russian influence in new conditions. In this, the series builds an unambiguous argument aimed towards the present. In *Sleepers*, the crime layer isn't convincingly synchronised with the referential level of historic events. It's not about a different way of interpreting history, but about the compactness of the fictional world and its inhabitants.

Rédl gets to the case because of his symptomatic personal motivations, apart from the expressed general solidarity, he tries to help because of family ties which he himself lacks. His subsequent self-destruction, which can be at first glance interpreted as a cynical historical paradox, is not a result of pressure from the outside, but is caused by personal problems. It presents a slogan saying that politics and history are not to blame for one's own personal problems. The series doesn't present a good or a bad side of history, it only surmises the position of a determined individual in history. *Sleepers*, on the other hand, presents history itself as bad, and places a good person, who is crushed by circumstances without any chance to resist, against it. To a certain extent, the series copies the rhetoric presented by the *Parlamentní listy* website and similar subjects. Czech political development isn't presented as an intersection of the efforts of various Czech political subjects, but rather as a passive object of interest of foreign secret services. The actions of these secret structures are almost identical before 1989 and after it. The paradigm of society and the position of individuals within it hasn't changed. The series works with a motive of social paranoia. Exaggerated and unfounded concerns caused by personal problems (fear for one's own safety, feeling of social ousting and failure) fuel conspiracy theories which remove personal responsibilities from individuals. History doesn't differentiate between good and bad side as it embodies evil.

Free criticism of artistic perspective belongs to fundamental values of a democratic liberal society. In this respect, we can view both analysed series as a manifestation of maturity of the post-revolution society. The ideological intention of *Sleepers* was to point at the danger represented by the influence of Russia on the development of Czech society. I don't consider the resulting form of "contra-Velvetness" as an expression of the authors' personal opinions; from my point of view it stems from unrestrained artistic ambitions to integrate an attractive motive of a conspiracy into the narrative structure. History was not metabolised by the genre; it was mutated by it.

It is good to be in touch with something one does not fully understand

Interview with Viera Čákanyová about the film *FREM*

Miloš Kameník

Viera Čákanyová (1980) was born in Bratislava and after studying Screenwriting at the Academy of Performing Arts (VŠMU) she continued studying Documentary Film at the Film and TV School of AMU, where she later shot a documentary feature film *Olda* (2010). She was awarded a prize at FAMUfest for her student films *Piraňa* (2007) and *Alda* (2009) and contributed to making the short story films *Gottland* (2014) and *Slovensko 2.0* (2014). She also works as a script editor and often cooperates on film projects for the television or non-profit organisations. Her last film *FREM* (2019) premiered at the Jihlava International Documentary Film Festival in the category Česká radost (Czech Happiness) and was then introduced at Berlinale in the section Forum in February. The Czech and Slovak distribution premiere have been postponed due to the COVID situation. The film *FREM* presents a view of the vast land and life in Antarctica through an “entity” of unknown origin which makes the film audio-visually impressing while also giving it an unusual way of narrating which disputes with the anthropomorphic interpretation of the world.



With your latest film *FREM*, the often-mentioned topics are ecology, climate, modern technology or artificial intelligence. What made you choose this enigmatic, experimental form for such an “engaged” film which has a very specific topic?

Initially, I was not thinking about an engaged film; I do not think this way, especially not at the beginning of a journey. The form only became clear during the making process, when I was looking for it. I hadn't decided in advance. Even the final form, which some audiences may find a bit too radical, was only created after we had been thinking about employing a more traditional narrative of almost an actors' film with a person as a hero. The evolution of the film was very turbulent, and the final form was created only in the cutting room.

Could one say it is an experimental film?

I am not sure, probably yes, but what does an experimental film mean? People often wonder whether something is a documentary or an actors' film, but I do not think about those genre definitions. I have a topic, and I try to find the most suitable form for it. Even when I mix different approaches, I do not let them limit me in the sense of “now, we are shooting an actors' film, and there are such and such rules to do that”.

What was at the beginning? A significant part of the storyline takes place in Antarctica, but the film begins with a prologue which might vaguely resemble lyric diary films by Jonas Mekas for example.

Originally, there were three separate chapters where I was pondering that as species we keep reaching our natural limits which we then try to overcome with the use of technology. Such as in the field of medicine, where we try to solve how to slow down ageing, or we do research on incurable diseases. Then there is artificial intelligence as a tool which helps us to compensate for the limits of our brains because we cannot process the amount of data we produce. With the help of those tools, we try to solve even complex problems created by what we do. We analyse a whole array of data, look for the cause and effect between them with the help of artificial neural networks etc. All of this was initially supposed to be in one film. As time passed, however, I had to start reducing the content, and in the end, the subject of artificial intelligence usurped the whole film for itself.

The material in the prologue, shot on 16mm film, relates to the original storyline of man-researcher in the field of artificial intelligence. He shot it as a kind of requiem of his, perhaps because he came to understand that one day, our analogue, biological matter will cease to exist, or will be transformed by AI. So it was meant as a sentimental goodbye to the organic world, we are part of. This was then connected to the Antarctica part, where the entity is observing the perishing natural world. I was tempted to show the world from the perspective of AI, through the subjective look of a camera, where we cannot see the “body” of the observer. I was also interested in the concept of an observer in quantum physics who, by his presence alone, alters the reality he is observing. At the same time, I was unsure whether I would be able to make it functional also at the level of a feature film. Our goal from the beginning was to shoot a film for cinemas, not to create experimental video art, although it was one of the possible options. I was not confident whether we would manage to make the being or entity “vivid” and suggestive enough through the means of film, i.e. sound and picture so that the viewer would be able to relate to it. We have a natural need to anthropomorphise which usually helps us to identify ourselves with a character of inhuman origin, but this was so weird that I did not know whether we would manage to pull it off. Therefore, we also worked with a parallel line featuring a man-researcher. When we arranged the material in the cutting room and saw it in larger sequences, I made a radical decision, and we cut the man-researcher line out.

But the look of the artificial being is still an “eye” of a camera, operated by you or the cameraman, by which you anthropomorphise it, don't you? The material is also arranged in the cutting room by a man. Have you not thought of an algorithm which would operate the camera or software which would arrange the material in post-production?

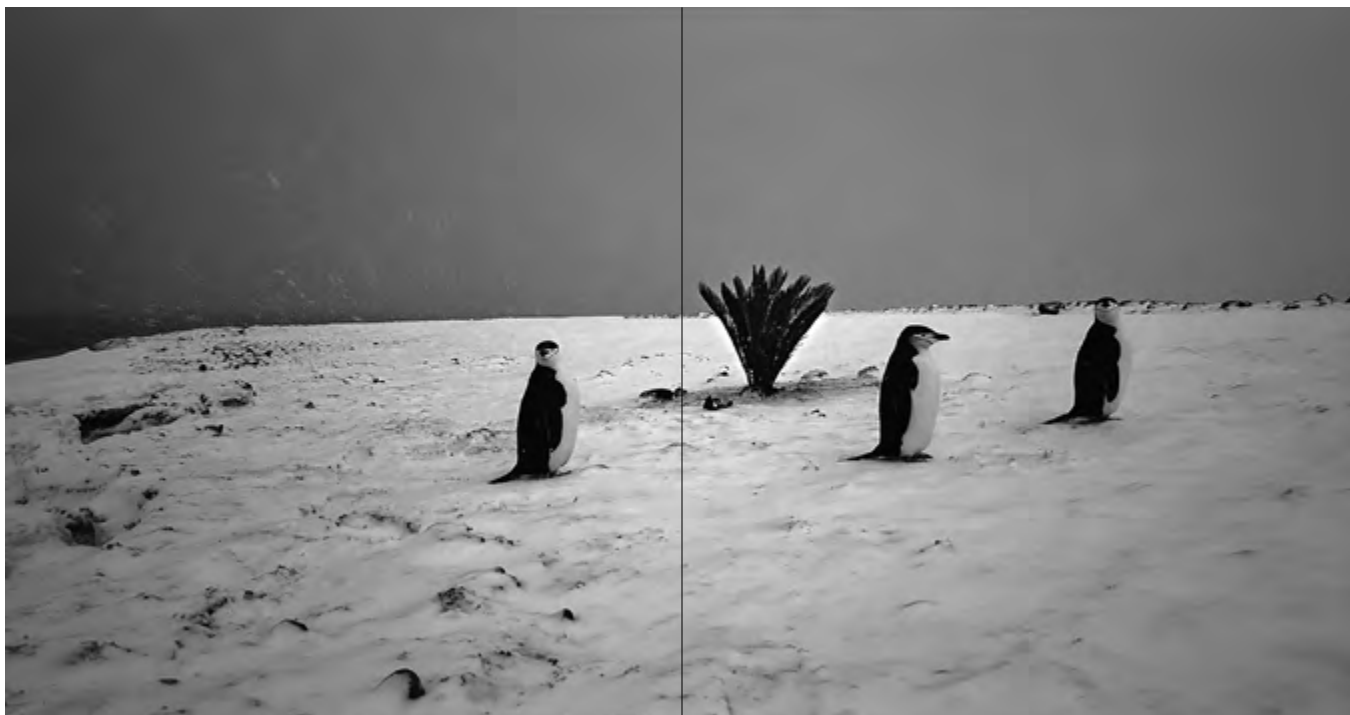
Yes, I have, and I might try it one day, although it is not a new idea, for an experimental filmmaker Michael Snow tried something similar in his film *La région Centrale* already in 1971. A lot of things happened in a very short time. First, we had to wait for a long time to see whether we would be able to get to Antarctica at all, then it was suddenly possible, but we were pressed for time to prepare for filming and our stay there. I was thinking of using it more for editing. There are editing algorithms; I have seen such films; it is usually artists who experiment with them. Another thing is neural networks, which are used, for example, to recognise pictures. The problem is they start identifying patterns in everything possible, which leads to creating “psychedelic” sights resembling those of LSD visions or something like that. I was thinking about using a neural network in post-production for a while, though. We would load there all the material from Antarctica, and it would then start randomly generating something, perhaps with setting some limitations or initial criteria. For that, however, we would need a huge processing capacity to expect something interesting in a reasonable time frame, and the finishing of the film would take other several months. It was even unsure if something interesting would come out of it in the end. With the current state of development, the results are not that interesting, actually. It would perhaps end up as an experiment for the gallery, but it would hardly be something to watch in the cinema. It is a compromise. Working with film media for which I use some form of artificial intelligence is something I would like to try in the future.

There is a certain narrative, perhaps even an evolutionary line in *FREM*. Apart from the prologue that we already mentioned briefly, there is the apparent progress in the story moving from organic materials to lesser evolutionary forms of fauna and flora up to mankind and its technical inventions. Through the eye of a camera which came alive, we watch a lonely expedition member from a distance, while hearing walkie-talkies, radio and television broadcasting. How important is this development storyline?

That line represents the very human touch that has structured the material and created some minimal narrative. If I tossed it into an editing algorithm, we would, for instance, watch a stone for twenty minutes, then there would be some flashes of snow textures, suddenly a penguin, a huge macro detail of its excrement, and then twenty minutes of a black screen with only the wind gusting... That would probably be the outcome. The ideas I want to communicate are meant for people. I also had to struggle to maximally “abandon” the human anthropomorphic way of thinking, but at the same time to keep it bearable for people and functional for the film. In Berlin, it was interesting to listen to people say what they had seen in the film. Some did not even notice that the main “character” was AI, even though it is implied in several places. Some of the viewers found different things in the film, and they enjoyed it much differently than I would have thought.

Aren't festival programmes and promotional interviews, especially to this film too defining when they mention artificial intelligence, autonomous entity and such? Is it not good that part of the audience did not recognise it?

Interviews about films before people can see them are a way of formatting the audience a bit. Even at this moment, when I lay out everything, I deprive the readers of an intuitive or direct intense experience because I tell them beforehand what they should look for and what to think. It annoys me,



but I do not know of another way of doing it because I am a part of the medial environment where it works like that. I understand that you and others, who write about films, need something to write about, but with regard to this film, I think it is a pity. There is an inner conflict in me in the sense of how much to say about it beforehand.

When I saw the film for the first time, I knew almost nothing about it and then, retrospectively, I was quite surprised by the texts. I perceived the film at a more spiritual, metaphysical level. The look of the camera at our time-space is unbound from the human body, and I did not need to technically specify that further for myself, even though there were hints in the soundtrack which had some technological features, but at the same time we could hear the dyspnoea of the entity occasionally, which is something of a biological origin.

I do realise that viewers might find the breathing a bit confusing. There were several layers in the sound design, one of which was the inner sound of the entity, that we called “bios”. We tried to induce the feeling that we are in the head or body of that thing. At first, it sounded very mechanical, but through the means of various postprocessing, we made it sound more “organic”. The digital entity, with its natural habitat being the silicon universe that is a virtual, digital world, decides to explore the organic, physical life. And to be able to expand to the environment, it finds prosthesis, in this case, a drone, simply a body that it can use for the exploring. When it wants to try out how it feels like to have a body in the physical world, it also takes over other attributes of biological life, such as this “bios”, something like a heart or breath.

Can we also understand the digital modifications of video this way? Various doublings, crumbling of some of its parts...

We had two options how to create the feeling that the thing is examining the environment, that it can also work with it somehow, transform it; or at least to indicate that it is interested in something, that it is not only an unconscious techni-

cal set of commands but that it is capable of a mental process which is expressed, for example, by being able to focus on something in reality, which we can indicate by using visual effects or by the morphing of sound. Part of the “bios” layer are also some kinds of “cracks”, which we wanted to develop up to the form of speech, to create reactions to particular situations.

So as a means of communication?

Yes, but it was also meant to serve as an internal command at the same time, for example, to change direction. However, it is not very advanced, if I had spent another year working on that, perhaps it would have been more sophisticated. As such, it remained in its more rudimentary form. Then there is the level when it assumes sounds from the environment, which is probably the most obvious part. It chooses selectively and listens. It was also a way how to make the entity “more alive”; if it only perceived the atmosphere of the place as a foley microphone on the camera, it would just be a flying camera. I wanted it to focus solely on sounds it finds interesting, some small fine microscopic things that it later works with, takes them out of the environment; such as the cracking of ice. It is a kind of sound zoom for which we used algorithmic processing because it was easiest to do with sound.

So how did you work with it?

Standa Abrahám did. For instance, he used the so-called granular synthesis, which is a way of algorithmically splitting sounds into their microelements. I think it is also used in software speech recognition. Created sound textures were then further edited with the help of other tools while we were treading a thin line between a noise and a melodic musical composition. I am not sure whether I am explaining it correctly, I am not that technically proficient, you would have to ask Standa or the sound designer Miro Tóth, who edited the textures and created the overall sound dramaturgy. It was quite difficult to mutually agree on how the final product should look like, and find specific sounds when the chosen approaches would produce something interesting. There was a lot of experimenting, mistakes, frustration.

What does the name *FREM* mean? I was unable to look it up.

Perhaps because it means nothing (laughing). It is a random string of letters; I do not even remember how I came up with it. I planned to use something incomprehensible to a man because it relates to the topic of the film. It was a working title for a long time, but then I googled it one day to see whether it does not mean something by chance and I discovered that in old English and even in some contemporary German languages there was/is the word *FREM(D)* which means different or foreign. And then I discovered the funniest thing; that Roald Amundsen's ship on which he sailed to Antarctica to conquer the South Pole was called *FRAM*, which means "forward". I found all those connotations good, and I liked the fact that there was a sense of familiarity present or a feeling that it means something, while it actually did not.

There is a scene in the film where digital effects ripple the place and create there a rift or pocket. Is it supposed to mean that we are looking through the time when we see the stars, asteroids and dinosaurs there?

It might, but it can also mean other things. I wanted it to be ambivalent.

We have already discussed the line of evolution, and we could say that dinosaurs represent a kind of a dead-end in it; at the time, they were the most complex organisms but became extinct because of the asteroid which collided with the Earth and caused the climate change. It is some kind of memento that, perhaps, another species is coming to the stage of its extinction, as indicated by the asteroids at the end. The film is set in Antarctica, where climate changes are taking place, and ends with a man; that is why the most common interpretation is the dystopian one. You connect it with dinosaurs, but also a palm tree cast ashore, heralding the inevitable and perhaps a fatal change. The asteroids at the end, however, might also be viewed as stellar matter, as something everything else has emerged from, the return to the beginning. Some millions of years ago there was a sub-tropical biotope with palm trees and dinosaurs in Antarctica, and perhaps, they are still out there in the parallel reality. It is just that we do not have the ability to see them, which might not be the case of our entity, through which we are examining the reality in the film.

It is evident that you are interested in scientific development, physical theories and the like. At the same time, you process them in a clearly poetic form...

Perhaps I wanted to be a scientist, so this is a way how I compensate for it (laughing). I am interested in those things, but it is still a layman's view. I have studied all sorts of things regarding AI, but it is such an extensive and complex subject that all of this is only my subjective artistic licence. My artistic experiments would not probably make it through the editing process in a renowned scientific magazine.

Are you going to continue working with this topic?

I am finishing another film at the moment which also relates to the subject of artificial intelligence but in a more socially-political context. It concerns new technologies based on blockchain. It is about infrastructure which developed on the internet and which makes it possible to put in place a number of innovations, perhaps even in the sense of reforming the way how the society is administered, representative democracy and such.

One can immediately see that your filmography is very diverse. You have worked both with animations (*Got-tland*) and raw video journals (*Olda*). Is a new way of communicating crucial for you, or is it just a coincidence? Do you choose specific approaches right at the

start and then you shape the given topic with them, or does this only happen in the process of filmmaking?

As I said earlier, it depends on a particular film. At the beginning, I usually have a topic, and I try to find the ideal form for it during the making process. With *FREM*, the whole thing was very complicated. The result might look like a clean surgical cut, but it was preceded by a bloody massacre (laughing).

Is it always like that with you?

Quite the opposite. Here, I was also experimenting with the limits of my own imagination and the possibilities of a narrative film. Up until now, I used to have the form more thought-through, and the films were very often a mix of genres.

Do you watch experimental films?

Not really. Partly because of the volumes at which they are being created. Suddenly there are millions of films, videos, pictures and God knows what, which makes me tired, and I tend to cut myself off it completely. I only go to the cinema if a friend recommends me something. Regardless of all the duties related to the premiere of my film in Berlin I also tried to go to the cinema, and I saw five or six films from the Forum section, where *FREM* was also screened, and I found some of the titles interesting. It was more of an exception, though. I do not watch films much.

I have noticed that you quite often have an indirect structure of journal narrating style in your films.

Yes, it is something I like. I also have a kind of parallel journal material which was created during our filming in Antarctica that I would like to turn into an independent film. It captures my view as a creator, but mainly as a human in that particular environment. In a way, it should be a complementary, people film to *FREM*, which is shown from the "non-human" perspective. Until now, I have always tried to avoid bringing up my personal matters in films, or I have used other characters to express my thoughts. I dislike appearing in front of the camera, I avoid it, but I made an exception here.

How much time did you spend there?

Six weeks in total. For three weeks with some breaks, we lived in the red container you could see in the film. And we spent another three weeks at the Polish Antarctic station Arctowski, but we could not do much filming there because we needed shots of a landscape without the human touch so we used to look for a place where we would be alone in an untouched environment, and that is why we used to return to that container.

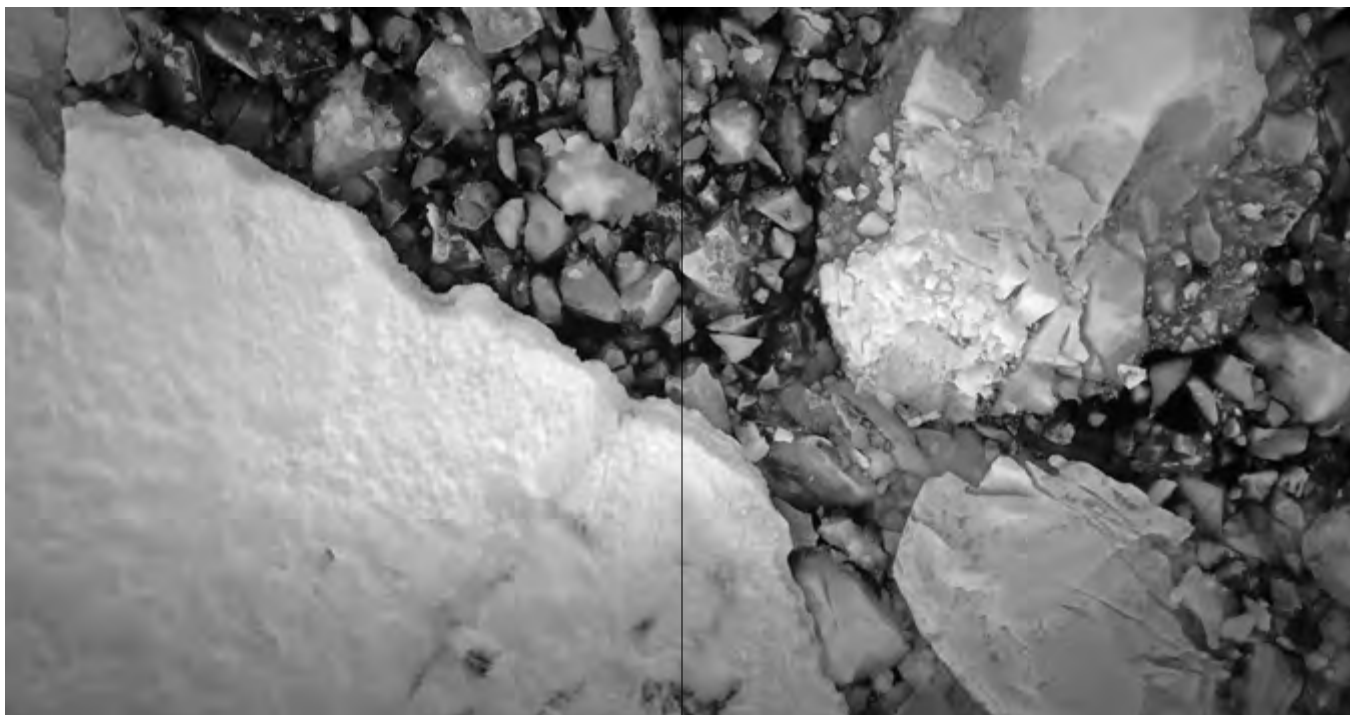
How can you tell the length and form of a film which is not narrative beforehand?

There were many editing versions before we got to this form. The most radical decision was to gradually eliminate the human line. Once I was sure it would not be there at all, we only had to refine.

It could have had three hours but also thirty minutes, right?

You can intuitively feel whether something is long or not. It also depends on the overall rhythm of the film, inner dynamics of situations, and possibly the dynamics of individual sequences. Sometimes you may want the viewers to struggle a bit, to make them meditate or to read the shot in a bit unusual way. The problem comes when you spend too much time working on that, and you have no distance, which is guaranteed to happen, especially since I was editing alone at one point, which was horrible. Then it is good to take a break.

What experience do you have with dramaturgy development programmes, international consultations, pitching, documentary incubators and such?



I have no extensive experience with them; neither I feel the need to undergo something like that.

Didn't you have to go through it? It is quite a standard procedure nowadays.

I did not have to because I said I did not want to take part in it. I was a bit lucky, of course, because my producer agreed to that more or less. We managed to come to an agreement even in the Czech Television; I only had to attend a couple of necessary meetings. It was under the patronage of the producer Petr Kubica which might have been one of the reasons that made it possible. In the end, they probably agreed that the film was good since they had accepted it to Berlin. They choose your film to be screened at a festival, which is a kind of stamp that it is not complete rubbish.

Did you have a script editor, who went through it all with you?

It was Klára Tasovská; she saw all the versions. The producer Nina Numankadićová also had her say in it, especially in the final stage of editing, for an editor is also a script editor. We did the editing with Marek Šulík. It was demanding for me, and I think for him too. Sometimes it was challenging to find common ground, various disputes arose as a result, but it is not uncommon in the cutting room, we are still friends.

What were the disagreements about?

The form. Choosing Mark seemed a bit absurd at first, for he is the one who likes narrative, people stories, so it created conflicts resulting from our different ways of thinking, but that was the interesting thing about it. Naturally, he wanted to keep the parallel line with a man because the view of AI was not his thing. I had to do the editing alone for some time so that we could later watch it and say "all right, it is functional" and continue developing it further. But I do not want to complain about him; it was a difficult film, constant looking. I was able to come up with a new idea every other day before he had managed to get used to at least a partially functional form, we had been refining the day before; everything had

turned upside down in my head overnight, it was really exhausting for both of us.

The film has only screened in Jihlava and Berlin so far but have there been any surprising reactions?

In Jihlava, I had a feeling, and it was probably also because of stress since it was the first time I was showing the film somewhere, that many people would find it boring, but according to their reactions, it was not that bad after all. I do present it as a "difficult" film, but perhaps it is a form of my internal defence. In Berlin it was good, it worked, the people there were open, perceptive, they responded well, had a lot of interesting questions, they were thinking about what they had seen. Some even though it was a spectatorial film (laughing). There were no instances of complete incomprehension or any form of aversion, which I was worried about a bit. It naturally also depends on how the viewers are prepared for the film. At Berlinale, the viewers are probably more used to seeing less common forms of films. The form of some other films in the Forum section was quite unusual too. I am curious about the viewers' reactions in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. There is the possibility of complete incomprehension, but it is all right, I find it normal that not everyone might like it.

Before the Film and TV School of AMU, you studied screenwriting at the Academy of Performing Arts (VŠMU). What made you choose this path?

That is a long story. I originally even studied law. But I used to read a lot, I tried to write short stories, poems; I was looking for a way of expressing and film came to me as the best option. I was not planning to study screenwriting, but when I was applying with VŠMU, there were only three study programmes opening: Screenwriting, Film Studies and Editing. I did not want to do film studies, I did not know much about editing then, and so screenwriting seemed like the best option. To that, I was still a law student, so I was studying two universities simultaneously for some time because I needed to get it clear what it was I really wanted. Screenwriting was thus a period when I was looking for the right decision to make. In those days, the university was not functioning at

100%; for instance, we had no directors in our year, which did not make much sense, so I applied with FAMU. I chose the documentary because there were more possibilities to try things out, both camera and editing. It seemed to me as more interdisciplinary and that the people there were more open to different kinds of things, that I would not have to make only classical documentary films.

So were you surprised there with anything? You changed one film university for another. Different personalities teach there.

In my first year, we had Martin Mareček to teach us. Then I studied at Míra Janek, Karel Vachek and Martin Řezníček. I found it good thanks to the diversity we had. I even found it useful that Karel Vachek was there. With him, it was interesting to come across a completely original kind of the broad philosophical scope of thinking and not to understand any of it (laughing). Although I was sometimes angry or frustrated that I could not understand him, later in life, I came to believe that it is good to be in contact with something one does not fully comprehend, that it is even good to seek such people and situations out. This mental unrest related to the effort to understand something incomprehensible, to try not to withdraw to the “safety” of resignation or simplification, to look for an interstice through which one could spot the hyper object of reality in a different way, is inspiring, it moves you forward. Sometimes, such a peek presents itself to you only ex-post, after some time, when you suddenly connect the dots; but it is not sudden, there has been a genesis to it, however subtle, and it happens as a result of being exposed to the incomprehensible as I mentioned.

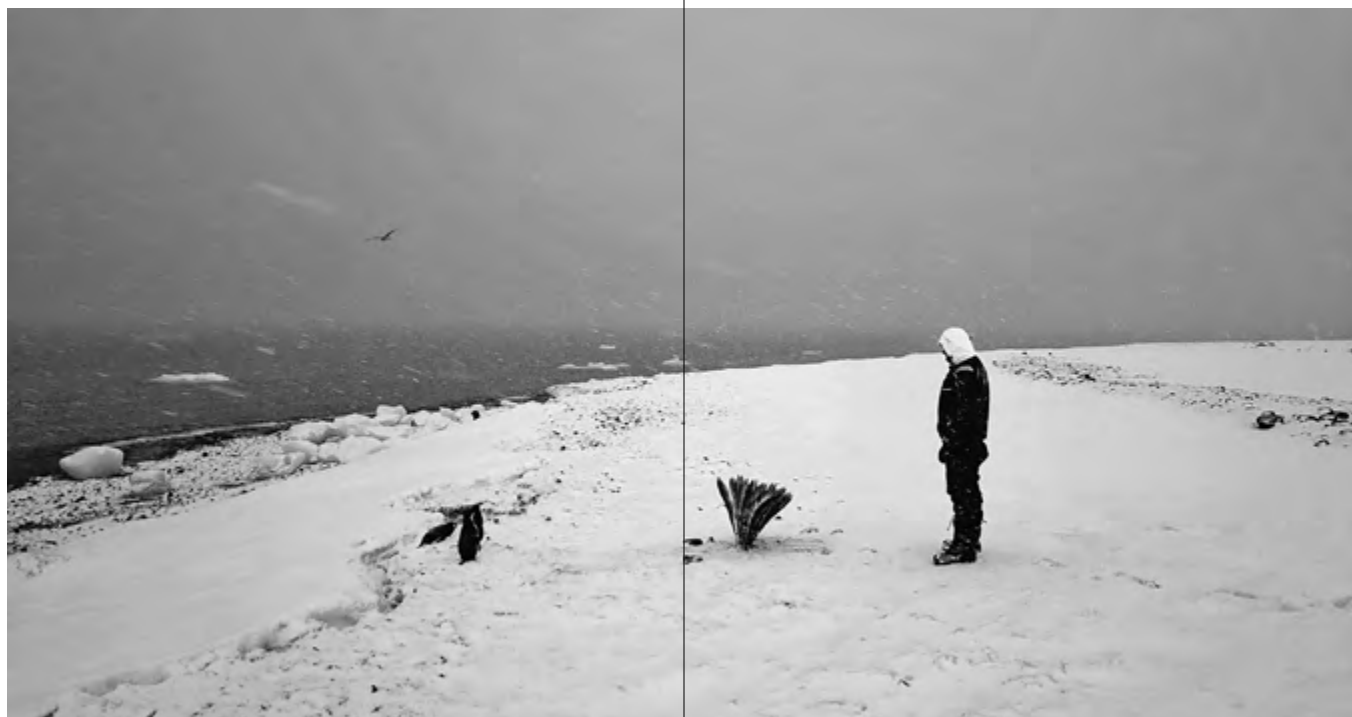
Have you not been influenced by such meetings also in the way that you do not operate with particular “boxes” in advance but rather give form to the chosen topic overtime and gradually change it during the process of creation?

I definitely have. But I think this need to experiment is something innate, to follow an unintended path even in the forest, to venture outside the marking. It is sometimes more interesting in the end, and sometimes not. Maybe it was one of the reasons why I chose the documentary. The reality might surprise you, and a documentary is thus an open form in its essence. You choose a topic and decide what you want to do, but quite often it happens that you have to improvise or change the original plans to respond to changing circumstances of filming or situation in general. You are much more often confronted with changing conditions during the making process, which requires you to be constantly innovative and look for new methods on how to deal with that. In an actors’ film, it does not work like that so much, and that is why I do not find it that attractive, although I use some of the actors’ film features, I am comfortable with an open experimental approach. With *FREM*, I even started to look at the recorded material as a “found footage” after some time. That is the approach that I sometimes also use, but it is only possible when I distance myself a lot from it. To immerse into the material and start looking at it as if somebody had just given it to me and I am supposed to try and find a hidden, perfect form in it, an unsuspected potential.

How do you find a producer and raise funds for such a film when you cannot say in advance: “It is going to be like this and that”?

It is difficult. I will have to start telling them in the future (laughing). I do tell them, but it changes in time, perhaps sometimes a bit too quickly. But *FREM* was a real extreme; it was fortunate that we found common ground with the producer and that she was also open to my searching. At the general level, I hope that the form was interesting; we had a current and global topic, so we were able to raise money from the European funds MEDIA and Eurimages.

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Let's be open to the world

An interview with Andrea Slováková, the Dean of the Film and TV School of Academy of Performing Arts (FAMU) in Prague

Martin Svoboda

Having taken charge of the school after a rather tumultuous times under her predecessor Zdeněk Holý, Andrea Slováková has become the new dean of FAMU. What does she want to focus on? What does FAMU mean to her? And what is FAMU supposed to mean to the Czech society and film industry? We covered all the essential questions in the extensive interview. It has been in preparation since February and was originally meant to be published at the time of her succession, but everything has been slowed down by the current complicated circumstances. Thanks to the delay, the Dean has been allowed to update and elaborate on some of her answers.

Why have you decided to become the Dean of FAMU? It does not seem like a position one would dream of because it is well-paid. It must be motivated by a more personal need of some kind.

There are two things that motivate me. The first concerns FAMU itself; the second concerns the society. I have been interested in institutional developing for my whole productive life; I joined the team of the Jihlava film festival a long time ago, for example, and have watched it become a successful international event. I have also founded the Nová beseda publishing house out of nothing and I found it very satisfying – in short, I like the process of things coming into existence, developing and growing. I decided to stand as a candidate for the Dean position when I put together everything I knew about FAMU. Thanks to my studies there and my work for the Nakladatelství AMU publishing house, I suddenly saw where the school could be heading. How to stabilize the things that work and where to go for a progression. Once I became convinced that I would be able to embrace the various aspects of the huge mechanism and that I could offer myself as its administrator, I accepted the call of the academic community for me to candidate.

And the social aspect?

I have always worked in the non-government and public sectors and I believe it is where I am supposed to be – involved in creating society, art and academy-related values. But this is not only about realizing my potential. I consider this sector a key one in a healthy democratic society. We must stand up for the institutions in this sector. And there is no doubt that FAMU is important for the cultural life of the society and for its staying in touch with the culture abroad.

Do we need to “stand up for” FAMU because of a certain threat? Does it need to be “saved” for some reason?

I would not say that FAMU needs to be “saved” from something, but it needs to be “protected”, it requires a continuous care. There are two important aspects I can think of: The art schools in the Czech Republic are brutally underfinanced. Despite the fact that they officially have a different position in the system of college and university funding – the art schools are not funded “per capita” (based on the number of students) but have criteria of their own. This is an essential measure for these specific study subjects since the art schools cannot increase the number of students without devaluing both the value and the meaningfulness of the education they offer. Apart from the fact that this exception is in constant danger of being revoked, it provides far less money than needed. There are professors at FAMU with their basic wage lower than a supermarket cashier, which poses a threat to the offered education from both long-term and short-term points of views. It significantly limits the number of teachers who would be willing to participate and could afford to work for such a remuneration. We must address this in the dialogue with other schools and the Ministry of Education. We must apply for various grants in the first place, of course – I do not want to underestimate them. But these one-time solutions of specific situations are not enough; we need a systemic change. It cannot be performed by FAMU, though; the main responsibility lies with the Ministry and the whole net of Czech art schools. FAMU can only try to initiate and support the change.

The second aspect I wanted to talk about is protecting the inner institutions within the schools. When there was the dispute between some of the faculty members and the previous Dean, the academic senate unanimously removed him from the office. The opinions on this can be varied, but the act itself was unequivocal. When the rector decided not to respect the ballot result, he sent a certain signal. I cannot agree with this decision since I find it fundamentally inappropriate to belittle the authority of the university administration in this way. This is about the significant and hard-won academic

freedom and about the democratic mechanisms we should be proud of.

But we do not need to review this crisis; it was a very unpleasant conflict that was more about the emotions than about the facts, unfortunately. Moreover, the communication lagged behind as well – the academic senate only reacted to the unfortunate development of the situation once certain media entered the conflict with their strongly one-sided opinions. In times like that, the public should not be involved, it should not be forced to adopt an opinion without a detailed knowledge of the whole affair.

A postscript from August: Now that I have commenced the position, I experience on an almost daily basis what many had described to me as an enormous fatigue from the internal communication before I was elected and started the job. It is possible that any bigger institution goes through phases like that, but I have been flooded with mass emails in which dozens of people are joining discussions about very specific issues without having relevant information about it. Emotions are being mobilized in manipulative ways, exaggerated fabrications are being made up resulting in concerns the unsubstantiated nature of which is being masked by the rhetoric. This principle is not constructive at all, it is toxic and exhausting for many people at once. I also feel the pressure to treat certain faculty staff as “untouchable” – as if one could not criticize these people. I have been trying to establish a natural way of solving conflicts (to take a step back and make a compromise) and mistakes (self-reflection followed by an apology or some rectification). What I find interesting is that this is not a usual pattern of behaviour in this environment; I think it is rather a result of the tense atmosphere of the last three years, not something one could fight. I have discussed the prevalent communication in the form of manipulative or defamatory mass emails and the provoking of the irascible emotions with other institutions as well as with two psychologists, looking for a way to calm down the atmosphere of exasperation and tenseness and to relieve the tired colleagues of mine. Thanks to the more constructive faculty staff and several bodies that have been introducing a business-like attitude to the university operations, it seems to me that we have been finally able to focus on pressing serious issues and on a debate full of constructive arguments without emotions.

What are your other plans?

I think it is of the utmost importance to make FAMU more open and permeable, to truly be in touch with the Czech culture and society. One of the very first ideas I initiated some time ago was a published final thesis in which various film and culture-related figures were asked to reflect student films presented at the end of the academic year. At the other schools of the Academy of Performing Arts, there were concerns about this kind of external reflection, and some of the departments resisted this dialogue with the outside world. But I believe this to be a crucial step to openness which should be our aim since we are a public university. During the academic year, the school should be a protected and closed environment to a certain extent, to ensure peaceful education; once a year, though, the gates should open and the results of the education should be presented to the public and reflected by it. The above-mentioned book was part of the process.

I also find it important for FAMU to be a role-model when it comes to a responsible approach toward the climate change. I would like to focus on the relationship between the institution and the environment, even more specifically by thoroughly examining the administration of the university buildings, for example. First and foremost, though, I would like to contribute to the introduction of sustainable film production in the Czech Republic. This is nothing new; the options have been explored abroad and we should react to that. I know that when I say we need to be “open” and “permea-

ble”, it sounds vague and ambiguous, but there is no way of avoiding that. The students should be in touch with the real film crews, they should visit film sites. The students of all the subjects, not just of directing. The sound engineers should visit audio studios; the editors should visit the cutting rooms. Because shooting a film in the school environment cannot be compared to being part of real shooting, and we need the students to experience this as early in their studies as possible. And to see a professional crew, ideally led by a world-class film-maker, would be a very useful part of such training. This is the overall aim of the mentoring programme I have been developing.

The students participating in the programme will also pay three visits to the chosen film-maker (director, sound engineer, cameraman, editor) when preparing a film of their own to consult it at various production stages. There will also be a two-week-long workshop for five students led by a film-maker, right here in one of the classrooms. It will be very demanding, both finance- and organization-wise, especially the first part of the programme; it will be a huge success if we manage to offer it to one student or two a year. But FAMU will definitely pursue the goal of being more open to the world.

A postscript from August: *I will add two on-going internal plans. They might seem marginal but they are crucial for the ability of the school to serve its students. The students seem to be somewhat overburdened by all the lessons and have only a little time for their own work. We have been analysing the study plans and the demands put on both the students and the teachers and will continue in that for at least another six months but it seems to be the case that there are too many subjects for too few credits – the credits do not reflect the demanding nature of the subject when we take into account both direct and indirect studying (homework, preparation). And I must go back to the final theses, to the presentations of the end-of-the-year and end-of-the-studies exercises and films: when there is an exercise asked from all of the students across the departments, the final product is presented separately at each of the departments, which means that the students get no feedback from the other departments. To get the feedback from the individual professions is very useful, it makes the students' knowledge more thorough and teaches them to respect all the professions; and that is why we want to screen the films for all the departments at the same time (once the Covid-19 related restrictions are over).*

You place high demands on yourself. To be open to the world, that is something to be adopted not only by FAMU but also by the whole Czech film industry which seems to be almost fetishizing the top festivals such as the one in Cannes while producing a low number of films that could actually get the attention of these festivals. But how to make the value of the local versus the international focus clear?

First and foremost, we must explicitly say that while we are discussing the importance of a success abroad, we do not look down on those films that have no ambitions like this. We cannot aim at shooting exclusively “universal” festival dramas that meet the international taste. It may be the case that if we realize the value of the films dealing with local topics and deliberately speaking to a clearly defined audience, we will have a better understanding of how our films relate to the market and the film fashion abroad.

When I talk about being in touch with the world, the first thing that comes to my mind is to what extent the students and the teachers are familiar with the international film. We do need the contemporary world film to be more present in the education, we do need more students visiting festivals all over the world and watch the progressive approaches when they are fresh. Not because we need to copy these but because we need to understand the process of transforma-

tion. It can help us to be both universal and unique, to realize the value of a language of one's own. To find our place in the world, we must understand the world at least a little bit. When we are aware of something, when we acquire certain knowledge, we can then vary it, define ourselves against it, combine it. A film-maker cannot rely on the rest of the world coming to them; we are a small market and many films do not make it to us, which is why we need to meet them halfway.

How is the Czech film doing in your opinion? Are the negative reports on it being a fatal failure true? Just recently, the Czech short animated drama *Daughter* (Dcera) was nominated for Oscars, and *The Painted Bird* (Nabarvené ptáče) was screened in Venice. Can it be that the rumours of failing are exaggerated?

You have already mentioned that we tend to fasten upon the festivals abroad. Yet the local film industry cannot be legitimized only through the reactions of top-class festivals. Especially when it comes to the student films, it is not good to press for something, to prevent the students from thinking that their absence at the festivals is a waste of their efforts and talents. We must be able to name some of the values and qualities on our own, without turning to an external or even an international authority. Let's not forget that the main purpose of the student films is educational, which means there should be special benchmarks for them, one of the most important benchmark being the extent to which the film develops the author's skills both within the given aspect and within the context of the author's self-development.

Do not take me wrong, it is important to be seen at the festivals. The world can then see the students' works and react to them which must be supported. But we cannot let ourselves to be obsessed with competition or helpless when rejected.

Having said that, I can finally go back to the question of yours. Is the Czech film industry successful? There are documentaries screened at the festivals, sold to TV stations and sometimes even to cinemas abroad. Animated films have been flourishing. Some of the films with very specific topics have been successfully distributed at the related events. From this point of view, there are films and film-makers that have definitely been successful.

Talking about documentaries: the documentary department has been highly respected within FAMU for a long time. A month ago, Karel Vachek surprised me with his statement that if it had been up to him, the “second department of directing” (which is what he calls the documentary department) would have already been dissolved upon his arrival because it is a nonsense to distinguish documentaries from other types of films. He only acknowledges it as a department for historic reasons and also to avoid everybody at FAMU “going mad” at once. It is true that many film schools have no special documentary department. What is your opinion on this?

That is a good question. Not necessarily because the documentary department is rather an exception at other film schools – I do not think it is bad to offer something unique. Nevertheless, the film studies have been more and more focusing on dissolving the traditional classification- and genre-related boundaries. From this point of view, to classify something as a document and to make it stand apart can be seen as problematic. Purely hypothetically, I can imagine why one would want to make feature films and documentaries united. On the other hand, the reasons for keeping the two types of film separate seem more substantiated to me right now. Even if we refuse to draw a line between them, we cannot refuse that there are two clearly defined and varies approaches taught at the respective departments. And if these discrepancies exist, there is some sense in them, even if one would adopt Karel Vachek's opinion about the “two departments of directing.” In a way, the existence of the two

very different departments show us how the film-maker's approach to reality and its presentation can vary. Even though the students do not attend both the departments at the same time, they know about the other one and can visit some of the lectures offered at the other one, learning about their potential and refining their opinions.

That is why I think the two departments should communicate more with each other. Not with the aim to blend into one another but to make the best use of their dynamics and differences possible. The curriculum requires the students of directing to shoot a documentary in their second years, and the students of documentaries to shoot a live action studio film. It could probably be even more organic; nevertheless, I find the discourse typical for the two departments so fruitful, stimulating and inspirational that I consider that an argument to keep them separate.

You have been talking about the development and the plans for future, which is understandable. But what do you think will only be outlined and what will actually be implemented?

In the months before my arrival, I had many discussions with people who knew the FAMU environment to map the current situation and to find my "default setting" for this position. As I have already said, I think it is crucial to have a clear idea of the things that work, and to start from that. I do have huge plans for changes, of course. And as of now, I see no reason to lower my expectations.

A postscript from June: FAMU has been affected by the corona crisis pretty bad. Due to the fact that international students cannot come and a huge part of these classes must have been cancelled, the budget has lost at least a quarter of the revenues and it is likely this will continue. I have stepped into my position on May 20, when there was a provisional budget in place and many activities have been slowed down or even suspended at the university; in the light of that, I had to abandon my wonderful plans for developments and focus on the new financial reality right after my arrival, along with the whole team – the estimated loss of revenue and expenses showed that we needed to design and adopt measures saving millions of Czech crowns as soon as possible. And the unexpected tasks are far from over – we still work on the organization of the following academic year which is usually done in April or May. We have also been preparing for the second wave of the corona crisis. This must be similar in almost every institution. Fortunately, the calmer start of summer in terms of Covid-19 spreading and measures being adopted, it was possible for me to implement a plan I considered crucial for a better understanding of FAMU: to interview all the staff. 199 meetings and truly inspiring discussions have been held, a tremendous help with further planning for me.

Talking about permeability: I have never understood why the public cannot access the student films. I suppose as a journalist I could ask for some screeners and would most probably get them, but why is there no server with all the films for free? For example the films by students of the International Film Studies Pisek are accessible via YouTube. If the FAMU thesis films were on-line, I would watch them regularly.

I agree that we desperately need a common on-line film server. I need to have a proper look into why this has not been done yet, since we both know that all the student films are digitalized so that they could be sent to festivals. This is one of the things I could not have prepared in advance because I will be able to access all the logistic and legal details that have presumably been impeding this so far only after I start the job. I am not sure if all the films can be expected to be available to the public. But there should be a password-protected place with all the films; that would be a major development. I would

think this is a matter of course, we will definitely have to deal with it.

A postscript from June: First of all, I would like to invite you to the presentation of the final theses – it is public since we are a public university. The screenings will take place between 1st and 23rd September almost daily, there is a programme on-line and we will share the events on our social network profiles. I have also found out that there has already been a project launched, it is called FAMU VOD and it will make the films available to the public; as of now, the legal and economic contexts are being explored. Some of the student films cannot be made public due to legal reasons, but this only concerns a small number of them. We are finishing the concept of how the films will be accessible now, I suppose the pilot version could be on-line as of this autumn.

Before the interview you mentioned that you would like to practice your Czech – and you have really answered only in Czech so far. Is it a personal choice of yours or is there some pressure to suppress your Slovakian origin?

Since I am supposed to represent an important cultural institution, I take it as my duty to use the language of its culture. I learnt Czech when I studied journalism, it was the first university I attended, so it is no problem for me to speak Czech. I like the language. I have an accent, of course, and I sometimes use Slovakian verbs, anybody can tell I am from Slovakia. I do not try to hide it. But I think it is an adequate and logic gesture to show that I understand the important role of FAMU in the Czech culture.

I would say that some people may mind your career background rather than your homeland. For example Ivo Mathé made a comment in his recent interview that FAMU has been led by theoreticians for a long time and "that is why it is like that."

The FAMU Dean has so complex duties and responsibilities that I would not dare to say if a theoretician is better or worse compared to a practitioner; this division tells us nothing about the person's skills required for the job. I studied both film studies and documentary making. Even though I am mostly seen as a theoretician, I shoot my own films. They are short films, often experimental, but there always is a film crew producing them. I have been focusing on TV dramaturgy and I do not think anyone can say that this is not a practical profession within the audiovisual arts.

Do you think it would be ideal to establish a "Czech film style" at FAMU – a unified tendency, something similar to our notion of the New Wave era, romanticized to a great extent? Or do you think it is better for each film-maker to have a style of their own?

The way we see the film industry of the 1960s is so romanticized that I am not sure if the myth is actually sustainable. We narrow the era down to a couple of the most distinctive figures and try to find what they have in common, often by force. To what extent this sample is representative compared to all the films made in the era and whether it makes any sense at all to talk about, these are not easy questions, mainly because we still know so little about these films. In Jihlava, we once prepared a programme of the New Wave documentary film-makers many of whom shot very interesting student films but then disappeared from the film industry. We need to make a more thorough research into the history of the student films, together with the National Film Archive, so that we can have a clearer and less romantic notion of the true face of the Czechoslovakian film at FAMU in the 1960s.

But your question was about the influence of the myth which exists without any doubt, no matter how hard we try to deconstruct it from its very foundations. I personally consider it rather negative and unproductive to look for a "national film." I would say the priority should be to work on one's personal style, one's voice. I think FAMU has a duty not only to

pass the knowledge of the world to the students, to educate them, but also to learn them how to work with the knowledge, how to define themselves within the art of film-making. We can also try to awake the basic feeling of being socially responsible in the students but it is not our mission to become the heart of a unified style.

What should the relationship between FAMU and the Czech Television look like in your opinion?

Independent public media are essential for the Czech society. The Czech Television is yet another institution we must protect from any threat. I think it is highly likely that the role and the influence of the traditional linear broadcast will grow smaller in near future but that does not mean that the institution cannot adapt to it and to reframe the way it fulfils its function. The non-linear types of broadcast have been in use for some time, there are several services available online. We should think not only about how we can contribute to the Czech Television in its current state but also how we can help during this unavoidable transformation.

The students should take TV films and shows into account. They should focus on TV series as well as on reality shows, for example – there are many genres they should form an opinion about and influence them in a way they think is up to date. The audiovisual sphere is a complex one, if one wants to work in it they must be able to react to the current flow.

This does not concern only TV but also virtual reality, for example. Its technological as well as aesthetic development has been tumultuous. By the way, BBC is one of the stations which understand all of this and try to react to the phenomenon. This brings me back to the fact that television has become a medium of transformation, and the relationship between FAMU and the Czech Television should therefore be based on mutual understanding of this.

What does it look like with the department of video game design? From what Zdeněk Holý said about it, it was supposed to be ready “to start the next academic year.” But this was four years ago...

Helena Bendová who initiated this department gathered a wonderful team of both academics and practitioners. This field of study is inherently interdisciplinary; looking at the FAMU departments, it overlaps at least with the camera, sound, animation, script writing and production departments, but it has something in common basically with everything which makes it an interesting platform. With this in mind, a complete study plan has been created and I consider it very good. The faculty management has not succeeded in securing the art committee's approval yet, though. Without the approval, we cannot go on with it despite the fact that everything has been ready on paper for almost a year. We have the staff and the great curriculum and I believe we will manage to open the department.

What prevents the art committee from giving the approval?

Based on the minutes from the meetings, there are some universal doubts whether this subject is suitable for FAMU. But there have also been some specific objections. For example that there is a lack of teachers with high academic degrees. Which I think is not fair in relation to a discipline that has the ambition to start a new tradition in the context of the Czech university education, and therefore there cannot be enough experts with the highest academic degrees possible yet. Quite to the contrary, we need to focus on young academics who can build something without a strong precedent. Let's name Jaroslav Švelch, for example, who recently published a book about this topic in MIT Press and is one of the top world experts in game studies. When it comes to the teachers in a field with such a strong connection to the practice, I think is not only sufficient but even desirable that they make up for the absence of an academic degree with a

long working experience in the field. The department needs a chance to train the academic elites.

The committee also did not like that there is no subject focusing on addictology which I think is a terribly anachronistic opinion, to use a scientific discourse. According to the scientific studies of the last two decades, video games have no greater potential to cause addiction than any other comparable activities. About three percent of the players are in danger of becoming addicted, but these are people predisposed to addiction and nothing indicates that playing video games could be overly stimulating for them. Were it not for the video games, most of those addicted to them would be addicted to something different.

Nevertheless, the curriculum has been amended to accommodate the strongest objections of the committee as much as possible, and I hope that the project will be approved.

A postscript from August: I am very glad that the committee has accredited video game design as a subject of study. After a long and both intellectually and practically rewarding debate, it was approved with 10 votes out of 11. The committee members see the subject as progressive and useful for the FAMU students. Not everybody at the faculty can relate to that, of course – introducing a new subject, especially such an innovative one, is always a matter of struggles, discussions, and resistance to changes. Looking at the past, though, there used to be no independent departments of sound and of animation, no department teaching how to create moving pictures for galleries and experimenting with films (as at the Centre for Audiovisual Studies) – and their results and the benefits they bring both to the students and the Czech audiovisual scene today are amazing. I am also glad that it is an inherently interdisciplinary subject the teaching of which will overlap with the departments of animation, sound, script writing and production, and also that we will be able to train experts on the audiovisual art in the Czech Republic, a country where game production, art and industry are dominant and strong, thus joining many prestigious film schools abroad (British National Film & Television School, Danish film school, NYU...) as well as several film schools in V4 countries (Poland, Slovakia) where this field of study has been a standard part of the offer for several years now.

Talking about the institutions: what relationship do you think FAMU will have with the Czech Film Fund?

FAMU has a great experience with the Fund and it is wonderful that the students have been using it more and more effectively. The final students films are often created in co-production, they need to be supported even in the production phases, which increases the standard level of them. Looking at the applications for financial support, we can see the improvement over the years, which is very positive not only because there is a bigger chance of getting a support but also because it shows that young film-makers are improving their skills of communicating with the institutions and have a clear idea of what they are doing, why they are doing it, and how they are doing it.

Would you agree with the producer Jiří Konečný who once told me that the Czech system of financial aids and financing allows any project to be realized if the makers can communicate with the institutions in a proper way? Is the door open to anybody regardless of anything? Is there really no outside factor affecting the decision except for the quality of the project?

We have definitely come closer to this state since 2012 when the Fund was reformed. I also appreciate the variety of the subsidized films – as for this aspects, I think the Fund is working as it is supposed to be. There are several marginal films that have not been approved for the subsidy due to their narrowness or that have decided not to apply for it – there

is a limit to the universality and the system of the committee must stipulate it as a matter of principle. Despite that, I would like my answer to sound mostly positive. If we feel compelled to complain about the list of the subsidized films, I would not necessarily point out to the system of subsidies; we must be more self-critical and point out to the film-makers themselves in the first place. Should you happen see some of the application, you would be shocked for example by how few of them describe the style. They talk about the story, the topic or the characters, but the film style, the audiovisual rendering of the film, is either mentioned only in short or not mentioned at all. It is not unusual for the directing specifics to completely ignore the directing method. We have already implied that communicating with the institutions teaches the author, among other things, to explain and understand their plan in a way as complex as possible. If the explanation lacks any idea of the style, the problem may be even bigger than it seems. This is yet another thing FAMU needs to tackle.

Let's continue in this self-criticism. Are you satisfied with the structure of FAMU, with the distribution of subjects?

I am not sure if I can say that everything is perfect in this regard. But I think that if something is working and is even rare in the global context, it is the fact that we train the students in their chosen subjects since their very first year. It is more common for film schools abroad to train the undergraduates as "universal film-makers" and to allow them to specialize only later. Our version offers thorough education of top representatives of all the film-related professions. It is important to make sure that all the students know the basics of other professions as well, of course, despite the early choice they make – we educate them with this in mind, we force them to leave the pigeon-holes of theirs since their first year.

FAMU offers no acting-related subjects. Can the theatre actors keep up with you?

That's certainly a big question. In the cinema, the absence of film acting often puts us out of tune more than anything else. The question is, though, whether this would really change with the introduction of film acting as a FAMU subject. Anyway, the film-makers need to cooperate with the actors and the actors must get used to the specifics of film-making. Nevertheless, right now I do not think FAMU should introduce this subject, even though we need to give it some serious thought; I would rather say that the principles should be taught more systematically at the Theatre Faculty. The two faculties will need to discuss it properly.

You will probably laugh at me, but I must ask about the slightly caricature conflict of "the arts versus the crafts." One would think nobody takes it seriously anymore, but once in a while somebody brings it back in all seriousness.

We probably have to talk about it, mainly so that we could get rid of this stereotype for good. It is an unbearable saying that tends to reappear every time a conflict, often an unrelated one, gets the media attention. In case of a hard-to-understand conflict at a film school, there is probably no other solution than to come out with this absurd antagonism instead of the nuances. We have already discussed how unproductive it is to bring academic disputes to the public and ask people to back "the right party" based on emotional decisions. Everybody with a basic knowledge of what film is about knows that the arts and the crafts are conjoined, that they are inseparable and one cannot be taught at the expense of the other. I wish anybody who claims that FAMU teaches "the arts at the expense of the crafts" added a simplified explanation of what it meant according to them. What is the boundary, who puts it between the arts and the crafts, and where does this happen? There is a group of craft skills re-

lated to the knowledge of the methods, of the nature of the media, and of the institutions, and these skills must be learnt by all FAMU students. Only through them they can be creative regardless of the form they choose – a genre film, a strange cross-breed, an author's film, a gallery installation, or a community film. Each of these forms requires different but thorough technical procedures, they all depend on them. Cameramen, sound engineers, editors – they all submit one practical exercise after another at FAMU.

You have mentioned the "author's film." This is something quite specific for the Czech film industry. This fancy for the word "author's." Most often it appears in the credits, for example as "an author's documentary." But it also concerns staged films; recently, I saw a poster for "an author's horror." I cannot think of any other nation doing this. Why are we so obsessed with the word?

It is yet another way of categorization, an inaccurate evocation of the difference between audience-friendly films for or genre films on one hand and "the art" on the other. I think that using the word "author's" is rooted in the whole Czech context – unlike on some bigger markets, the producer's studio films do not prevail here. The head of the Czech crew is still the director, and they want us to know that by using the appropriation. I do not think that this is caused by some pressure felt by the FAMU students. Yes, the school wants to create a space where the individual creative voices collaborate, but the final way of expressing themselves can be varied.

There is nobody forcing the term "authorship" upon them, and no final film is disadvantaged for being a genre film. On the other hand, I do understand why young film-makers find the word "author's" attractive and want to use it to show us that they have found their voice.

In the era of many prominent productions moving to PC monitors and of on-line distribution channels being launched, what would you say is the value of the big screen?

While we need to support new kinds of distribution, the big screen is crucial and irreplaceable for me. When you say "film," the first thing I imagine is still the dark cinema, even though it may sound conservative. The film projection is the core of the experience for me.

I would like to tackle one of the more complicated topics: the position of women at FAMU. Despite the fact that in the interview you gave to Jindřiška Bláhová from the *Respekt* magazine, you seemed rather reluctant to talk about it. I do not want to pressure you into "dealing" with it simply because you are a woman, but I cannot pass it over in silence since I have already heard several female students confessing that they felt marginalized at FAMU at some point and some teachers behaved chauvinistic towards them. I must bring this up as one of the challenges you will face.

As for why I do not want to talk in public about certain communication habits or unacceptable behaviour, we can once again discuss the dangers and the lack of constructiveness of bringing the public into a complicated issue and making the discussion emotional. The public communication of specific cases could harm the victims even more, which is a paradox. On the other hand I realize that it is a highly emotional thing for women if they feel under such pressure, and I would never advise them to be silent about it. But I personally feel rather the need to stay calm and to look for a solution inside the institution. I cannot see how a discussion outside the school, let alone in the media, could help. I would even be afraid that the female students would be hesitant to speak out because it could jeopardize their personal lives.

We certainly need FAMU to be a safe place where nobody feels disadvantaged because of their sex, gender, sexual orientation, or ethnicity. I have heard many stories about how people can change when they are in power, mainly, but not exclusively, when the one in power is a man dealing with a woman. As I see it, the students should have the possibility to communicate with the school through specialized staff, and the management should react adequately and should not tolerate inappropriate behaviour and language. This problem is much bigger than us, of course; the whole Czech society proves that changes in deep-rooted patterns of behaviour are hard. It definitely does not mean, though, that we are supposed to yield the struggle.

We could also talk about the sad way of how these issues are often portrayed in the Czech films and TV shows.

Yes, we could; it is actually closely related to FAMU. We have been facing not only the challenge to solve these issues within our institution in favour of our students but also the challenge to teach them a sensitive approach so that they are able to reflect these issues in a productive way in their works if they decide to tackle them. The most important thing is for FAMU to be “healthy” with regard to this. Because the way we will approach this will become part of the formative experience of the young people and will influence them as artists and film-makers. We must be role-models for the students in addition to protecting them so that they could become role-models for their audience.

I do not want to pretend I have a simple solution ready. I think it is necessary to have a person in the school in whom each and every woman and man, students and teachers alike, could confide. But it is not a universal formula. Few people would seek help because someone made one joke at their expense in an ordinary conversation. But these little things add up, creating an environment in which people are divided into those who mock and those who are mocked or dominated in any other way. Usually, none of the minor offences is serious enough to allow for an intervention from the administration. We must therefore work on a collective improvement, we all must start to realize what we can do with words. I hope it will be easier then to isolate the individual problems. Easier said than done, though.

A postscript from August: I have already had some experience with this as a mediator, and I must admit it is difficult to deal with sexual harassment and inappropriate behaviour (for example inappropriate language), typically occurring between two people in imbalanced positions of power; having listened to stories of the true victims, my colleagues and I have come up with the following model which seems to be functional in terms of substantial and quick enough reactions. As of this September, there will not only be a school psychologist providing emotional support and help with inner power restoration, but also an ombudsman to whom both students and school staff will be able to tell about their experience and discuss their further options to solve the issues.

What is your opinion on the disproportion of women in certain film-related positions, specifically in directing? On the other hand, we have many female documentary film-makers – but I have repeatedly heard the explanation that women often turn to documentaries because it is the easiest genre for them to break through and they have no other choice. Which spoils the joy of the female documentary film-maker phenomenon.

I do not like it when I am asked to speak without having clear data, but my intuition tells me that there are still far less female directors and even less camerawomen and female sound engineers than the male ones. It is one of my goals to actively support women, to show them that they can

break through in film-making, and also to support them to try for higher academic degrees. Last but not least, we must be obliging when it comes to their motherhood, whether planned or existing. This is not a task just for FAMU, though; the conditions must develop in the whole film industry.

We have discussed FAMU in relation to the Czech culture. What is your view on FAMU International?

From the institutional and economic point of view, I can give you no unambiguous answer since many of the relevant information has not been made public yet and I have not been able to dive into this yet. The very principle of FAMU International seems to be a natural and integral part of the faculty. We want our students to go abroad; similarly to that, I understand that many international students want to visit the Czech Republic, and I think we are obliged to offer the possibility to them. The biggest weakness is the lack of promotion of the study programmes, though. To have talents from abroad visiting is not a charity thing, it is attractive for us. If we want the Czech film industry to be part of the European and the global contexts, this is one of the requirements. It is not always easy, especially since the international students must pay tuition. No matter who pays for that – the student or their university –, we must be able to give them reasons for joining us.

We have been circling around one of the hot topics: the employment options of the graduates. What is your plan in this area?

I have already talked about one of my plans – about FAMU’s permeability and ability to communicate with both other film institutions and the practitioners in the international context. The graduates must understand how film shooting is done and what the infrastructure of the film industry looks like. Another plan is for continuous feedbacks from the audience and a chosen distribution channel for which we must prepare our students. I would also like to introduce minimum competency lectures for teachers so that the students will be able to teach about films, as well as lectures in film curatorship and dramaturgy, to offer even more options to the graduates. If the postgraduate alumni could teach in elementary and high schools, the overall film literacy of the public would improve – qualified film teachers is what most schools lack in. But this is rather an extension of the subject offer; the most important thing is for film-makers to make films, of course.

A postscript from August: I want to add fresh experience with analysing the applications for one of the special development calls announced by the Czech Film Fund. Even though since my appointment I have not had so much time to do the expert analyses for the Fund, I appreciate that the Fund has prepared three special calls supporting various film industry segments affected by the corona crisis, and I would like to thank the Fund for that. I wrote several analyses for film and TV shows projects, and once again I must say that many of them totally ignored the style aspects. To make the authors to think about the audiovisual methods and the vehicles of expression, we must work on that with the FAMU students. They must know not only what they want to shoot about, what they want to say and with what story, but also in what way, with which directing method, with what approach to the visual, sound, rhythm and other qualities. These are the key competencies our graduates must not lack to be successful!

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SMITH

Droneman	(Czech Republic 2020)
Director and Writer	Petr Zelenka
Cinematography	Alexander Šurkala
Cast	Kryštof Hádek, Jiří Mádľ, Veronika Khek Kubařová, Zuzana Fialová, Richard Stanke, Helena Dvořáková and others
Runtime	110 mins
Distribution CZ	Falcon
Release Date	6. 2. 2020

One recurring theme running through different historical periods of the literary and film tradition is an individual's identification with grandiose ideas. This behavioural pattern mostly emerges in a crisis once we lose everything. It is a compensation act when the world around us is torn apart and the only chance of salvation is to gravitate towards the unchanged core of the collective memory. That is why we tend to idolize icons (much rather than persons), history (shared individual, collective and institutional memories), and we become attached to "our ancestral ideology", which we often scorn in periods of calm. Large scale historical events promote this philosophy even outside the frame of a work of art. It is a conscious defence mechanism used in an attempt to face the relentless pressure of the reality threatening to destroy all we consider important and valuable. This type of dramatic suspense may trigger various reactions, they, how-

ever, need to create enough space for the narrative, which subsequently shows little interest in details and trivialities of its protagonists. Such ground plan is typical for writer and director Petr Zelenka. His newest feature film, *Droneman*, is a continuation of the singular career of the director who switches between theatre, film, and television work.

Pavel (Kryštof Hádek) is Zelenka's classic character type, which has appeared in the director's works in a range of variations: he is resolute in what he does, he is at once fascinated and frightened by the loss of individual and collective memory, and due to his decision or circumstances he cannot / is unable to remain passive. In the case of *Droneman's* main character, Zelenka opted for an almost ascetic form. Following a shock from the death of a beloved person in a terrorist attack in Israel, Pavel returns to the Czech Republic with an increasingly clearer vision of what is indispensable or needed



in his life. He does not really understand what happened to his native land; he is learning the names of members of the government by heart the way a school pupil learns to recite a poem; he has no desire to build a career, or start a family, and, as a consequence, he is the embodiment of a traditional hero (at least in the literary tradition context) who approaches his thinking and acting strategy in the same way he approaches clothes he is wearing. The fact that his behaviour had been shaped by a shock, which is actually deeper than it might appear at first glance, can be also seen in Pavel's straightforward (and when it comes to social interaction also passive) attitude towards women. His dramatic counterpart is his ex-classmate Plech (Jiří Mádl) who works in the media as an operator of remotely controlled drones, which represent a currently attractive means of visualisation. They also represent - and here I believe that the social criticism of Zelenka's screenplays emerges at the very core of the film narrative - the stereotypical perspective and technique of the commercial and the non-commercial media world. Plech is a skilled businessman who transforms his looming life and social frustration into music: his nights revolve around aggressive rapping and contempt for social norms and rules, while his days see him willing to fight only for those causes that earn him money or that do not pose a risk to his social status. It is this confrontation of a childlike conviction with an adult calculation, which produces Zelenka's legendary irony, however, in *Droneman* it is veiled by the main character's audacious plan: Pavel wants to uncover illegal and immoral (two different things in the Western collective context) steps of the American government during its military operations in the Middle East and eventually also press charges against them. Once his chances for a legal implementation - and thus for a path, which is in line with the rules and the education system of the society - are ruined, he puts his plan in motion in a purely individualistic and activist way. Only the power of his conscience stops him and confirms - whether consciously or not - the social norms and the system he lives in. Everybody deserves compassion, after all.

Yet the almost detective plot using the context of conspiracy theories, which appeals to many, becomes a mere desperate torso, which, while silently omnipresent in the story now and then, is still rather naively mediated. What ruins it is probably the subject matter itself or from the fact that it is

a current topic. Zelenka's screenplays, and thus also his films, often use self-reflective approach like his previous film *Lost in Munich* (2015) which does not only centre on the historical event of the Munich agreement, but also on the work on Zelenka's film as such, which the crew try to finish in spite of all obstacles. It is a story similar to *The Karamazov Brothers* (2008), even though they are based on a famous literary text and a theatre adaptation by the Dejvice Theatre; and also to the playfully mystifying *Year of the Devil* (2002) and *Mňága - Happy End* (1996). "You cannot explain this to normal people, they just don't get it, even if it's right in their face", says Tomáš (Tomáš Bambusek) in *Lost in Munich* and he puts into words what not many admit to themselves and what only the seemingly naive young man dares to say out loud in *Droneman*: *Idiota De Mente* is solidly rooted within the European philosophical tradition, however, there are only few spectators who face the present day and are willing to see what is right in front of their eyes. In other words, it is easy to discuss what was, but it is creatively naive to see the present day through a romantic character pointing out wrongdoings (or even crimes) in a collective consisting of individuals who often use such wrongdoings to build life stability (cruel and careless) and a feeling of safety (illusionary and selfish). Such an angle of reflection is completely different from the author's previous explorations of the lost and found of our common collective memory.

Droneman is remarkable by its theme, but what makes it rather interesting is what it actually does not have. Shaping reality through attractive shots from high above, which Pavel and Plech demonstrate in a truly visually attractive manner when making a commercial or during a luxury handbag show (in a wittily sarcastic and impressive sequence), is - I am afraid - more suitable to convey a commercial message rather than the author's reflection on our society's deliberate memory loss. Because - who is watching from above? The idea of such a droneman is as terrifying as everything that Pavel uncovers during his investigation. The compassion and sacrifice at the end, blurred out or even pushed aside by the current view multipliers belong to a different world than what Pavel tries to uncover in a systematic and desperate manner. It is a world that even the author himself would refuse to look at.

× Michal Kříž



Viva video, video viva	(Czech Republic 2019)
Writer and Director	Adéla Komrzý
Cinematography	Kryštof Hlůžke, Jakub Halousek
Music	Jan Hammer ml.
Cast	Radek Pilař, Petr Skala, Woody Vasulka, Steina Vasulka, Adéla Komrzý, Ivan Tatiček, Jaroslav Vančát, Věra Geislerová and others
Runtime	85 mins
Distribution CZ	Aerofilms
Release Date	13. 2. 2020

A playful revival of the beginnings of Czech video art

In July 1989 during the Salon art exhibition, the right-wing of the Industrial Palace hosted the first exhibition of Czech video art entitled Video Day. It was initiated by Radek Pilař, the pioneer of Czech video art, more known to the public as the illustrator who created the children's television program characters Večerníček and Rumcajs. In September 2018 the same venue hosted a re-enactment of the crucial exhibition. The idea was put forward by Pilař's granddaughter Adela Komrzý, a student of the Documentary Film Studies at FAMU, who was working on a film about her grandfather. When Pilař died at the beginning of the 1990s she was less than a year old. She used the re-enactment as an opportunity to discover her grandfather including the part of his work, which had been overshadowed by his more popular works for children.

The personal framing of the film is evident right from the first take, which is probably the only audiovisual documentation of a meeting between Pilař and the director who was an infant at the time. The family line is then elaborated by the author through readings of extracts from Pilař's notes. The voice belongs to her and she uses it as a means to enliven the legacy of her famous ancestor. The film revolves around the exhibition preparation and uncovers Pilař's thoughts and creations using his journals and home-made videos, creating an inventive combination of the past and the present, of the analogue and the digital media.

Komrzý also captures Pilař's friends and colleagues at their homes. Rather than approaching them as honourable artists who merit praise and respect, she chooses to treat them as ordinary human beings and witnesses of a particular era, its atmosphere, and its creative conditions. The con-



cept is well complemented by their occasional slips from their roles and inappropriate remarks. Those are humanizing moments, which would have been skipped in a serious documentary with “talking heads”. Personages whose work is now being subjected to serious critical evaluation at art schools ingeniously admit that their approach to the artwork was often intuitive and that they saw little importance to their works – they did not even consider them worth archiving. The latter makes of the author’s effort to bring back the memory of the first Czech video experiments in their diversity a detective work with a need to search for material remains of the early video art and its creation tools. Digging out history in the form of old VHS cassettes, dusty film reels, or computers with 1 MB of memory resembles an expedition to an enchanting land of primitive optical tricks, skipping images, cracking sounds, and computer graphics with a resolution of a few pixels.

Komrzý does not pretend to be part of the craft, she does not attempt to present a single version of the history that is right. Instead, she provides the space for several contradicting opinions on what video art was about and what purpose it served. In that way, she indirectly admits that her shooting of the film involved discovering uncharted territory. Therefore, she obviously does not offer a complex overview of Czech video art. Nevertheless, by showing portraits of a few “videists” together with numerous extracts from some of the films, she lets us have a taster of the context and circumstances of its creation..

The memories of Petr Skala, Věra Geislerová, Petr Vrána or Woody and Steina Vasulkovi help us understand that their creation of an artistic alternative to the “official culture’s filth” was not so much about their eagerness to fight against the regime, but simply a sign of indifference towards the ideologists of that time and their ideas on what should be created and how. Thus, professional comments of art historians and theorists are constantly balanced out by the personal drive of individual artists. Some of them do not hide their endless - and together with the playful narrative also rather contagious

- enthusiasm as well as their amazement about the amount of time and pages contemporary researchers devote to something they only took as a “virtue in despair”.

The artists casually tell the story of how they happened to become acquainted with those who were similarly “disturbed” and without a clear goal they started experimenting first with a film material they bought under the table and then with the first available computers. The film expresses and highlights the element of coincidence formally enlivened in the style of the humble beginnings of Czech video art. Some situations pretend to be captured by a shaky camera, damaged by picture interference creating the impression that we are watching a worn-out VHS cassette or play a pop hit in the background, which young people would last listen to thirty years ago.

One of the important components of the document, which provides a clearer view of the early Czech video art scene in the then socio-political context, is formed by the thoroughly exploited and well-selected shots from that period. Komrzý arranges them using witty associations and contrasts, and in that way, she offers a unique view of the late socialist and early capitalist era similarly to the way the “videists” did. Capturing the atmosphere is clearly as important to the author as providing the key facts. It is also apparent in the way she allows the scenes to fade out once the dialogues finish, which enables her to record moments of embarrassment and hesitation.

Thanks to how it stays on top of things and the fact that the director belongs to a different generation *Viva video*, *video viva* never turns into a non-critical one-sided celebration of half-forgotten geniuses whose free way of thinking in the times of oppression brought them nothing but trouble. Its fixed narrative structure, ceaseless flow, and natural humour manage to bring about a fascination with primitive animation even to an uninformed audience who will find the film as accessible as will the regular modern art gallery visitor.

× Martin Šrajer



Caught in the Net	(V síti, Czech Republic 2020)
Directors and Writers	Barbora Chalupová, Vít Klusák
Cinematography	Adam Kruliš
Music	Jonatán Pastirčák
Cast	Tereza Těžká, Anežka Pithartová, Sabina Dlouhá, Karolína Zachová, Vít Klusák, Barbora Chalupová, Barbora Potužníková, Renáta Androvičová and others
Runtime	100 mins
Distribution CZ	Aerofilms
Release Date	27. 2. 2020

Raising public awareness through emotions

Vít Klusák is known for documentaries where, similarly to his American colleague Michael Moore, he uses his camera to stir current social issues up like a hornet’s nest and, also like Michael Moore, he is often criticised on the grounds that he skews the result according to his proposition putting himself in the role of a moral judge without hesitating to ridicule his protagonists. Such criticism was sparked especially by his last film screened in the cinemas *The White World According to Daliborek* (2017) depicting an antisocial Neo-Nazi from Prostějov as a dummy and the Czech extreme right-wing groups as a playground for ridiculous weirdos. Three years after its release date, the conspicuous Czech filmmaker returns to the cinema with *Caught in the Net*. Its theme is online abuse of underage youths, a topic perfectly suited for Klusak’s typical documentary method.

Capturing adult men who seduce twelve-year-old girls through social networks on a camera would be rather difficult. The filmmaking team where Klusák was joined by the director and writer Barbora Chalupová and hired three youthfully looking actresses who were of age (Tereza Těžká, Anežka Pithartová, and Sabina Dlouhá). He built three children’s rooms in an atelier, created three new identities, and three new social network profiles - and an anti-tale was ready to begin.

Hence, altered reality and acted situations constituted an inevitable and admitted part of the concept. The film shows how the directors select the actresses, prepare the rooms and profiles. The trap is set to lure the so-called predators. Nevertheless, those soon start to exhibit such utterly despicable behaviour that the filmmakers’ manipulation will be seen as a required and desirable defence. *Caught in the Net* is a documentary with a clear assignment of ethical and



moral labels. Hardly anyone would dispute that the girls are cast as the heroes while the men who show them their penis after a two-minute talk are the villains. In this film Klusák does not need to put himself in the role of a defender of morality, the whole crew naturally occupies such pedestal. The venting of his shock, disgust, exhaustion does the same for the audience, he gives release to himself as well as to the audience using humorous moments and provides a feeling of the secure ground by forming a team of decent people who are constantly present in the studio during the longest filmed phase of the first ten days filled with chatting and skypeing. The spectator automatically shares the filmmakers' point of view and most likely he will be taken aback in the same way as the actresses by the speed and level of obscenity, arrogance, and absolute lack of interest in the predator's under age counterpart. Cyber grooming and sexting have been part of the public awareness to a certain degree. However, *Caught in the Net* represents a sudden wake-up call to such sleepy ideas. Live broadcasting of the evidence is significantly more telltale than statistics that Klusák and Chalupová used as their baseline. Already before its release date, the documentary served as a tool to raise public awareness and it became part of a wider informative campaign. The feature film version for audience above 15 was accompanied by a shorter version *Caught in the Net: Behind School*, which is suitable for audiences of 12 and older where the girls provide more advice on how to act in case someone finds himself in a similar situation.

The documentary screenings in different towns are accompanied by debates, which are as long as the film itself. *Caught in the Net* raises a lot of questions especially regarding the predators' psychology and our use of social networks. Even though it features for example a sexologist Renata Androvicova who has worked on the topic for a long time, the film spends little time addressing those questions. It focuses more on describing the events rather than on explaining why

they occur or on demonstrating how the online environment skews accountability. Only one confrontation with a predator takes place in the case of the so-called Ústečan who is recognized by the make-up artist Barbora Potužníková as a person in charge of children's summer camps. His tactics to deny his guilt add a notable piece into the mosaic of abrupt self-centredness and machist feeling of supremacy and untouchability, which are presented by the film through its frighteningly wide collection of male hunters. Even this topic remains on a descriptive level; analysis of chauvinism would move the film to another form. Vít Klusák together with Barbora Chalupová focus on providing information regarding the practice i.e. the process and tactics of online seduction, warning against the predators, and advice on how to fight them.

The confrontation scene is complemented by a part where a hidden camera follows a personal meeting of the girls with selected predators; the time when the girls maintained contact with the men from their real homes is not depicted in the film (for understandable production reasons). The timeline of the "relationships" might not be legible in the pile of strongly resembling online conversations, nevertheless, the key and essential facts about cyber grooming are not missing. The film offers a colourful novel spectator-friendly presentation of such facts using mediated experience and as such, it becomes highly emotional. Due to the clear definition of roles, it is easy to identify with the girls who cope with the situation astonishingly well both mentally and professionally while still showing their immediate reactions. Also, the audience responds, *Caught in the Net* is a film suitable for collective viewing in a cinema where the audience rides an emotional rollercoaster and then explodes in applause of satisfaction when at least a dog pees on the things of one of the predators at a coffee house. *Caught in the Net* is also a film with a mission, which does its best to trigger change.

× Iva Přivřelová



War Memorial	(Mohyla války, Czech Republic 2020)
Directors and Writers	Martin Ježek
Cinematography	Adrian Hoc, Lenka Kerdová
Runtime	35 mins

After violence

“Go!” says the Mother in Karel Čapek’s legendary drama of the same name to her son who faces self-destruction on the battlefield. War is near, behind the door. Expectations, goals, consequences on either side are unknown. The phenomenon of war, discord, armament is a forever fascinating theme...In his last project *War Memorial*, Martin Ježek draws on both Čapek’s legacy and the obsession with fighting, and warfare itself. Completed and presented for the first time in autumn 2019 this artefact turns obsession into an offer of an experience, of a shared immersion in an “audiovisual situation” brought to life, which had been methodically prepared following the tradition of the author’s worshipped structural film. What is the outcome of his film-fight, loud as a cannonball?

The shooting took place at the cult spot of Moravian communities engaging in their guilty military pleasure - Aus-

terlitz near Brno where the Battle of the Three Emperors took place. Every year at the end of November the area around the Pratzen Heights hosts weekend meet-ups aiming to re-enact the battle, which themselves are a staged reality – a documentary following a precisely rehearsed rhythm and an inner structure of participants’ reactions. Participants of this historical entertainment event undergo training, rehearse their choreographies, which makes it difficult for an outsider to join without due preparation. Nowadays the same goes for joining the army and entering the war in general as the army positions have become jobs, which one can get through completing the relevant degree. Yet none of this context or information is employed in the work by its author: Ježek plunges into the landscape of action chaos, the zone of dynamized co-existence in the state of emergency, he uses the energy of all those present in the scene (in the context, which, when



brought to action, performs a past image of itself). His Super 8 and 16 mm cameras are ready for action. Like weapons – instruments of power – they portray one of the last re-enactments of Napoleon's triumph. The footage was made into a 35-minute montage, which is then presented through live projections conducted by the author without any further framing. Unless we count the introduction or post-screening debate like the one which took place during the February release in the NFA cinema (in fact the film was released at the Ji.hlava Documentary Film Festival in the section Fascination: Experiments for experimental documentaries).

Ježek approaches this antithesis to the action film genre and to the entire history of the war-machinery narrative with a great amount of sobriety and, one could even say, with minimalist means. The structural mathematical code of the inner rhythm of the montage does not necessarily need to be examined for accuracy, it serves the creator as a score, a set of rules holding the edited footage together, similarly to keeping a regiment in the desired formation. What is important for the projection recipient is the resulting effect. Do we find ourselves in the middle of a battle, or is it obvious that the projected image of the events is filtered on several levels, bringing about a paradoxical estrangement? Nowadays, it is only logical, that the material's archaic tone as well as the presentation format represent one of the filters themselves. Instead of attempting to deepen flexible tendencies of the audio-vision called virtual reality, the author uses two synchronous projections to make the viewing more objective and to narrow the act of film viewing into a situation similar to viewing a sculpture. Ježek–archaeologist makes the spectator feel very lonely and

indifferent towards the war and the battle on screen. Does the leitmotif divert from fascination with violence to become a fight for its rejection? As the cyclical repetition of the used chorus from a popular children's military-themed song together with the playback of the radio adaptation of Čapek's play *Mother* using the voice of Otýlie Benýšková from 1953 in the soundtrack become almost unbearable, it seems impossible to fall in love with war through Ježek's film.

War Memorial strips the tumult of the battlefield of any fetishes or myths; it does not put it on a pedestal. One could almost say in today's context and global discussion about self-preservation chances of our society, Ježek's interpretation is heading towards an appeal – one that is blunt and rejects any compromise. Be a pacifist! Resist the temptations of your subconscious longer than Čapek's mother did and do not place a weapon in your son's arms! Rebel against violence and keep calm. In this way, *War Memorial* may turn out to become Ježek's entrée into the current geopolitical discourse, but it may also serve as a fragile personal testimony of visions or fears, which are already being imposed by the future covered in many shadows of dystopia and collapse.

Clearly, while it may be intoxicating and delightful, watching the projection in such form cannot possibly provide a smooth captivating experience. It rebels, crushes, stabs, beats, shoots, sounds, speaks, screeches, shines, illuminates. It points out and it rejects. Has any other Czech film of this year's passing season offered such a mixture of effects, emotions, and energy, such diversity and charge?

× Matěj Nytra



Havel	(Czech Republic 2020)
Director	Slávek Horák
Screenplay	Slávek Horák, Rudolf Suchánek
Cinematography	Jan Šťastný
Editing	Vladimír Barák
Cast	Viktor Dvořák, Anna Geislerová, Martin Hofmann, Jiří Bartoška, Barbora Seidlová and others
Runtime	105 mins
Distribution CZ	Bontonfilm
Release Date	23. 7. 2020

Havel’s Origin Story

Slávek Horák approached his biopic of the most important politician in modern Czech history, Václav Havel, not as a descriptive historical film striving for precision and detail, but as an introspective psychological drama. His *Havel* descends into the turmoil of the titular character’s internal struggles, love problems and prison torments, giving up on didactical labelling of time, places and people and alienating audiences from the story through its theatrical stylization. The film centres exclusively on the 1968 Soviet occupation and the normalization era whose main cruxes (the trial of the band Plastic People of the Universe, Charter 77, the secret police Asanace operation and the events of November 1989) it rushes through, perhaps because a more comprehensive interpretation of Havel’s life, Charter 77 inception and the end of the single party rule can already be found elsewhere, in the

works of historians (Jiří Suk for one) or the TV series *Czech Century* (České století, dir. Robert Sedláček, 2013-2014).

In Horák’s film, the rational, pragmatic, non-emotional, humble and shabby debater Havel from the *Czech Century* portrayed by Marek Daniel is replaced by a bashful, doubting, indecisive, introspective thinker wearing suits, smoking jackets, patterned dressing gowns and prison uniforms played by Viktor Dvořák. We’re watching a completely different Havel, even though the portrayal is congenial. Dvořák managed to flawlessly transfer onto the screen Havel’s inner light, charisma and the soft noblesse of a patrician emerging from the swamp of normalization which makes him respectful to even the lowest of the low.

The central theme of *Havel* is conscience. In the opening scene, Havel tells a foreign journalist that he is a dissident out of cowardice as he’s afraid of that “sticky” feeling of remorse



which arrives every time he does something wrong. The whole film subsequently deals with his inner struggle with his one concession to the powers that be. Havel is portrayed as an imperfect, indecisive, pliant man who still needs to grow into certain attitudes and actions. His essential support and counterweight to the state police who are trying to intimidate Havel into submission is a morally strong Olga, whose example ultimately helps him make his decision. He even uses her sentence structures (“we knew what we were getting into”). Without this strong partner – who, on the other hand, had a very passive role in the *Czech Century* – Havel would, according to the film’s authors, never become who he became.

Horák styled his film into a theatrical metaphor, in which the normalization era is an absurdist drama and people’s private lives during this totalitarian regime present a spectacle for the eyes of (un)authorized observers. Scenes taking place in public are approached with the detachment of nameless coppers and accidental witnesses, or with the enthusiastic air of epiphany of someone who just found his moral role model. The camera often focuses on Havel’s sensitive face, his wandering eyes looking for inspiration between different centres of attention. This way Havel remains a passive spectator during the trial with Plastic People of the Universe, only to later become the active architect of the hearing with the Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Prosecuted. Instead of reneging on his principles, he writes down his defence in the interrogation room and then walks directly into the stage courtroom, where he hands his notes to one of the justice system puppets, with the words “your lines”. The trial then sets off like a rehearsed number during which Havel is sentenced to four and a half years for subversive actions against the republic. If his plays were getting their inspiration from the state of the socialistic society, the film turns this perspective on its head and views the reality of normalization as the fruits of someone’s wild imagination.

Havel doesn’t offer us a more complex character of a foot soldier of the regime similar to Major Dočekal played by Igor Bareš in *Burning Bush* (Hořící keř, dir. Agnieszka Holland, 2013) or to Antonín played by Ondřej Malý in *Walking too Fast* (Pouta, dir. Radim Špaček, 2009). The police are defined by their ridiculousness as set out by their bizarrely formal diction, their pitiful existence by proxy when they devote their lives to observing the lives of others, and their fear of dissidents. Their push and pull with the actor Pavel Landovský, whose photo the wife of a brutal enforcer hides under her pillow, expresses the system’s fear of dissenters who put not only the apparatus itself, but also its place in the hearts of its own family – “the people” – in doubt. This system is guarding its comfort zone, sometimes with a certain doze of lethargy, sometimes

aggressively. It prefers to hide behind children, often those as of yet unconceived: random citizens point out the ruined future of the children of the dissidents, but at the same time they send their own children to get autographs from personalities with whom they wouldn’t dare incriminate themselves in person, despite obvious sympathies. On a train, Landovský is admired by the crowd and asked about his future roles, but only until conversation turns to the fight against the political conditions which make it impossible for him to continue in his acting career. The people altogether respect socialism as a game on silence without which it is difficult to achieve their destination in the peace and quiet needed for work.

Individuals scared and plagued by remorse can be found in the so called silent majority as well as among the dissenting and policing circles. The film doesn’t denounce human weakness as such but the monstrous state apparatus which already achieved what is a proven strategy of the political dummies of today: to divide the nation and label its citizens with ideologically symptomatic monikers. The herd will use these monikers to further polarize itself. This polarization of society is symbolized by the physical threshold dividing the “Plastics” concert in the pub’s lounge room from the tap room itself – it’s the border between the underground space where the “peacekeeping forces” run in to pacify the “disorderly” and the environment belonging to the “official culture” where the bartender is tiredly washing a glass in the sink full of dirty dishwater and, together with the atomized crowd of “good people”, watches the clash of the two factions with an air of disinterest.

More than anything else, Havel takes an observational and conciliatory role on this threshold between the worlds of the pragmatists and radical anti-regime activists to whom he feels the need to keep excusing the smallness and fear he himself experiences under the unrelenting pressure of the threats and surveillance. In Havel’s eyes, even the informer whom he supplies with tea at night and informs him of his plans so that his watch, which he has to perform, would be easier, is a victim of the unsuitable political system. He realizes that unlike an ordinary person whom the state powers would have an easier time trifling with, he is a famous “protected individual” who can achieve something both for himself and for others.

Even though Horák’s film does stoop to pandering to the audience through some jokes and sexual escapades, it remains a distinctive view of Havel as a man discovering his own strength in a society paralyzed by fear and resignation at all levels.

× Tomáš Gruntorád



Lost Coast	(Ztracený břeh, Czech Republic 2019)
Director and Screenplay	Jiří Zykmund
Cinematography	Jiří Zykmund, Petr Vejslík
Cast	Věra Bližňáková, Petr Bližňák, Petr Bednář, Milan Reichstater, Alexandr Hájek, RNDr. Miroslav Šebela, CSc and others
Runtime	78 mins
Distribution CZ	Pilot Film
Release Date	6. 8. 2020

An Elegy on the Expulsion from Home

Lost Coast is a documentary which opened in Czech cinemas in August having quite recently won the Andrej Stankovič Award. The award's purpose is to bring attention to those Czech cinematic enterprises which tend to be overlooked by the mainstream media. In this case the award managed to anticipate just that situation. The film, despite having received a special mention in the Czech Joy programme section of the Ji.hlava International Documentary Film Festival, really did not draw much media attention with its premiere, not even with its diploma from the so called "samozvanci" ("the self-constituted", title of the critics group awarding the Andrej Stankovič Award). And it shows that the local documentary scene currently tends to be more diverse than the non-documentary one.

The eponymous coast of the photographer and cinematographer Jiří Zykmund's film is by the Nové mlýny reser-

voir in Pálava where a very peculiar fishermen's community has been spending the best moments of their lives for twenty years now. The fishermen have, according to their own words, cleaned up and lovingly cared for the dilapidated piece of coast themselves. After landslides in 2014, however, the authorities have decided that their caravans and cottages must be removed. The loss of a favourite place called Mušov brings back memories of the flooding of a centuries old village of the same name which has fallen victim to the construction of the "south Moravian sea" in the 1980s. If Zykmund centred his documentary on the first Mušov's disappearance and the trauma of its five hundred inhabitants who had not agreed to the flooding, the documentary would have been much more dramatic. The expulsion of a band of peculiar characters doesn't seem like such an awful tragedy. However, the film puts the change in their live into the context of various



other changes connected to the reservoir which speak about a more general problem than a forceful move into a block of flats disrupting the union of a long standing couple.

Still, the lonely Věra Bližňáková, forlornly singing another one of the Czech evergreens and waiting in vain for her partner Petr, who is more attracted to water than to her, is a fairly apt closing image of this observational elegy on the various aspects of the relationship of man and nature. After a short opening sequence with archive footage showing the construction of the reservoir, the film starts with the same couple, still happily fishing together on the coast. Life in the community looks idyllic. Věra is preparing sandwiches, one if her younger neighbours is teaching his young son to fish, another is singing a Michal Tučný song about “not looking for a more beautiful world”. But Zykmund’s next trip to the archives and a moving picture of a dry tree trunk sticking out of the water bring a reminder of the forcefully flooded village and soon enough we find ourselves witnessing a new clearing out, burning, dismantling and tears.

The documentary spends a lot of time on the laments of the expelled inhabitants and later on their old-fashioned complaints about their partners and women in general and these episodes are not as rich in information as the inputs of the zoologist Miroslav Šebela, who informs us that the construction of the artificial lake in the 1970s and 1980s disrupted also the local fauna and flora, which was unique enough to cause the initial settlement of the Slavic tribes in the area. The use of the coast for human leisure doesn’t stop though. The Mušov reservoir coast now hosts both the Aqualand Moravia water park and the nearby camping site Merkur and the film captures both attractions as overcrowded commercial zones of organized fun which leave a meadow full of trash behind every day. The melancholy tone of the film also owes to the

music used, the oft repeated Shostakovich waltz in minor key only evokes the feeling of repeating past mistakes and going in circles.

Even though Zykmund himself does not appear in the film and his light and agile camera with which he has plentiful documentary experience is unobtrusive and observational, his opinions are quite apparent from the film itself. Not only through the choice of words with which the zoologist Šebela, standing next to the dilapidated church, the last surviving building of the old Mušov, predicts that the human population crisis is not going to end well. Or through making a connection between the end of the romantic relationships of most of the protagonists and the end of the fishing community or through the monologues of the fishermen themselves in which they remind us of their humbleness in contrast to the materialistic nature of others. The documentary does not mention the reasons behind the construction of the dam in 1989, such as an effort to prevent flooding. He empathises with the fishermen whom he also gives space, not the authorities which consider their shanties to be illegal and dangerous.

The focus of *Lost Coast* is on life changes caused by an external force, on the role the past plays in our present and it also touches on human egocentrism – all this on the story of outsiders who want to live their own way in their own fisherman’s pace, which only few have understanding for.

“The film provides a moderate examination of the basic questions of the human existence in a landscape that has been turned inside out. It’s a metaphor of a world which is falling apart and harder and harder to understand,” was the evaluation of the appreciative jury at the Ji.hlava International Documentary Film Festival.

× Iva Přivřelová



Charlatan	(Šarlatán, Czech Republic – Poland – Ireland – Slovakia 2020)
Director	Agnieszka Hollandová
Screenplay	Marek Epstein
Cinematography	Martin Štrba
Soundtrack	Antoni Komasa-Łazarkiewicz
Cast	Ivan Trojan, Josef Trojan, Juraj Loj, Jaroslava Pokorná, Martin Myšička, Miroslav Hanuš, Jiří Černý and others
Runtime	118 mins
Distribution CZ	CinemArt
Release Date	20. 8. 2020

The Secret of Urine

Where Marek Epstein has, while writing screenplays, so far mostly relied on his own imagination, Agnieszka Holland has been capturing the life stories of a long line of various personalities from Polish, Czech and world history. That is why their cooperation begged the question if, or how much, is the director willing to move away from her preferred approach to the biopic genre this time around. Even more so since the real Jan Mikolášek, a healer and a herbalist whose life *Charlatan* describes, is himself highly incongruous.

Despite having depicted some real characters in a relatively controversial light (*Total Eclipse*, [1995], *Copying Beethoven* [2006]) and in the miniseries *Burning Bush* (Hořící keř, 2013), with a screenplay by Štěpán Hulík, having been interested more in the viewpoint of a virtually unknown lawyer Dagmar Budešová than that of Jan Palach, the majority of

her filmography consists of classical biopics of personalities whose high moral credit is perceived as the status quo. The last person she granted the honour of turning his life into a film was the Welsh journalist who discovered the truth about the famine in the Ukraine in *Mr. Jones* (2019), preceded by, among others, the legendary outlaw who stuck up for the downtrodden (*Jánošík: A True Story* [Janosik. Prawdziwa historia, 2009]), a Polish priest disregarding state's prohibitions in the time of the Solidarita movement in *To Kill a Priest* (Le complot, 1988) or a Jewish intellectual who does not hesitate to sacrifice his own life when caring for abandoned children (*Korczak* [1988], directed by Andrzej Wajda with screenplay by Holland). All of these films can be praised for a lot of things but an original approach to the biopic genre is not one of them.

The road *Charlatan* has chosen is definitely a little more complex. Mikolášek himself spoke of million-headed crowds



whose pain he was able to relieve or even whose lives he saved through a simple analysis of their urine, but there is definitely no historical consensus on him being a purely positive character in the Czech twentieth century history. What remains ambiguous is his willingness to partially submit to the two totalitarian regimes as well as his basic character.

Even though Mikolášek is not tied by the Hippocratic Oath, he justifies his willingness to help Olga Scheinplugová and Max Švabinský, but also some prominent Nazis such as Martin Bormann and Karl Hermann Frank or the communist president Antonín Zápotocký, by his irrepressible need to heal. The creators largely ignore the question to what degree this owes to dangerous opportunism rather than selfless care for a fellow human being and they certainly aren't coming up with a possible answer – due to lack of incontrovertible historical proof we can hardly hold that against them though.

Where the filmmakers do cloud reality is Mikolášek's character and that is considerably harder to find an excuse for. The title character with the face of the uber-popular Ivan Trojan (in one of his most difficult roles to date) is far from your typical poster-boy hero an inspiration for whom we might look for in the thematically related Martin Frič film *The Secret of Blood* (*Tajemství krve*) from 1953, which is precise by the way it sticks to the genre rules even by today's standards. Jan Janský, the probable discoverer of the four basic blood groups, fought the incredulity of his colleagues and was able to sway them to his side using his unrelenting diligence and hard data. *Charlatan* doesn't tell us what politically unaffiliated doctors think about Mikolášek's undeniable

successes (but we do find out that he holds them in disdain). In any case, this arrogant narcissus fails as a role model of the virtues which tend to be accented in most biopics. Scenes revealing the even darker sides of his character still appear accidental and defy understanding in the context of the prevailing storytelling tone. When he brutally smashes a sack with unwanted kittens as a young trainee, when he forces his lover to poison his wife to make her abort their baby as a lovelorn man or at the end of the film, when he commits betrayal of almost biblical proportions as a convict arguing for his own life – in none of these situations is his act convincing. These and similar fragments are so outside of the overarching context that instead of adding dimensions to the main character they confuse the audience and pose new unanswered questions.

All this despite the fact that Holland and Epstein are no strangers to the art of functioning abbreviation. As a proof we can look to the secondary queer storyline describing a fictional intimate relationship between Mikolášek and his assistant. Even though, again, not everything is explained completely – especially regarding both men's marriages – their several explosions of joined (un)happiness never stoop to caricature. The sunlit and principally ephemeral moments create a suitable antitheses to the universal greyness of the prison from behind whose walls the hero narrates most of the story. Had the creators looked for the key to the healer's complex nature here, *Charlatan* could speak of it in a markedly more coherent manner.

× Ivo Michalík



Kiruna – A Brand New World	(Kiruna – překrásný nový svět, Czech Republic 2020)
Director and Screenplay	Greta Stocklassa
Cinematography	Stanislav Adam
Original Music	Pavel Jan
Runtime	87 mins
Distribution CZ	Pilot Film
Premiere	10. 9. 2020

When a Town Has to Move

Since Czech TV was (alongside FAMU and Analogy Vision) one of the production partners of *Kiruna – A Brave New World*, we can expect that audiences interested in the Czech-Swedish documentary filmmaker Greta Stocklassa's feature debut will live to see it on TV as well. In her work, the director, daughter of a Czech mother and a Swedish father, remains grounded both in the Czech context and in Sweden. As is clear from her picture, she's familiar with the Swedish environment and mentality. The stage for her story is a town called Kiruna, the Nordic centre of the iron ore industry.

When the film opened at the Jihlava documentary film festival last year, some expected that it could (or even should) win. The director's outlook is permeated by melancholy and aesthetising elements which consciously move the film's testimony to a visually arresting spectacle. As early as in the first

shot where a freight train cuts through a snowy landscape dotted with looming tree trunks like an infinite black snake are we captivated by the majestic silence and mystery.

This opening shot gives away how the entire shape of the film is going to be formed. It comprises of long, generally stationary frames (with the exception of those taken from a moving car) overlooking the action recorded with a certain curiosity but still in a detached manner. This approach can be labelled as observational since the author hesitates to wade into the matter she portrays even though the snips of reality chosen do show a clear creative intent. This is also suggested by the impersonal shots of people's faces through their reflection in the mirror. The three protagonists (Timo Vilgats, an aging middle school teacher, Maja Jannok Björnström, a student with native Sámi origins and Abdalrahman, a Yemeni immigrant) through whose eyes we watch, represent dif-



fering viewpoints which don't intersect anywhere and just pass each other without any overlap whatsoever and, what's more, are voiced almost inadvertently.

Kiruna is a small Swedish town located beyond the Arctic Circle, which means that it can boast several weeks of polar nights (when the sun doesn't rise above the horizon) and polar days (when the sun doesn't set below the horizon). The director, however, doesn't use this fact more than necessary, she just records it as something worth mentioning through the testimonies of the locals. What the sometimes constrained lighting conditions demanded though was some quality camera work by Stanislav Adam, which we can appreciate for instance in the moment when the bright red numbers of the timer light up a completely dark room with no need for additional lighting.

Kiruna's existence is tightly bound to both surface and underground mining of iron ore. It provides the locals with livelihood both in the mines themselves and in the services linked to them but at the same time it slowly but inexorably tears off pieces of their living space. That is why it has been decided to move Kiruna several kilometres away in stages even though the mining will eventually approach the new site as well. That's how the motive of the transport of whole houses becomes one of the key storytelling motives of the film alongside the movement of freight train cars observed both from a distance and from immediate vicinity.

Stocklassa set out to bring us closer to the everyday lives of the locals (including a tourist excursion to the mine whose wide tunnels look more like a motorway). She observes lessons in the local school, people spending time in the library and dancing at the disco. She also documents folk and school festivals usually connected to the native (Sámi or Lappi) peoples proud of their ancestry, as attested to by their traditional dress and choirs. She also captures conversations of the Arab immigrants. Only the mining company remains in the background. Despite the mosaic of many voices I consider the testimony presented quite vague or maybe blurred, almost liquid.

The older generation personified by the teacher has created strong emotional ties to the place and looks at the

imminent changes with a certain sadness, as suggested by the careful disassembly and transport of the gigantic model of the settlement (one of the press reactions even mentions a Forman-style view). The youngsters are more attracted to settling in more civilized parts and Maja herself is mostly pre-occupied by her origins which she uses as a defining building block of her identity. To the refugees, about whom we don't learn much and who hardly had any time to get used to the environment, let alone to become part of it, Kiruna doesn't mean anything and the motive of departure by train, which doesn't only relate to them, symbolizes a more favourable outlook than that promised by passive immovability.

Even though the director chose a slightly viciously sounding ironic title, *Kiruna – A Brave New World*, she's lacking a more constant, targeted anchoring of the chosen theme and approach. She only jumps back and forth between the Kiruna landmarks and looks at the individual characters in a majestic manner but without any clear message. Out of all the speakers who guide us through the story, the fate of Kiruna touches mostly Timo and not in an especially confrontational manner. On the contrary, the prevailing feeling is of conciliatory resignation. For the others, their personal business is more important to them, and the presence of refugees in the story is utterly redundant, mute as to the communication function and dictated perhaps only by the demands of „political correctness.“

Now a note to the treatment of music in the film since Stocklassa has incorporated a special original music (Pavel Jan composed various melodies including organ compositions played in the local church) which also works with noise, speech and singing originating in the filmed events. And she achieves a considerable dramatic effectiveness when she suddenly leaves the picture to drown in silence to touch the audience with even more urgency. In any case I have to point out that the audience members I'm speaking about are those responsive and aligned to the director's insight.

× Jan Jaroš



Shadow Country	(Krajina ve stínu, Czech Republic 2020)
Directed by	Bohdan Sláma
Script	Ivan Arsenjev
DoP	Diviš Marek
Music	Jakub Kudláč
Cast	Magdaléna Borová, Stanislav Majer, Csongor Kassai, Barbora Poláková, Pavel Nový, Petra Špalková, Zuzana Kronerová, Ági Gubíková, Robert Mikluš and others
Runtime	135 mins
Distribution CZ	Bontonfilm
Release Date	10. 9. 2020

Epic Illustration of History and Opportunism

An artistically ambitious collective portrait of Czech borderland throughout several turning points of 20th century. An epic historical drama exploring dilemmas related to the principle of collective guilt and state-organised violence not only during the rise of Nazism, but also during the reconstitution of Czech statehood after World War II. A film reflecting upon personal responsibility and guilt in turbulent history. That could be the description of *Shadow Country* directed by Bohdan Sláma and written by Ivan Arsenjev. In it, the authors return to the events taking place between 1930s and 1950s in a small border village Vitorazsk in South Bohemia. But the film's ambitions are betrayed by concrete poetic and dramatic solutions.

In Czech context, reference titles could be *All My Compatriots* (Všichni dobří rodáci, dir. Vojtěch Jasný, 1968) and *Habermann* (Habermannův mlýn, dir. Juraj Herz, 2010). In

contemporary international context, Sláma's black and white portrait of a remote and reclusive village collective during a turning point conceived as a film without a main hero is necessarily reminiscent of Haneke's *White Ribbon* (Das weiße Band, 2010) and *1945* (2017) by Ferenc Török, but without a comparably distinct unifying authorial gesture. It can also remind viewers of Pawlikowski's *Ida* (2013) but without its intensive visuals. Or even *Schindler's List* (dir. Steven Spielberg, 1993) without an effort to use the story to celebrate the heroism of an individual in the holocaust machinery. According to Sláma, the film's black and white stylisation refers to the amount of grey tones between black and white or, in other words, good and evil. That may be true, but a black and white stylisation at the same time implies artistic ambitions and the fact that the film takes seriously not only itself, but its historical theme as well.



Sláma's efforts to make a collective portrait are backed by the decision to use a widescreen format with dominant wholes. Sláma's long-term collaborator, cinematographer Marek Diviš shot the scenes in one take and often – for instance in the scene on the village square – filmed three plains at the same time. The character closest to being the film's main protagonist is Marie Veberová (Magdaléna Borová), a Czech woman who marries a German before World War II and is more a victim than a culprit. Josef Pacht (Csongor Kassai), a Czech inclining to Communism who married a Jew, may be a victim at first, but his ruthlessness after the war is rooted in his vindictiveness and the principle of collective guilt. Due to her youth, Pacht's daughter is one of the characters who doesn't fall too much behind. Others are guilty of not resisting injustice or their unwillingness to risk anything in order to defend someone.

As a period piece, *Shadow Country* is believable when it presents the factual core of concrete Czech-Austrian-German-Vitorazsk historical dilemmas. But it fails because of its psychologically shallow portrayals of individual characters: some merely represent national dilemmas and character types. For instance the motivation of Veberová (Petra Špalková) is basically reduced to a series of information and reactions to outside situations culminating when her decade-long agitation for the vision "Heim ins Reich" collapses because her son, whom she proudly sent to war, dies. On the other hand, *Shadow Country* doesn't explain why Marta Lišková (Barbora Poláková) passionately presses herself onto German officers and becomes the Führer's most ostentatious supporter from the entire village. She even makes a Nazi salute facing death.

The film also includes a downright problematic transformation of the "village idiot" played by Jiří Černý, who after more than two decades of life in the village becomes an utterly ruthless and heartless brute and a member of oppor-

tunistic Communist rabble with will to power. Within a fictitious work, there is no interpretation of this that would make sense. The collectiveness of the portrait and its national and historical nuances have taken their toll on the characters' psychology. In some situations, the performances of actors are undermined by bad post-sync. For example, in the scene in which the parson talks to expelled villagers in the woods, the authors mistakenly thought that the viewers will not notice how the sound differs with facial expressions.

In general, *Shadow Country* can be perceived as a historical image of opportunism. An image of how "little" people bend under the crushing weight of history or, on the other hand, more or less take advantage of power which gives them superiority over others. It implicitly contains a cautious criticism of opportunistic pettiness in the sense that we should all strive for higher ideals surpassing actual social profit. Regardless of nationality.

From the point of view of a society-wide discussion, this topically valuable film would have probably been more daring had it been published two or three decades earlier. It offers a historically indisputable spectacle based on the thesis "we need to remind ourselves of that." But its value increases when we look at it through the lens of history and conscience instead of looking for a creative authorial work. Compared to its ambitions, *Shadow Country* is a rather mechanical portrait of people caught in the turmoil of historic events. It assumes a civically justified anti-nationalistic and anti-opportunistic approach and affirms the undeniable need of historical memory. But it doesn't include a great dramatic tragedy, a historical paradox or a deeper deliberation on personal responsibility. Instead, *Shadow Country* is an epic audio-visual work constituting a methodical text on an important topic.

× Pavel Sladký



FREM	(Czech Republic – Slovakia 2019)
Director	Viera Čákanyová
DoP	Viera Čákanyová
Runtime	73 mins
Distribution CZ	Doc-Air

When We're No Longer Here

Viera Čákanyová's experimental essay *FREM* is a kind of follow-up to the Canadian documentary *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch* (directed by Jennifer Baichwal, Nicholas de Pencier, Edward Burtynsky, 2018). While the Canadian documentary eco-thriller explores the consequences of fundamental anthropocentrism, the Slovakian director doesn't portray humanity as a bad master responsible for the destruction of the planet, but rather as a relic of the past. She sets out to Antarctica which represents an era of "post-humanity" in which the organic world transformed itself into an icy digital land.

Čákanyová avoids the classical narrative of nature and popular science documentaries. She focuses on stylistic devices so much that the medium itself becomes an independent entity and thus also the key to interpreting

the film. A perspective of a stranger who uses his prosthetic eye to explore what remains from the human world comes with a profound existential report on the digital era of loneliness and cold. Unanchored camera wanders through the frozen terrain, changes its pace and direction and rapidly alternates between long shots and close-ups. Cracking of ice, crunching of snow and roaring of the ocean force their way through a layered soundscape with a rhythmical simulation of human breath. The manifested presence of the medium represents not only extreme subjectification, it also reflects the power of modern technologies which became the deities of new age. When a crack in an iceberg reveals a dreamy still life of primeval jungle with dinosaurs and icebergs transform into meteorites, a tunnel opens to take us into a different time and space.



Between Spiritual and Virtual

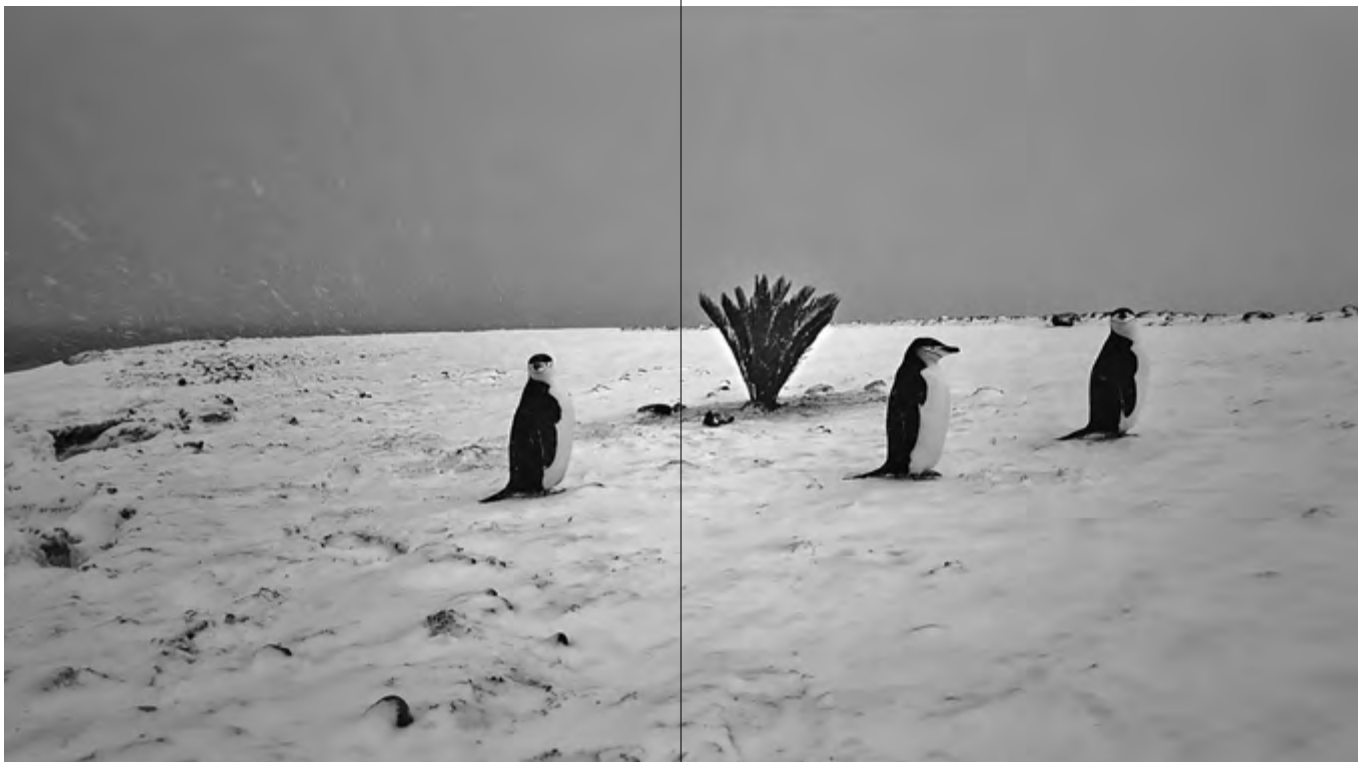
FREM raises an ontological question about the world. Throughout history, humans have been trying to go beyond the borders of matter and use religion, astral projections and chemical substances to achieve enlightenment. The desire to throw off the shackles of physical existence projects itself into digital technologies offering virtual reality with unlimited possibilities. But there is a gap between spiritual and virtual. Technologies don't represent a window to new worlds, but rather a mirror. The era of technology crashes into a barrier of infatuation with oneself and vicariousness. The prosthetic body of artificial intelligence collects information about outer reality and converts it into code without any possibility to connect to it. It is as if we held a glass, examined it from all sides but couldn't get into it.

The era of digital media has lost its authentic contact with reality to which the material "analogue prehistory" connected with body, senses and emotions. *FREM* bids goodbye to this organic world. It floods the viewers with nostalgic footage of sunsets, swarming animals, rich colours and an intoxication with the present moment. The time when the Earth was a safe haven and a patient host is now but a merciful dream. An escape from the understanding that civilisation is a self-delusion, a result of humanity's strenuous effort to cover the banality of its own existence. Only the fading sounds of American Christmas carols and compositions by J. S. Bach and F. Chopin demonstrate the absurd and monumental extent of the waning human existence.

The perceived proximity paradox is characteristic for Čakányová's film. The neologism in its titles refers to all things distant and alien. But at the same time, it names the innermost subconscious processes and we can even find the abbreviation REM in it, referring to the rapid eye movement phase of sleep. The perceived proximity paradox is apparent also in the language of the medium which represents an alienating element as well as a subjectification tool. Drone footage makes the landscape look so distant that it changes into a structure. Concrete entities become objects disappearing in the infiniteness of an abstract canvass. Antarctica confronts human microcosmos with the planet's macrocosmos; on one hand, it reflects distant planets, on the other inner human feelings, desires and frustrations, just like the planet Solaris in Andrei Tarkovski's film (*Solaris*, 1972).

Čakányová made a unique and interpretatively rich essay which, thanks to its open experimental form, generates many equally valid interpretations. But all of them intersect on an existential level best represented by footage of a polar explorer who built a replica of his living room in a small container in the middle of a snow plain and created a giant sign "say something" with his footsteps in the snow. It is a report on the loneliness in the middle of indifferent infinity.

× Janis Prášil



books

The Films of Paul Verhoeven: Nothing but an Auterist's Wet Dream

Flashforward. At the end of Book One in his monography *The Films of Paul Verhoeven* (Paul Verhoeven a jeho filmy), academic Zdeněk Hudec states that the cohesiveness of the Dutch director's work was best described by underground filmmaker Bruce La Bruce – due to obsessive themes and style, he characterised it as “an auterist's wet dream.” The mentioned book published this April by publishing house Casablanca as a part of its series about filmmakers can be rather “incorrectly” recommended only to those whose first wet dream (of auterism) didn't mark the end of their puberty. Although the previous sentence may come across as a caustic condemnation, a service text (not) recommending the book needs to state, highlight and underline the fact that the book is still worth buying and reading, even though it costs more than a dollar. The dollar reference naturally alluding to the iconic catchphrase from sci-fi action film *RoboCop* (1987), one of Verhoeven's most famous American films. If you recognized it but you aren't very familiar with the Dutch films of the discussed provocateur and prefer interpretations of themes and motives with regards to style, the book is just for you.

If you still want to know more (yes, a reference to *Starship Troopers* (1997), skip this paragraph as it was written primarily for those who don't know anything. The beginnings of book reviews usually don't pass verdicts, they introduce and put things into context. But the authors like them as it's quite easy to write introductory passages and they are paid by the word. As far as books on film are concerned, Casablanca is one of the most productive publishing houses and can boast some of the best arranged series. It publishes foreign books focusing on individual films (series Film Classics and Modern Film), original Czech titles in collaboration with various universities (Akta F, Film and History), collections and anthologies (Film Mosaic) and gives space to the authors themselves by publishing their work or interviews with them (Film Word). At first, its series Filmmakers targeted club audiences by publishing foreign literature (*The Cinema of Krzysztof Kieślowski*, *The Films of Ingmar Bergman*). First contribution by a Czech author was a monography of Sam Peckinpah (you can surely guess its title) for which Zdeněk Hudec won the Prize for Best Academic Work 2010/2011 by the Czech Society for Film Studies.



↳ Zdeněk Hudec: *Paul Verhoeven a jeho filmy: Nic víc než kus masa*. Prague: Casablanca 2020, 296 pages. ISBN 978-80-87292-49-5.

With his book *The Films of Sam Peckinpah* (Sam Peckinpah a jeho filmy), Zdeněk Hudec proved himself to be a rigorous researcher who doesn't succumb to period trends in case of theoretic paradigms and who can introduce an original perspective and inspirational observations. His study *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover* (Kuchař, zloděj, jeho žena a její milenec) only confirmed that. It profiled Hudec as an academic with a wide scope as each chapter differed greatly in methodology: from a stylistic analysis, his text moved to the intertextuality theory, then to symptomatic interpretation and ideological criticism and subsequently to psychoanalysis, genre and post-modernism without losing cohesion. Monography *The Films of Miklós Jancsó* (Miklós Jancsó a jeho filmy) expanded his ability to evaluate the given topic from various perspectives and find the best interpretation frame with a certain provocativeness as in his book drawing on ideological criticism, he defined himself against a static stylistic analysis and neoformalism in general.

His publication on Verhoeven doesn't include an "exhaustingly mechanic exact measurement of distances," nor does it aim to be an "analysis with seemingly empirical objectives of cinemetric and formalist analyses" as was mentioned in the interpretation of Greenaway's film. Hudec uses most of his 200+ pages to dissect a single stylistic method (mirrors in mise-en-scène), but he focuses exclusively on their symbolic function and their implicit symptomatic meaning. Instead of observing their variable function both in a single film as well as Verhoeven's entire filmography, he limits himself only to mirrors as mediators of power relations between characters. He leaves out other functions – for instance *RoboCop* and *Showgirls* (1995) use mirrors as means to reveal the original identity hidden behind a bodily surface. He doesn't bother to associate a detail to the whole on other than a thematic and motivic level, while the underrated anti-musical satire *Showgirls* uses mirrors not only as a significant element in the mise-en-scène, but it also uses mirroring as a unifying principle: the characters have their doppelgänger equivalents, many scenes show someone impersonating someone else, some sequences are mirror reflections of previous sequences and structurally, we can talk about two films in one – the second one beginning after roughly fifty minutes in the same manner as the first one. Beyond this promising observation, the book doesn't mention mirrors anywhere else, but it would certainly be worth it to elaborate it with respect to other methods including Verhoeven's long tracking shots helping the audience to find their bearings, express dynamics and hierarchy in given professions and groups and also rhythmize the plot with changes of perspectives and crowdedness of the scene. In a similar way, the author could focus on the unique editing against axis which has an interpretational potential in Verhoeven's films. But it's not a theme or a motive and so this observation is unfortunately not elaborated or exploited.

The previous paragraph didn't criticise *The Films of Paul Verhoeven* for not being primarily an analysis of style or poetics but used a concrete example to demonstrate that certain things with certain potential are not elaborated in the book. And that's why the by far weakest passage is the part of the book dealing with what it calls a deceptive narration, even though it probably means unreliable narration. Instead of a narratological or narratological-cognitivist analysis, it merely sticks with description of what was seen and at times moves to apparent explanation ("subjectivity disorder as a consequence of technologically mediated images"). In the given part, there is no individual input, but it is here that it would fit the most. Verhoeven's films are more interpreted than analysed, it is talked more about their reception and re-evaluation of original opinions during the titles' second life after they are released on various media rather than dealing with cognitive processes of the audience during watching. The attention could have been focused on clues providing information disrupting the alleged unambiguity of films *Fourth Man* (De Vierde Man, 1938), *Total Recall* and *Basic Instinct*, but

that would require not turning to existing interpretations or director's claims. There could have been speculations about where the narrative mind games lead in relation to themes and meaning: *Total Recall* ironizes canonical narrative, *Basic Instinct* is not only a pastiche but also a commentary of noir in reaction to changes in society. But Hudec focuses on the relation of fiction and reality and ignores secondary literature of narratological and cognitivist nature mentioning Verhoeven's neo-noirs and sci-fi.

The reason can be that the book has two stories, or rather unifying lines, which are supposed to supplement each other. Narrative number one is placing Verhoeven's work in the framework of realism (in relation to representation of religion) and naturalism (in relation to representation of violence and sex) to consequently move to the (a)politicality of the films. Unlike the book about Peckinpah, in which the ethnological grid was original and adequate, the book about Verhoeven uses a rather problematic frame of realism and naturalism. Realism can hold up as the list of work with religion and its symbols is based on Verhoeven's book *Jesus of Nazareth* which secularizes Christianity. But the list of religious allusions, references and signs could do without this book as the density of motives and themes in Verhoeven's filmography is self-evident so there is no need to turn to help to the director and texts from and about him. With naturalism, the problem is more complex. Hudec himself classifies violence in Verhoeven's film as campy and at times even mentions campy naturalism (!) and so he forcedly looks for similarities while neglecting the differences between the work of one filmmaker and the literary stream. We can only speculate about the reason, but in my opinion, it is connected to narrative no. 2 which permeates the book from the beginning to the end. Naturalism is an established trend with a certain value. Hudec therefore used it to elevate Verhoeven's work in the eyes of wide public.

Let's set aside that this approach is rather elitist. Hudec stands against popular writing which according to him neglects motives, themes and style thus reducing the auteur mainly to a skilful Hollywood craftsman. But this discourse was used here to refer about Verhoeven in the 1990s and not even exclusively; in the 2000s, a lot of books were published abroad, many thematic magazine issues were published in the Czech Republic, and the infotainment discourse changed. Hudec is flogging a dead horse here. He fails to see the irony in the fact that while Verhoeven wrote and directed his last Dutch film before moving to the US as a malicious mockery of his critics filling it with motives, themes and symbols that journalists lacked in his previous films, Hudec focuses on it.

The reason why he didn't surpass existing knowledge about the most famous Dutch director doesn't lie in auteurism, but in the approach to auteurism which assumed many forms throughout its history. Hudec never sees beyond the author, or against him for that matter, whether we're talking about a biographical author (Verhoeven's war experience, formative experiences from seminary), an implied author (ambivalence of titles readable as militarist or even fascist despite the proclamations of their real author), an author constructed from media texts (interviews and the "Jesus book")... Hudec uses all of them as it suits him and Verhoeven is always the instance and institution with the last word. I don't declare the death of the author, I just think that if Verhoeven was within auteurist discourse approached as someone who knowingly constructs his brand in the media, it could enable a critical view and help find knowledge surpassing the existing literature about Verhoeven. After all, some foreign publications depict Verhoeven to a certain extent as an opportunist filming satiric and moralistic titles but accepting the argumentation of ambiguity as it helps him to address broader audience.

The Films of Paul Verhoeven come across as a thorough summarisation. From this perspective, we can justify that it's divided into two "books" (two parts, each about 100 pages long). The First Book, as the part is called, is a biogra-

phy with a horizontal exposition, while the Second Book is an interpretation with a vertical exposition briefly outlined in advance (see chapter names: Jesus and Religion; Sex, Violence and Campy Naturalism; Between Reality and Fiction: Mirrors and Deceptive Narration; To Survive: The Chaos of History and the Disappearance of the Heroic Principle in it; Society, Ideology, Politics). The parts don't communicate with each other very much and the second part has isolated blocks connected by simple bridging between chapters creating the illusion of developing argumentation. I can't understand why the biography wasn't kept as an appendix, as it was in Peckinpah's biography and even in the much more cohesive, academically provocative and ideologically inspirational work *Jesus, Religion and Reality Status in the Films of Paul Verhoeven* (Ježíš, náboženství a status reality ve filmech Paula Verhoevena) which is a kind of first version of Hudec's expanded title published by Casablanca. With its journalistic style, the First Book is weaker than the second. Its schematic construction – from individual phases of production (pre-production, production, post-production) through distribution and at times propagation to the response of media – doesn't enhance readability much. Attempts to place it in the context of certain traditions are futile as other traditions remain ignored (the influence of giallo on *Fourth Man*) and some aren't even recognized. Besides, there is no systematic work behind that. There is also the matter of confusing earnings and profits and frequent ignoring of the films' second life resulting in an absence of comparison with sequels and remakes. And even when second life is reflected, it's not without omissions – just like in case of *RoboCop* where we don't hear anything about the second live-action series and a couple of animated series; *Total Recall* is addressed without mentioning a series and a remake. The book doesn't mention any games and comic books related to Verhoeven's American sci-fi films; Czech broadcasts of his Dutch films on cable TV and various cuts of *RoboCop* and *Hollow Man* released on DVD/BD aren't even taken into consideration. That's why the best part is the one focusing on *Showgirls* which maps the change of reception, and the worst part is the one about *Tricked* (Steekspel) which omits the problems of authorship in relations to a collective and populist creation. Disappointing is also the reductive approach towards referring about Czech perception of Verhoeven's films which sometimes misrepresents the facts (popularisation magazines gave above average ratings to *Hollow Man* and some even mentioned its moral elements) and at other times, the author selectively chooses what to (not) include (appreciation of *Starship Troopers* outside the academic community, ignoring the piece about *Tricked* published in Cinepur). But the worst thing of all is taking over Verhoeven's narrative about his own life and career which is not auteuristic (a visionary versus an institution), while it could have easily been pragmatic (moving to Hollywood as an improvement, long lasting desire to film genre films with adequate budgets). But if the biographical part is supposed to replace Rob van Scheersee's authorised book and the epic publication of Douglas Keesey for people without any knowledge of English or the internet, it will do.

Insufficient reflexion of limits is characteristic also for this critical polemic with themes and methods of application as well as gaps in the auteur approach. Setting aside Hudec's authorship which triggers certain expectations related to the aforementioned (original perspective, taking advantage of methodological variety, cohesiveness despite diversity, academic provocativeness), *The Films of Paul Verhoeven* is not a disappointment, it is comprehensible for a wide variety of readers even though it mentions names like Baudrillard, Deleuze and Thatcher, it's readable and not even the author's penchant for subordinate clauses and complex sentences obstructs the comprehensibility and fluency of the text. Extensive secondary literature and sources prove thorough research, but it's not without omissions (I didn't see Stevie Simkin's monography *Basic Instinct*; Hudec could have

also included Jan Borner's diploma thesis *Disembodied Movie Characters* written at the Theory of Interactive Media programme of the Masaryk University in Brno under the tutelage of Marika Kupková who served as a lecturer for Hudec's previous work on Verhoeven).

Many readers will surely praise the accessibility of foreign information from various sources without Hudec's excessive interpretation/analysis. The book includes many photographs (albeit without descriptions) which fittingly supplement the text. More knowledgeable readers familiar with books and studies on Verhoeven as well as films and TV series related to his work will probably commend passages about student films, well-argued original conclusions and a number of other observations (apoliticality, interconnection of style and themes). Taking into account Hudec's authorship but changing my optics to a more academic perspective, *The Films of Paul Verhoeven* is a testament to a thorough research work, wide focus and an effort to turn to neglected theoretic approaches without the need for exhibiting them. Despite the failure to comply with some academic norms (cohesiveness, communication between longer parts), the book is provocative and introduces an original point of view (realism and naturalism, apoliticality).

Just one thought to conclude. The book with *Nothing but a Piece of Meat* in its name is unfortunately nothing but an auteurist's wet dream. The title promised a focus on body as a unifying element in Verhoeven's works, to explore its representation, integration in social and political structures, its connection to media and media relations, genre and cinematographic traditions with regards to the referred etc. In other words, it promised to come with an original approach and create a cohesive and coherent whole. The first expert publication on the life and work of Paul Verhoeven disproves journalistic shortcuts (ambitionless craftsman, exploiting chauvinist) and comes with a thorough, but definitely not exhausting, list and interpretation of things that are most apparent event to laymen (religion, violence, sex, fiction and reality, history). It also presents a well-arranged account of the filmmaker's life and work including his often-ignored domestic work and summarises existing information. But we must hope this was not the last monography because if someone's work deserves interpretation as well as deep analysis, it is the work of the most famous Dutch director. However, the book is worth those few dollars, even if you don't learn more from it as it is at best a synthetic work.

× Marek Slovák