

002

FILM

006

A DOEBA

009

2021 — SPECIAL ENGLISH ISSUE — FOR FREE

014

017

023

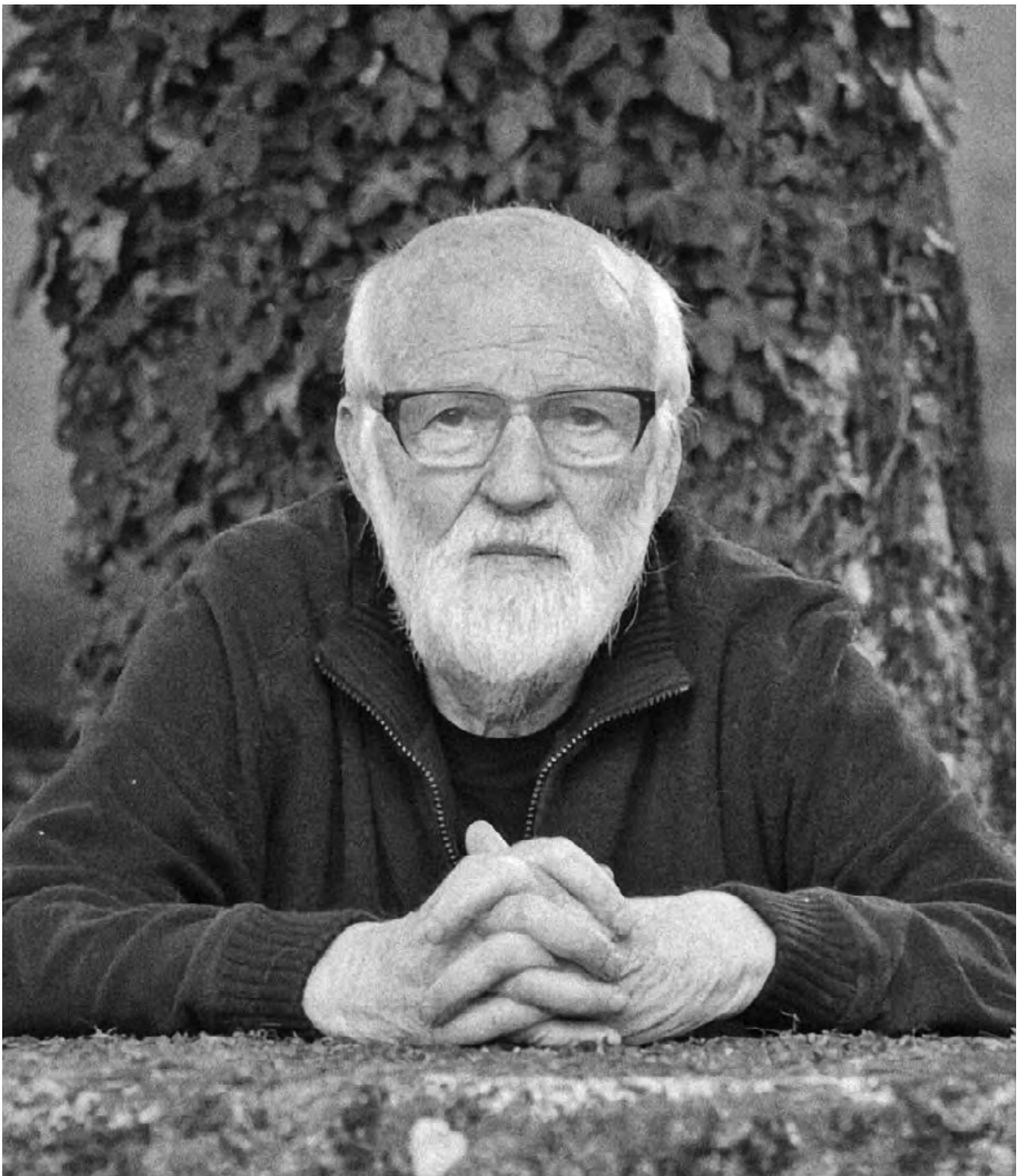
025

029

031

033

036



Forum – Czech film/Interview

002	Jaromír Blažejovský: Shadows of a brief summer — Czech premières of the past season	002
006	Natalia Něudačina: Czech animation in spite of the pandemic year of 2020	006
009	Martin Šrajer: What has remained under the net — Czech documentary films in 2020	009
014	Natalia Něudačina: Michaela Pavlátová: Holding up a mirror to human communication	014
017	Miloš Kameník: I'm a fragment collector — Interview with Ondřej Vavrečka	017

Films

023	Jan Daňhel, Adam Olha: Athanor: The Alchemical Furnace (Martin Šrajer)	023
025	Mira Fornay: Cook F**k Kill (Zdena Mejzlíková)	025
029	Jindřich Andrš: A New Shift (Michal Kříž)	029
031	Jan Prušinovský: Mistakes (Zdena Mejzlíková)	031
033	Martin Šulík: The Man with Hare Ears (Marek Koutesh)	033

Books

036	A Book About Vojtěch Jasný (Jan Jaroš)	036
-----	--	-----

FILM A DOBA

Critical quarterly journal dedicated to film and the times since 1955,
Special English Issue

Published by Spolek přátel Filmu a doby, z. s. with financial support of the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic and the State Cinematography Fund

Editor-in-chief
Eva Zaoralová

Executive editor
Michal Kříž

Writers
Jan Křípač, Martin Šrajer

Editorial board
Michal Bregant, Jan Bernard, Petr Gajdošík, Saša Gedeon, Pavel Horáček,
Milan Klepíkov, Karel Och, Alena Prokopová, Jan Svoboda, Zdena Škapová

Graphic design and layout
wonderyears.studio

Translation
Pavla Voltrová, Tereza Marková, Jan Koválik

Production

Vydavatelství Filozofické fakulty Univerzity Palackého v Olomouci

FILM A DOBA

Branická 620/124, Braník, 147 00 Praha 4
e-mail: lugardon@gmail.com
www.filmadoba.eu
filmadoba

Free of charge

Place of Issue
Prague, Czech Republic

Date of Publication
November 11, 2021

Cover photo
The Alchemical Oven (r. Adam Olha, Jan Daňhel, 2020)

ISSN: 0015-1068
Registered with the Ministry of Culture of the Czech
Republic under No. E 1569



↳ Shadow Country

Shadows of a brief summer

Czech premières of the past season

Jaromír Blažejovský

The coronavirus pandemic has knocked the Czech film industry from its historical peak. In the excited atmosphere of the sold-out screenings of Barbra Chalupová and Vít Klusák's documentary *Caught in the Net*, the cinemas had to decrease their capacity by the hour and close down completely three days later. There were no screenings from 13 March till 10 May (in Cinema City multiplexes till 25 June), and then again after 12 October. According to the Film Distributors Union, only 6,384,953 people visited Czech cinemas last year, which is the lowest annual total ever. The number of screenings fell by 46% year on year, and the number of tickets sold decreased by 65%.

The average number of viewers declined from 34 to mere 22 viewers per screening. The reason was the impoverished offer (with promising premières postponed both globally and locally), hygienic measures (limited number of

viewers, required spaces between them, obligatory masks) and pure aversion to the risk of infection. It was mainly the Hollywood products that lost the most. Czech films didn't suffer that much: while under normal circumstances, they had been seen by an impressive 22% of all visitors, in 2020, they completely prevailed with a share of about 55%. If a viewer dared to visit a cinema, he or she mainly did so to watch a Czech film. But even the Czech films didn't fulfil their potential, especially when they were only screened shortly in early autumn.

History like modelling clay

The brief summer relaxation of measures was dominated by three films, receiving also the most Czech Film Critics' Awards and Czech Lion Awards nominations later. All of them go back to recent history.

Bohdan Sláma's first non-authorial opus *Shadow Country* (Krajina ve stínu, 2020) was made at the initiative of the producer Martin Růžička, having engaged the screenwriter Ivan Arsenjev. It is based on the intricate destinies of residents of Tušův Suchdola between the 1930s and 1950s, including the massacre on 25 May 1945 with 14 locals ending up shot dead in a pit. It was written about the film that it was too expensive (CZK 40 million) and too long (135 minutes). In my opinion, it should have been more expensive and longer. There was a potential to breathe in and produce a large epic similar to Bernardo Bertolucci's *1900* (Novecento, 1976). I can imagine an at least four hours long colour film river in two parts with a break in the middle.

Unfortunately, even though the Czech circumstances are no longer modest and are capable of producing a larger project, they are still not generous enough. Rather than creating a medium-quality mainstream film, the authors went for a more minimalistic, but art-house way. Just like Václav Marhoul in his three times as expensive and only 34 minutes longer *The Painted Bird* (Nabarvené ptáče, 2019), Bohdan Sláma took the path of Eastern European modernist masterpieces. As he said, his inspiration was none other than Andrei Tarkovsky and his *Andrei Rublev* (1966). This style involves a complex mise-en-scene composition with deep spaces and a generous black-and-white widescreen 35mm material, which is nowadays a sign of artistic qualities, if not necessarily their guarantee. However, Diviš Marek's cinematography didn't have enough lyrical, transcendental time to reach its full potential, as it had to follow all those people and animals in their swarming and having sex.

But there has been enough of dramaturgical criticism. The film has defended its form. What I appreciate is the serious approach to the historical matter. The cruel settling of accounts with neighbours who were Germans or had joined the Germans was happening elsewhere as well after the war. The film does not deny a moral chance to its sinful characters. Not even the teacher Pacht deserves to become a massacre initiator. He is a bit more educated, was bullied in the past,

and came back from the concentration camp. He doesn't want to be a victim of history; he wants to be a history maker and judge. And yet he becomes a mass murderer. Paradoxically, it is him who could have had the courage to take action against the evil, if only he hadn't represented the evil himself. *Shadow Country* is a tragedy of the good which couldn't control itself, became proud, and got carried away with revenge. Instead of a black and white scheme, or a red one, for that matter, which often prevails in our reflections on our recent past, the film offers a sharper image of people lost in history. If we want to understand what happened in our country during the post-war decades, *Shadow Country* explains a lot.

It is symptomatic and probably also fair that both domestic annual Best Director Awards – from the Critics and the Academy – went to Agnieszka Holland for her *Charlatan* (Šarlatán). The competent professional has excellently mastered the Hollywood style, can skilfully work with accents and atmosphere, can surprise with her intention, lets Ivan Trojan shine. The tried and tested, albeit slightly mechanical narrative pattern alternating the presence with memories incorporates melodramatic and spiritual motives, intrusive symbolism, and tiresome music. The homosexual motive is the cherry on top, tasteful enough to appeal to critics and juries. If this is not enough, you can find some philosophizing about the symbiosis of good and evil in one person in the subtext. Also thanks to the intense images produced by the cinematographer Martin Štrba, *Charlatan* is thick syrup. At the same time, it radiates certain falseness. Marek Epstein's screenplay appears to be the biography of the famous healer Jan Mikolášek, but it makes him a victim of a political process. He was allegedly threatened with the death penalty as he was accused of herbal assassination of the head of a Communist Party neighbourhood committee in Kopřivnice. In reality, he was sentenced to three years for tax evasion. The film gives the impression that we should add Jan Mikolášek's name to the gallery of political martyrs of the 1950s. What appears theatrical is the scene in which the herb doctor is surprised by the news about the Lidice massacre, performs

↳ Charlatan



an “acting concert”, breaks the window, and cuts his healing hand endowed by God.

The Czech Film and Television Academy submitted *Charlatan* for the Best International Feature Film at the Oscars and succeeded: the film was shortlisted. Prudently, the Czech Film and Television Academy didn't send *Havel* behind the ocean, even though its author Slávek Horák asked for it, identifying the former President, himself, and his film in a funny way: “It would indeed be a great honour for me to represent the Czech Republic at the Oscars again.⁰¹ I think that Havel would be a great candidate for that. It is a personality Americans, and especially the American Academy members and liberal artists, remember from the times of his greatest fame.”⁰²

In Havel's story, the director saw a “Hollywood-like drama”⁰³, and he made the film in a way reflecting this. It is obvious that the target audiences aren't Czechs and Slovaks, but foreigners, knowing only the names of Havel and Dubček from our modern history. So it was necessary to put them together and arch a plot arc over their relationship. There are fewer situations where men are closer to each other than when they urinate together. Not only do the politician and dramatist pee together, but the master of the Theatre of the Absurd hurries to the Party leader with a bouquet in a servile way. This is followed by the invasion by five Warsaw Pact countries. And with the soldiers still under the window and before the kidnapped comrades returned from Moscow, the document expressing the agreement with the entry of the troops was already being signed in the theatre, whereas in reality, this only happened during the loyalty checks in 1970. The work is full of schoolboy errors: Alexander Dubček is referred to as the Gen-

eral Secretary, while he was in fact the First Secretary; on the radio, there is a mention of “comrade Dubček's government”, but the Prime Minister was actually Oldřich Černík. In portraying the year of 1968, Slávek Horák is about as reliable as Karel Steklý in his normalization pamphlet *Hroch* (1973). Later chapters do not care about accuracy either.

An old-timer can come to a sharp conclusion that someone who doesn't remember the past shouldn't tell a story about it. And that someone whose intellect doesn't match the brilliant minds shouldn't touch on them. The result cannot be a reliable reflection of the past, but only a mystifying fantasy, albeit with a funny punch line. As a fantasy, Horák's film is acceptable. Even though Havel was neither Dubček's fan nor rival, the attempt to capture our history “from Dubček to Havel” makes sense. It was a journey from the idea of democratic socialism to civil society, which Václav Klaus subsequently transformed into capitalism. The film is like a pictogram: we can see Václav Havel (Viktor Dvořák looks like him, he smokes in front of the camera and pronounces Rs wrongly), but otherwise we follow more or less gallant episodes, albeit not as funny as in Tage Danielsson's *The Adventures of Picasso* (Picassos äventyr, 1978).

A group of “shocked intellectuals” (Petr Pithart, Petr Janyška, Michael Kocáb, John Bok, Olga Sommerová, Fedor Gál, Petr Oslzlý, Lída Rakušanová, Jiřina Šiklová, etc.) protested against Horák's film in an open letter entitled “A few words: Havel was not a weakling, but a prototypical man of principle”. They claimed they had expected a film “about a great personality”, and what they saw was a “self-conscious character”. Oscar ambitions thus got into a conflict with requirements on historical authenticity.

Made by Peter Bebjak according to the screenplay by Petr Bok and Pavel Gotthard for the Czech and Slovak Televisions, the three-part miniseries *Actor* (Herec) demonstrates that recent past may be treated like modelling clay. It is not the first time the Stalinist era is used as the Wild West: fragments of real stories and situations are fabulated into adventurous fiction. The thriller about an actor, who offered

01 Five years ago, it was Slávek Horák's *Home Care* (Domácí péče, 2015) that competed for the Academy Award.

02 Karolína Minaříková Krupková, Hrdý pravdoláskař, *Esprit*. Stylový magazín *Lidových novin*. No. 7, 01/07/2020, p. 44.

03 Ibid, p. 43.

→ The Banger



his services to the State Security and was used to discredit prominent gays, was inspired by the story of the National Artist Vítězslav Vejražka who had later been revealed to serve as a “social agent”. The authors named the Mephistophelean State Security agent with a soft spot for dill sauce Korčák (which was the name of a Prime Minister during the normalization period), and the name of the officer seduced by the main hero by Korčák’s order is Kempný (like Korčák’s predecessor and later Communist Party Secretary). The names of the actors from the theatre ensemble (Švarcová, Pěničková, Sklenička) remind one of actual actors from the Central Theatre of the Czechoslovak Army (Jiřina Švorcová, Jiřina Štěpničková, Ota Sklenička). As if there weren’t enough jokes, the demonic villain and comrade Štěpánský’s rapist was played by Adrian Jastraban, the protagonist of *Dubček* in *Dubček* (dir. by Laco Halama, 2018) and in *Havel*. With its brutality and sexuality, *Actor* is joining the list of the works recently crossing the imaginary borders of public-service production: *Monsters of the Shore* (Vodník, dir. by Viktor Tauš, 2019), *Rats* (Zrádci, dir. by Viktor Tauš, Matěj Chlupáček, 2020), *Božena* (dir. by Lenka Wimmerová, 2021). The viewer is crushed by the made-up reflection of Stalinism assembled from true stories and events and carried away by the cleverly escalating plot. There will be no protest petition against *Actor* as the work is not trying to hide its fictitious nature and genre.

Bangers and Bábovky cursed in time

Yet another example of skewing the history is Lukáš Bulava’s acclaimed documentary *Video Kings* (Králové videa), presented as “the story of those opening the door for Western culture”, so that people “could watch films they would otherwise never have seen”. From the beginning, the film gives the impression that no Western films were allowed during late socialism, because “the Communist had a problem with everything”. As if smuggled VHS tapes were the only way chosen connoisseurs could watch *Alien* (dir. by Ridley Scott, 1979; Czechoslovak Socialist Republic premiere in 1983), *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (dir. by Steven Spielberg, 1981; Czechoslovak Socialist Republic premiere in 1985), *E. T. Extra-Terrestrial* (dir. by Steven Spielberg, 1982; 1985), *Flashdance* (dir. by Adrian Lyne, 1983; 1987), *Jaws* (dir. by Steven Spielberg, 1975; 1976, second premiere 1988), or film adaptations of Karl May’s books filling the cinemas since the 1980s again. It is not fair to the employees of Filmexport and the Central Film Lending Office of the time taking care of purchasing quality films, nor to the cinema operators screening them. Only in the second part devoted to the era after the 1989 revolution, it turns out that “people were glad they had *Terminator* and didn’t have to go to the cinema”. As such, the video kings were mostly home birds preferring very poor film copies with grotesque unofficial dubbing to the perfect image and stereo sound in the cinema behind the corner. However, they probably paved the way for the trash infiltrating the cinemas and legally distributed videos after 1989.

Boldly released in still half-closed cinemas in June, *The Banger* (Bourák) written by Petr Jarchovský and produced by Ondřej Trojan tries to reach the present from the garages of the wild 1990s. As a rock’n’roll retro musical, this misstep reminds one of *Big Beat* (Škalalí léta, 1993) by Petr Šabach, Petr Jarchovský, and Jan Hřebejk. It develops the ancient pastiche poetics of the Sklep Theatre. With its simulation of a crazy party, it draws on Otakáro Maria Schmidt’s *Eliška Likes It Wild* (Eliška má ráda divočinu, 1999) and the killer stupidity of backwoods dullards is reminiscent of the American series *Fargo* (2014). It also profits from the newly discovered atmosphere of socially excluded areas made popular by the series *Most!* (2019).

No matter how much *The Banger* is trying to deserve “with blood, tears, and sperm” its spot at midnight screenings at festivals for hardened viewers, it doesn’t go beyond the stereotypical view taken by metropolitan filmmakers on losers from the social periphery: poor people are portrayed

as picturesque freaks whose stupidity is to blame for their misfortune and played by elite Prague actors, this time again by Ivan Trojan. *The Banger* is frolicking in the dark because the nostalgic rockabilly subculture it tries to imitate doesn’t have much background here. Too far from Elvis Presley, too close to the 1990s.

Princess Cursed in Time (Princezna zakletá v čase) represents an updated pop culture model. The director Petr Kubík, screenwriter and composer Lukáš Daniel Pařík, and producer Viktor Křištof tried to revive the worn-out genre not with politicizing banter like the infamous *The Magic Quill* (Čertí brko, 2018), but with a spiral-like narrative and Hollywood superhero patterns. The bewitched princess repeatedly wakes on the same day, having to do everything again, but in a different way. Ellena (Natalia Germani) is not a delicate lady, but a tough action girl accompanied by the ironical archer Amélie played by Eliška Křenková using the estrangement effect. The image intensity sometimes reaches the heights of John Boorman’s *Excalibur* (1981). It is hard to tell how much fun it actually is for children or families since the number of viewers was distorted by the pandemic. Nevertheless, the young creative team showed a different, shinier door to the world of imagination than those leading to the gardens of the proud and incredibly sad princesses of the past.

This time directed by Martin Kopp, the third part of the series produced by the Pálava winery Vican *The Grapes 3* (3Bobule) was the most visited film of those having premiered during the pandemic. However, the weekend cinema attendance statistics were dominated by *Bábovky*, only screened for 18 days. Together with the director Rudolf Havlík, Radka Třeštíková remade her best-selling book of the same name (with more than 160,000 copies sold), about women pushing their way through relationships and life, into a screenplay. This involved keeping seven heroines out of twelve and transform the network narrative from short chapters told by the individual women in first person narrative into parallel stories culminating in the meeting of all protagonists at one time and place, showing that “we are all connected”.

Fashionable twenty years ago, the narrative form produces plots like from Grandma’s drawer and standardized types: prostitute, manager, teenager who is the daughter of another mother... As expected, the guy freak show looks even worse: unfaithful married man, coldhearted pimp, numb husband, teenage drug dealer, egocentric politician. Actresses and actors produce one-liners, everything is moving, everything is all right from the film perspective. *Bábovky* is a pointless, yet potentially self-ironical fight with banality, in which the empty words of the polished politician best express the polished film: “... we go through very similar things [...], sometimes we feel lonely and sometimes lost.”

Tomáš Polenský’s debut *The Pack* (Smečka) about bullying in a junior hockey team only spent four days in the cinemas. Regular production of problematic films for children and young people died away in the Czech Republic thirty years ago, and the attempts to draw on this tradition remain rare. *The Pack* succeeds at playing out a conflict, but it doesn’t solve it according to pedagogical handbooks. It shows that adults aren’t allowed or able to help the bullied children. No enlightened instructor appears on the ice rink. The film is remarkable for the skilfully taken shots of hockey matches.

During the pandemic crisis, news about projects in progress started appearing in the media: Petr Václav finished the biography of the composer Josef Mysliveček *Il Boemo*, the bestselling author Patrik Hartl is preparing an authorial comedy *Prvok, Šampón, Tečka and Karel* (Prvok, Šampón, Tečka a Karel), Tomáš Hodan is making a skiing drama *The Last Race* (Poslední závod). The premieres of the megafilms *Zátopek* (dir. by David Ondříček), and *Medieval* (Jan Žižka, dir. by Petr Ják) have been postponed. Cinemas, productions, and distributions can apparently recover quickly from the crisis.



↳ Sh_t happens

Czech animation in spite of the pandemic year of 2020

Natalia Něudačina

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, 2020 was a year of great changes for filmmaking all over the world, not excluding the Czech animated films. In addition to cultural events such as festivals, fora, and workshops that had to be cancelled or postponed, the covid-19 pandemic also hit the production and distribution plans of authors.

And yet, the beginning of 2020 was surprisingly successful also due to the fact that the short puppet film *Daughter* (Dcera) by the student of the Academy of Performing Arts (FAMU) Daria Kashcheeva progressed to the Oscar final and among other prizes, it was awarded the Short Film Jury Award for Animation at Sundance Film Festival. The same festival also saw the screening of the successful animated film *Sh_t happens* by directors Michaela Mihalyiová and Dávid Štumpf who were shortlisted for the prestigious César Award of the French Academy of Cinema Arts and Techniques this year. The short animated film *Leaf* (Lístek) by Aliona Baranovová from the Tomas Bata University in Zlín was screened at the seventieth Berlinale. The film school students again proved that they are able to produce quality animated works.

The pandemic didn't prevent the four student films in competition categories from being released at the greatest international festival of animated films in Annecy, taking place online for the first time. In the Short Films category, it was the Czech-Belgian co-production film *Carrousel* (Kolotoč, dir. by Jasmine Elsenová, 2020), in the Graduation Film category it was *Way of Sylvie* (Podle Sylvie, dir. by Verica Pospíšilová Kórdič, 2019), one part of the *Večerníček* series *Hungry Bear Tales* (Mlsné medvědí příběhy, 2020) by Kateřina Karhánková and Alexandra Májová was involved in the TV category, and the music video for the song *Tíseň* (2020) of the P^A^S^T band by Alžběta Suchanová and Nora Štrbová took part in the Commissioned Films category.

Already in March, the Association of Czech Animation Film reacted to the advancing coronavirus crisis with an arti-



↳ Even Mice Belong in Heaven

cle entitled *Where does animation stand in pandemic times?* (Jak si stojí animace v době pandemie?)⁰¹ on their website, pointing out that animation is one of the stable fields making it possible to continue in remote production even in times when the rest of production is subdued due to the crisis. The text also mentioned long-lasting problems and risks haunting the Czech animation (for instance not utilising the economic potential of Czech animated films or the lack of film incentives) and called for diversification of economy in the Czech film industry, for strengthening the segment of animated content production, and mainly for production of feature films and animated series which could employ hundreds of film workers.

Not even during the lockdown did authors of animated films forget about viewers who couldn't visit cinemas for a long time as all cultural facilities were closed. The distribution of many animated films was moved online. Czech VOD platforms expanded their offer by several short animated films. You could find the newest films not only in the online video library Aniont, presenting Czech short animated films for years, but also on the Aerovod and dafilms.cz platforms.

The Prague FAMU didn't forget about children either and compiled a series of the best short animated films for children from the past ten years entitled *From FAMU to Children* (FAMU dětem). The successful films by Kateřina Krahánková, Alexandra Májová, Martin Smatana, Diana Cam Van Nguyen, Jakub Kouřil and others were available for free until mid-April. FAMU then introduced the best of the newest animated films for adult viewers in the FAMU in the Cinema (FAMU v kině) series; on Aerovod, you can watch the award-winning *Daughter* and *Sh_t happens*, but also Barbořa Halířová's poetic playful film *Hide'n'Seek* (Schovka, 2019), Nora Štrbová's portrait of a loved one *S P A C E S (M E Z E R Y, 2020)* Adela Křižovenská's document about institutional care *Forget Me Not* (Kdo se mnou zatočí, 2019), or the above mentioned animated satire about women's multitasking skills *Way of Sylvie* by Verica Pospíšilová Kórdič.

In addition to animated series, fans of animation could watch the works by the current young Czech and Slovak il-

lustrators and animators thanks to the Domased online gallery launched in April 2020, reflecting the general situation of society, strange feelings of timelessness and psychological tiredness felt by many during the lockdown. Full of visual puns, personal insights, and humour, the project was initiated by Kamila Dohnalová, Karolína Davidová, Dávid Štumpf, or Michaela Mihalyiová.

Also the online platform f-a-t.cz (Film, Animation, Theory) for sharing animated film content was created last year, containing animation related articles, reviews, podcasts, and a database of personalities in the Czech and Slovak world of animation. It is obvious that the pandemic experience was often inspiring, encouraging authors to find alternative ways to share their audiovisual content.

In some respects, 2020 was even groundbreaking for Czech animated films. After many years, the Czech Film and Television Academy finally included the Best Animated Film and Best Short Film categories in their Czech Lion Awards. In addition to the Czech Animation Council annual awards given in the Anifilm Czech Horizon competition to nominate Czech films to international film competitions, it is the only independent Czech award for animation. This decision of the Academy shows that with the increasing quality of Czech animated films, the rest of the film industry can no longer ignore the needs of the field which has been unjustly neglected since the 1989 revolution. This year's Czech Lion in the Best Animated Film category went to Jan Balej's adventurous feature film *A Colourful Dream* (Barevný sen).

2020 brought significant changes into the festival world as well. The nineteenth International Festival of Animated Films Anifilm was moved both in time and space. Due to the restrictive measures against coronavirus, it was postponed from May to the beginning of October, and for capacity and strategic reasons, it was moved from Třeboň to Liberec after eighteen years. And since the government measures got tighter in mid-October, it was also the last Czech film festival that physically happened in 2020. Even though many offscreen events had to be cancelled, the film programme featured several remarkable short and feature films in Czech premiere. Among other films, the feature film competition included the new Japanese animated film on the border between tragicomedy and musical *On-Gaku: Our Sound* (dir. by Kenji Iwaisawa, 2019), the animated adaptation of an Afghanistan war drama *The Swallows of Kabul* (Les Hirondelles de Kaboul, dir. by Eléa

⁰¹ Jak si stojí animace v době pandemie? Asociace animovaného filmu, 25/03/2020. Available online: <<https://www.asaf.cz/2020/03/25/jak-si-stoji-animace-v-dobe-pandemie/>>. Cit. 04/03/2021.



↳ Hungry Bear Tales

Gobbé-Mévellec, Zabou Breitman, 2019), or the Romanian director Anca Damian's newest project *Marona's Fantastic Tale* (L'Extraordinaire voyage de Marona, 2019). By selecting the festival theme "Hear Animation", the organizers were trying to direct the audience's attention to music and sound in animated films and pay homage to Czech greats of film music, such as Zdeněk Liška, Luboš Fišer or Jiří Kolař. A lot of space was also devoted to Foley effects, with visitors being able to try out Foley techniques with the help of professionals from the Beep studio. The Anifilm's Lifetime Achievement Award went to the Czech sound master Ivo Špalj who has mainly specialized in Foley art during his nearly 60-year long career.

An important part of Anifilm is the rich industry programme, this time dominated by two events: CEE Animation Forum, one of the most important animation industry platforms in Central and Eastern Europe, and for the first time also Animation Espresso, a new pitching event mainly for young Czech authors with animation projects under development. While the Forum presentations took place online, the four-minute Animation Espresso pitching sessions could be held live in the festival centre. Remarkable Czech projects succeeded in both cases. The CEE Animation Forum Award in the Series / TV Specials category was awarded to the original animated series on the border between a fairy tale and mockumentary *No Happily Ever After* (Dozvonil zvonec) by Gabriela Plačková and Alžběta Göbelová, and the Audience Award was given to Eliška Podzimková's series *Baldies* (Plešouni), trying to familiarize children with the complex topic of cancer in a playful and comprehensible way. Within the Animation Espresso featuring 23 Czech projects, the main award was given to the short film for children in progress *Forgive* (Odpust) by Alžběta Mačáková Mišejková, and a special mention was given to Daria Kashcheeva with the highly anticipated symbolist film *ELEKTRA. A POEM*, mixing puppet animation with pixilation.

Even last year's Festival of Film Animation and Contemporary Art (PAF Olomouc) held in December went through great changes. The organizers decided to communicate the festival program subtitled *Domino* in three different ways: through exhibitions and performances in museums and public spaces of Olomouc, by distributing a PAF printed publication on the border between a catalogue and an anthology of authorial texts, and, unsurprisingly, by streaming the rich audiovisual programme (including the Other Vision moving image competition) online.

Even though it had been planned to release several feature animated films in Czech cinemas in 2020, their premières were moved to 2021 or postponed indefinitely due to the unfavourable situation. The long-awaited adaptation of Iva Procházková's book of the same name *Even Mice Belong in Heaven* (Myši patří do nebe) by Jan Bubeníček and Denisa Grimmová was supposed to première in last October, but the story about the friendship of a mouse and a fox in the animal heaven should only be screened this autumn. The première of the French-German-Czech co-production film *The Crossing* (La traversée) by Florence Miailhe was also postponed indefinitely. Made using the complex technique of oil painting on glass, the film about a dramatic journey of siblings fleeing an unnamed East European country should première at this year's Cannes Festival.

Currently being finalized, Michaela Pavlátová's animated feature debut *My Sunny Maad* (Moje slunce Mad) should theoretically also have its première this year. The relatively high-budget film about the experience of a Czech woman in the post-Taliban Afghanistan is currently striving for international distribution and participation in competitive film festivals. If we will see it in the cinemas this year is not clear yet. There are also two feature projects currently in progress, it is the adventurous animated debut *Heart of a Tower* (Srdce věže) by Peter Budinský in Slovak-Belgian-Czech co-production and the family film about a spider family *The Websters* (Websterovi) by Katarína Kerekesová, with which the director would like to build on the success of the children's series of the same name. It seems that the pandemic year hasn't stopped the development and production of many other hopeful animated projects to be distributed in the coming years, such as for instance Kristina Dufková's *Living Large* (Život k sežrání), Filip Pošivač's *Tony, Shelly and The Spirit* (Tonda, Slávka a génius), Martin Smatana, David Sůkup, Leon Vidmar and Jeana-Clauda Rozec's co-production film *Of Unwanted Things and People* (O nepotřebných věcech a lidech), Noro Držiak's *Michaela*, or Radek Beran's *The Proud Princess* (Pyšná princezna). Let's hope that in spite of all obstacles we can certainly await this year as well, Czech animation will stand strong just like last year and offer exceptional, internationally successful works.



↳ Caught in the Net

What has remained under the net

Czech documentary films in 2020

Martin Šrajer

2020 started well for the Czech film, and exceptionally well for the Czech documentary film. The documentary reality show by Barbora Chalupová and Vít Klusák *Caught in the Net* (V síti) has become the most successful Czech documentary ever. The three different versions of the film, i.e., *Caught in the Net*, *Caught in the Net: Behind School* (V síti: Za školou), and *Caught in the Net 18+* (all 2020) were seen in the cinemas by more than half a million viewers, which is more than for any documentary ever released in Czech cinemas. Exploring the world of sexual predators lurking on the Internet, the film also attracted the attention of the media including those that normally barely touch on documentaries. However, the journalists were more interested in the topic of the film than in the actual quality of the – not unproblematic – work, which is

rather typical of the Czech reflection of documentaries. The content beats the form, and it is often enough for a film to document a popular celebrity to be received favourably.

The authors of *Caught in the Net* were promoted by the media discourse to experts on the topic, and the film medium was degraded to a mere means of raising awareness and collecting evidence for police investigation. The fame of the film was probably one of the reasons why the film was also nominated to receive the Czech Lion Award in a different category in addition to the documentary one. For the role of a teenage girl chatting with strange men, Tereza Těžká received a well-deserved nomination in the Best Actress in a Leading Role category. Also the Czech film critics acknowledged *Caught in the Net* in more categories of their awards.



↳ Viva Video, Video Viva

With their votes, they secured the documentary's nomination in the Best Film and Best Director categories, among other things. Having only received four votes, Vít Klusák did not reach the second round in the Best Actor category.

However, *Caught in the Net* is an anomaly, and the attention it has received is mainly due to perfect marketing, an effectively presented topic and the willingness of journalists to take part in a would-be social event, and it is not an important step towards "equalization" of documentaries with live action films. What also played a role in the increased interest in Klusák and Chalupová's documentary were the anti-virus measures disturbing the distribution mainly later in the year. Many films were postponed due to the closed cinemas, while other ones premiered online. As such, the competition was by no means strong, and the cinema operators had no choice but to recycle proven films for a long time.

But we still shouldn't forget that in addition to *Caught in the Net*, there were 19 other feature documentary films distributed in the cinemas or online, and that documentary films made up half of all the films distributed. Looking just at the quantitative data, one might assume that 2020 was a good year for the documentaries. But even though the sides were evenly matched, the ranking list of the 50 most visited films – in addition to the three versions of *Caught in the Net* – only included *Meky* (dir. by Šimon Šafránek, 2020) with nearly 30,000 viewers (probably also due to the fact that it was included in the Tady Vary film show occupying most of the distribution network in July). The rest of the board was taken up by live action films. The only other documentary that did relatively well was the portrait of the mountain climber Klára Kolouchová *K2: My Way* (*K2: Vlastní cestou*, dir. by Jana Počtová, 2020) seen by around 13,000 viewers.

Closed cinemas, open online space

Mainly the fans of the Dunaj band probably liked *Dunaj of Consciousness* (*Dunaj vědomí*, dir. by David Butula, 2019), which according to the Film Distributors Union was the first documentary having premiered last year. Released still under standard circumstances, two films premiered in January: the exalting portrait *Karel Svoboda: Happy Years* (*Karel Svoboda: Šťastná léta*, dir. by Petr Klein, 2020), and the provocative half-documentary experiment *Moravia, O Fair Land III*. (*Morava, krásná zem III*, dir. by Petr Šprinc, 2019). Just like

Viva Video, Video Viva (dir. by Adéla Komrzý, 2019) having premiered in February, the latter was first introduced in the Czech Joy competition at the Jihlava International Documentary Film Festival. Shortly after the premiere of the documentary addition to Václav Marhoul's megafilm *11 Colors of a Bird* (*11 barev ptáčete*, dir. by Vojtěch Kopecký, 2020), which was more than obviously originally made as a DVD bonus, the cinemas were first closed – for a period between 13 March and 10 May 2020. After a short summer break full of Czech documentaries' experiments with hybrid distribution, the cinemas were closed again on 12 October 2020.

Most blockbusters didn't even reach the cinemas and weren't legally available online either. If the local distributors were experimenting with online releases at all, it was usually documentaries that served as test subjects – the very first one being the Slovak spin-off to Dan Přebáň's *Trabant* film series *Through Africa on a Pioneer* (*Afrikou na pionýru*, dir. by Marek Slobodník, 2019) –, because they normally don't break viewer records either. As such, the risk of financial loss is not that high. In the online sphere, the differences between single-screen and art-house cinemas on the one hand and multiplexes on the other cease to exist. The fee is usually the same and the quality of the screening depends on the home cinema equipment and Internet connection of the viewer. In spite of this "democratization", it can be more difficult for small films to reach and appeal to the right segment of viewers given the virtual world's fragmented marketing, the impossibility to meet face to face, and to organize live debates. This was also true for festival premieres moved to the Internet – for instance during the relatively well-managed online version of the Jihlava International Documentary Film Festival.

Moreover, the authors of smaller films going for online distribution had to deal with the competition of giant online video libraries providing a constant supply of broad but interchangeable and only rarely quality content for a flat monthly fee. Their hegemony is clearly obvious for instance looking at the preferences of users of the Czech-Slovak Film Database. Documentaries distributed by Netflix receive many more reviews than their Czech competitors (with the exception of *Caught in the Net*). It is not dozens or hundreds, but often thousands of reviewers. *David Attenborough: A Life on Our Planet* (dir. by Alastair Fother-



↳ The Alchemical Oven

gill, Jonathan Hughes, Keith Scholey, 2020) or *My Octopus Teacher* (dir. by Pippa Ehrlich, James Reed, 2020) are currently among the best rated films released last year. However, the preference for films offered by Netflix and HBO GO – not just the documentary ones – was also evident from what the Czech critics reviewed, commented on, and included in their annual ranking lists. If last year was favourable to documentaries, then mainly to those distributed by large streaming companies.

Ordinary and original monuments

The question is whether last year, any Czech documentaries were made and released – except for Chalupová and Klusák's hit – with a potential to cause excitement and have qualities comparable to foreign films. Going back to the most visited films and prizes awarded, it is obvious that documentary portraits are still very popular – with both academia and viewers and filmmakers who still love to make films about famous people. There are so many new film and TV portraits of people doing sport, politics, or art every year that for many people, they have become synonymous with Czech documentary filmmaking as a whole. And no wonder, because films about great and successful people, whom the documentarists surprisingly often portray as nearly perfect, stick to clearly defined conventions and the demand for them is a given.

The chronological overview of someone's life interspersed with talking heads and archive and private footage is rarely marked by greater complexity and an effort to present the person with all their flaws and contradictions. Last year's documentaries *Karel Svoboda: Happy Years*, *My Father Antonín Kratochvíl* (Můj otec Antonín Kratochvíl, dir. by Andrea Sedláčková, 2020), *Karel* (dir. by Olga Malířová Špátová, 2020), *Blood, Sweat and Tears* (Na krev, dir. by Erik Knopp, 2020), or *Pavel Černoš – Enfant Terrible?* (dir. by Olga Malířová Špátová, 2020) reflect the authors' undisguised admiration to those whose story they are telling. Moreover, the absence of a wider perspective is only rarely reflected. Czech documentary portraits are marked by gratitude to artists for letting the film crew enter their private space. There is no confrontation, no broader social context which could relativize certain decisions, no attempt to better understand certain problematic and unpleasant chapters

of the person's life (for instance Antonín Kratochvíl's multiple allegations of sexual harassment).

The uncritical homage to Karel Svoboda made by his son reminds one of a semi-amateur home video meant for the closest family members. It is symptomatic that only those colleagues of Svoboda are given the floor who were really experiencing the happy years mentioned in the subtitle, because they were willing and able to make conforming art during the normalization period, accepted by the regime and the masses. It is indeed a legitimate approach, but perhaps it not only reflects the director's humility towards his father, but also the reluctance of viewers or of Czech (and Slovak) society to critically deal with our late-socialist past. The greats of the normalization (pop) culture are embedded into established anti-communist narratives about silenced artists and a restrictive regime leaving no space for negotiations with the power and entering into mutually beneficial agreements. Just like many bitter-sweet comedies about the same period, films like *Karel Svoboda: Happy Years* or *Meky* reassure us that it was okay to conform and not to resist. The kindness and caution of filmmakers – with the exception of for instance Jan Gogola Jr. with his unconventional, strangely blurred and seemingly incomplete portrait of Jožo Ráž in *Eternal Jožo, or How I Met a Star* (Věčný Jožo aneb Jak jsem potkal hvězdu, 2020) – find support in the way we as a nation want to remember our recent past.

However, there was still some mild progress last year. It was not just men who received their own portrait – in *K2: My Way* and *Doggy Love* (Psí láska, dir. by Linda Kallistová Jablonská, 2020), it was women, and what's more, women provoking with their decision to resist the "traditional" gender roles. The protagonist of *Doggy Love* is the husky breeder and musher Jana Henychová. Many viewers didn't hesitate to share their opinion that she should leave the sled dog races to men and devote her time to her family. Also *The Alchemical Oven* (Alchymická pec, dir. by Jan Daňhel, Adam Olša, 2020) and *Viva, Video, Video Viva* with their freshly disrespectful approach fall outside the worn out portrait template.

It was *The Alchemical Oven* that has shown in the most convincing way that the Czech documentary portrait needn't just involve monuments made of talking heads and archive footage. Jan Daňhel and Adam Olša spent enough time shooting Jan Švankmajer to get to the essence of his thinking. They

created a playful and sharp mosaic portrait comparably original to Švankmajer's work in transforming dreams and reality into images and sounds. It is a shame that the viewers could only watch the most imaginative of all the portraits made last year on their monitors and TV screens.

Adéla Komrží's film went far beyond the portrait of the director's grandfather Radek Pilař. Uncovering Pilař's thinking and work using his diary entries or home videos together with the preparation of the retrospective exhibition Video Day 1989/2018 creates a story arc of a formally vivid multi-portrait of the first Czech "videists". It is clear from the statements of Petr Skala, Věra Geislerová, Petr Vrána or Woody and Steina Vasulka that if they were creating an artistic alternative to the official culture during the normalization period, it was not part of an active fight against the regime, but it was due to mere indifference to what should be made and how according to the censors of the time. Thoroughly collected and aptly selected archive footage plays a prominent role in the film, composed by Komrží based on funny associations and contrasts.

In the formally more rigid *Video Kings* (Králové videa, dir. by Lukáš Bulava, 2020) – which could be screened together with *Viva, Video, Video Viva* due to the same fascination with VHS aesthetics –, the exact and poignant editing represents one of the few special elements. The enthusiast film about the Czechoslovak unofficial dubbing nevertheless enchanted many film fans and critics. Just like in the portraits mentioned above, the 1980s are depicted outside of the political framework in this film. What matters here are nostalgia, collectors' passion, and fetishizing.

Stacking up funny stories associated with selling, borrowing, and watching pirated video recordings in the normalization and early capitalist Czechoslovakia in rapid succession and without much interest in the broader context, the film is still remarkable at least with its themes. Thanks to the dynamic editing and collage-like structure, it reminds one more of Western documentaries about various pop culture phenomena than of Czech documentary production by graduates from the Academy of Performing Arts. This is after all also true for the dynamic form used in *Meky*, which is also closer to the mainstream than clearly authorial documentaries and accommodates broader masses. It is probably not a coincidence that neither of the directors was shaped by the Prague Department of Documentary Film.

People and times

Well-known names attract people to the cinemas and TV screens more reliably than current social problems resisting the simplifying perspective of opposed black and white poles. Political and social matters of today haven't been at the forefront of interest of Czech documentarists for quite some time. The sixth and probably last series of the *Czech Journal* (Český žurnál) cycle was closed by three unconvincing films containing nearly no ideas (*Vojna Ztohoven*, dir. by Petra Nesvačilová, 2020), recycling one central idea all over again (*The Czechs Are Excellent Mushroom Pickers* [Češi jsou výborní houbaři, dir. by Apolena Rychlíková, 2020]), or including too many ideas without a central umbrella concept (*Hens, Virus and Us* [Slepice, virus a my, dir. by Filip Remunda, 2020]).

The absence of an opinion and of some enthusiasm for the topic is something we could also criticize about the winner of Jihlava's Czech Joy *A New Shift* (Nová šichta, dir. by Jindřich Andrš), which is mainly a well-constructed social drama about the situation on the changing labour market experienced by a dismissed Ostrava miner. Andrea Culková was one of the few moving from observation and reflection towards action in her participatory documentary *Grief* (Žal žen, 2020), focusing on Czech female members of the Extinction Rebellion movement. The shots from demonstrations, blockades and flashmobs the director was involved in herself are complemented by personal statements of the female activists explaining why they have decided to face the environmental

grief by direct action. The topic of social prejudice against people with physical and mental handicaps was only briefly touched upon by the positive documentary crowd pleaser *Two Roads* (Postižení muzikou, dir. by Radovan Šibr, 2020).

Also the first reflections of the quarantined life and the impact of the viral pandemic on the health of Czechs and the Czech healthcare were mostly apolitical. They were closer to mostly informative TV coverage than to engaged art, investigating and pointing out system weaknesses like the American *Totally Under Control* (dir. by Alex Gibney, 2020). In addition to *Czech-19* (Česko-19, dir. by Michal Kratochvíl, 2020) produced by the commercial Nova TV, there was a relatively objective documentary series *Hospitals in the Front Line* (Nemocnice v první linii, dir. by Zuzana Kirchnerová, Adam Olša, 2020) helping the viewers understand the situation in the health sector. Just like the conversation film *Spring in Peril* (Jaro v nouzi, dir. by Adolf Zika, 2020), the film was produced by the Czech Television. A valuable, albeit amateur chronicle is *Velký Šanc* (dir. by Ivan Kloc, Roman Cintl, 2020) based on interviews with ordinary citizens and representatives of the City of Tábor.

It was the inconspicuous observational film *Lost Coast* (Ztracený břeh, dir. by Jiří Zykmond, 2019), mainly telling the story about a disturbed symbiosis between different social and ecological systems, that probably brought the most convincing testimony about a part of Czech society mostly neglected by the media. Even though the documentary received Special Jury Recognition at the Jihlava Festival two years ago, nearly no one saw it in the cinemas, where it was first screened only in August last year. Made without much judgement and perspective, the esoteric *The Story of Tantra* (Příběh tantry, dir. by Viliam Polítkovič, 2020) suffered a similar fate, but in this case, it was more deserved.

Festivals at home, abroad, and online

The journey of "Jihlava" documentaries to the cinemas was generally more complex last year than in other years. The release of some of them was postponed several times, such as *Kiruna – A Brand New World* (Kiruna – překrásný nový svět, dir. by Greta Stocklassa, 2019), *FREM* (dir. by Viera Čákanyová, 2019), while others have not been released yet, e.g. *I Want You If You Dare* (Chci tě, jestli to dokážeš, dir. by Dagmar Smržová, 2019). Viera Čákanyová's antarctic visual essay suffered the consequences of covid just like *The Alchemical Oven*. Those who hadn't seen this film requiring quality sound and focused attention in Jihlava two years ago only had a chance to catch up on it online. A great complement to an experiment radically rejecting an anthropocentric perspective and giving the impression that it was made without human contribution was the very intimate and "humane" audiovisual diary *White on White* by the same director.

Released in the Forum section of last year's Berlinale, *FREM* was also one of the films improving the reputation of Czech documentaries abroad. *The Alchemical Oven*, the co-production film *The Vasulka Effect* (Efekt Vašulka, dir. by Hrafnildur Gunnarsdóttir, 2019), and Karel Vachek's last film *Communism and the Net or The End of Representative Democracy* (Komunismus a síť aneb Konec zastupitelské demokracie, 2019) were released in Rotterdam right at the beginning of the year. *Caught in the Net* was selected for the international competition at the Danish festival CPH:DOX. The Nyon Visions du Réel saw the release of *Wolves at the Borders* (Vlci na hranicích, dir. by Martin Páv) – one of the documentaries released last year having the most layers, together with *Lost Coast* – and the visually refined portrait of an artist *Traces of a Landscape* (Jan Jedlčka: Stopy krajiny, dir. by Petr Záruba, 2020). In addition to the Jihlava Festival, *A New Shift* also scored at the DOK Leipzig Film Festival. At the Amsterdam IDFA, Helena Třeštková presented her heartbreaking, nearly emotionally blackmailing time-lapse documentary about an elderly prostitute *Anny* (2020).



↳ Lost Coast

Several documentaries in progress were presented within co-production fora and international workshops taking place mostly online. At the ParisDOC Works in Progress, Erika Hníková presented her project *Every Single Minute* (*Každá minuta života*, 2020) about parents trying to raise a professional sportsman. Examining the impact of the Olympic Games on the locations where they took place, Haruna Honcoop's *Olympic Halftime* (*Olympijský mezičas*, 2020) was introduced at the prestigious Marché du Film in Cannes. Several hopeful Czech documentary projects were traditionally presented by their authors at the Prague co-production forum East Doc Platform or at the workshop of documentaries at the editing stage dok.incubator. What we can expect soon includes Adéla Komrží's *Intensive Life Unit* (*Jednotka intenzivního života*), Lucie Králová's *Kapr Code* (*Kapr*), and Miro Remo's *At Full Throttle* (*Láska pod kapotou*).

We will achieve an extension and slight modification of the picture of last year's Czech documentaries by including student films. Taking place atypically at the end of May, FAMUFEST introduced to the general public for instance the seven-minute long black and white essay *Mirror* (*Zrcadlo*, 2020), in which Juliana Moska partly draws on Evald Schorm's or Jan Špáta's poetics – without the mournfulness though –, paying homage to objects showing what things and people are actually like. The height of the Jihlava Festival Fascinace: Exprmntl.cz section was the suggestive and due to amplified sounds and accented corporeality also very physical confession *Nobody needs to know about this, he said* (*Zůstane to mezi náma, řekl*, dir. by Ester Grohová, 2020). In four minutes, the author processes the traumatizing experience of rape, pointing out the disproportion between the traces left by such an attack on the body and in the public space.

Unequal distribution of power

If we were to find an element Czech documentary films of 2020 have in common, it could be the constantly growing female voice, which was already obvious from the Czech Joy programme of the year before. Women directed or co-directed seven documentaries distributed. By including student films and films only screened at festivals so far, this number will grow significantly. It is the documentary sphere that shows the most significant trend of a growing proportion of women – be it directors, producers, or technical professionals – in the audiovisual industry, which can be observed in other countries for quite some time as well. It can be a consequence of the problem mentioned at the beginning – documentary films are still less prestigious, and hence the greater number of female documentarists needn't be a sign of equalization of opportunities. On the contrary, it shows that it is still men who get more opportunities to get involved in more expensive films.

It is a consequence of a situation omitted by the most successful documentary of last year. Men masturbating over teenage girls on the Internet are a symptom of a broader social and cultural failure. They are convinced about their privileged positions others should submit to. In the heart of the problem is the matter of power unequally distributed in favour of one sex. We should not forget the significant impact the media content surrounding us has on shaping this culture in addition to upbringing and peer pressure, with apolitical documentaries about uncritically celebrated men playing their role as well.

×

Michaela Pavlátová: Holding up a mirror to human communication

Natalia Něudačina

Michaela Pavlátová, an artist, director, animator and, last but not least, the head of the Department of Animated Film at Film and TV School of Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (FAMU), is undoubtedly one of the most prominent personalities of Czech and international animation and her works have repeatedly captivated both professional audiences and the public. After graduating from the Animated Film Studio at the Academy of Arts, Architecture & Design in Prague, she immediately made her mark with her short films, which have won numerous prestigious awards at festivals in Berlin, Annecy, Hiroshima, etc. With *Words, Words, Words* (Řeči, řeči, řeči..., 1991), Pavlátová even achieved an Oscar nomination in the Best Animated Short Film category. Her latest film, *My Sunny Maad* (Moje slunce Mad), which tells the story of a Czech woman's life in Afghanistan, can easily be described as one of the finest animated features in post-revolutionary Czechia, and its theme resonates more than ever against the backdrop of current events. One could even dare to say that Michaela Pavláta can be considered another great Czech animation artist after Irena Dodalová and Hermína Týrlová – not only because her distinctive authorial handwrit-

ing cannot be mistaken for anyone's else, but also because her capable pedagogical guidance favourably influences the work of contemporary young filmmakers, whose films are becoming increasingly internationally known at festivals abroad.

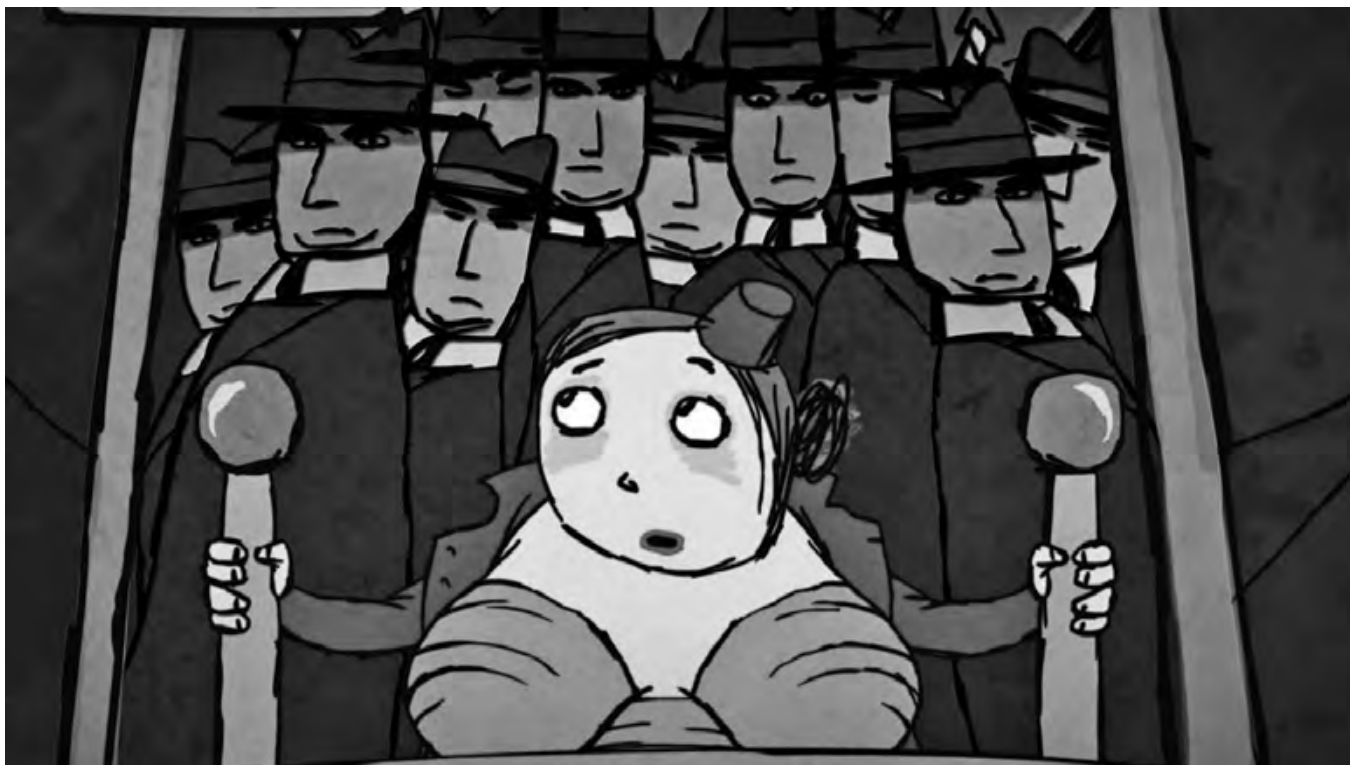
It is therefore surprising that while the works of her male colleagues (such as Jan Švankmajer, Jiří Barta, Aurel Klimt, and Jan Balej) have received a considerable amount of attention in Czech journalistic and scholarly texts, Pavlátová's work has not been explored or even characterised in any significant way – with the exception of a few interviews and one bachelor's thesis.

Insight, tragicomicity, humour, playfulness, characterization, simple but not banal art, and, above all, the complex portrayal of human relationships: these are the elements that are inherent in her films. Considering the topics she chooses, the message of her films is clear, congenially punchy, at times unusually feminist, and relevant even years after their first release.

Already in her diploma grotesque *Étude from an Album* (Etuda z alba, 1987) she reflects the ambiguous relations between men and women with lightness and exaggeration.

→ My Sunny Maad





↳ Tram

Using the example of problematic marital communication, in which the pompous, loud and insistent male letter A and the subtle and persistent female letter B stand against each other, Pavlátová uses a simple cartoon animation to draw attention to the stereotypes associated with both sexes.

She then develops this topic in *The Crossword Puzzle* (Křížovka, 1989), a short cartoon anecdote analysing the inner dynamics of married life, when the man's passion for the woman is replaced by a passion for something as trivial as crossword puzzles. Although the film moves towards a happy ending, Pavlátová takes an ironic view of the actions of the man who obsessively fills in the blanks and sees his wife's attempts for seduction only as an incentive to find the solution of the puzzle.

Words, Words, Words, one of Pavlátová's most acclaimed and original short films, is a subtle study of interpersonal communication with all its paradoxes, misunderstandings, joys, and disappointments. Few films have succeeded in faithfully portraying the variety of human speech in a café environment in such a short running time without a single word being spoken. A rude argument mingles with gossips, tiresome monologues, chatter, whispering, amorous sounding out, and silent understanding. Pavlátová convinces us that the words themselves are not that important, that the way we say them is much more fundamental and says more about us than we think. The individual types of conversations are interconnected by wandering, colourfully distinctive elements, and their emotional appeal is underlined by amplified foley effects and voice insertions performed by the master of sound Ivo Špalj.

Pavlátová followed this work with the short film *Another Go* (Repete, 1995), where she exchanged her interest in communication for exploring the complexity and cyclical nature of interpersonal relationships as a whole. Through repetition, rhythmization, gradual transformation and interweaving of four micro-stories, which are initially arranged side by side in

the form of loops differentiated by colours and composition, the director spins an unstoppable carousel of emotions and demonstrates the different perspectives in the understanding of relationships between men and women. Pavlátová offers the audience a feminist point of view (perhaps unintentionally). Although she does not judge the male characters, she depicts them as passive, insecure, desperate, or self-absorbed. On the other hand, her female protagonists may be victims of inner frustration in their stereotypical forms (the home-fire keeper, the lover, the rescuer, and the beautiful stranger), but it is they who are given an active role in the film and who manage to break out of the daily routine, at least for a while. However, according to Pavlátová, even disrupting the usual order and trying to bring about radical change are short-term solutions and even illusions. Having won the Golden Bear at the Berlinale and the Grand Prix in Hiroshima, the film points out that the differences between men and women, as well as the inevitable mundanity of everyday life, are not conducive to relationship harmony.

Together with documentary filmmaker Pavel Koutecký, Pavlátová takes a similarly reserved approach to the marital union in the film *Forever and Ever* (... až na věky, 1998), which suggestively combines documentary techniques with a number of various animation ones. What are our ideas of a relationship and what is its reality that follows the wedding day? Playing with hypothetical scenarios about marriage, the filmmakers reflect, sometimes cynically, sometimes hopefully, on a union that is increasingly seen by many as an anachronism. By contrast, the animated symphony *Carnival of Animals* (Karneval zvířat, 2006), based on a musical suite by Camille Saint-Saëns, has an unexpectedly positive, almost liberating tone. Animal, bizarre, surreal, and surging with unbridled energy, this celebration of sexuality teems with a variety of colours, characters, rhythms, and artistic styles. This bold film also received a Special Jury Mention, this time at the ANIMA festival in Córdoba.

Although Michaela Pavlátová has also directed feature films during her long career in addition to the cartoons, her films *Faithless Games* (Nevěrné hry, 2003) and *Night Owls* (Děti noci, 2008) differ from her animated works in terms of both content and form. In these films, she once again deals with interpersonal relationships, does not shy away from breaking down stereotypical ideas about men and women, and explores the psychology of her characters more deeply, but she does so (unsurprisingly) with a much lower degree of satire and self-reflection, and therefore also without the detachment that is so characteristic of the rest of her work.

Contrarily, a fresh perspective as well as a certain amount of humour, eroticism and empathy are present in Pavlátová's cartoon *Tram* (Tramvaj, 2021), for which she won the prestigious Cristal Award at Annecy, the Special Jury Prize in Hiroshima, and was nominated for an Oscar. Thanks to the simple stylization, humorously accented phallic elements, and appropriately rhythmic music from *Protector* (Protektor, dir. Marek Najbrt, 2009), this funny sexual fantasy of a plump tram driver whose monochromatic passengers pay no attention to her is a provocative, yet tasteful and affectionate film about women's sexual needs and the desire to escape the grey everyday life and loneliness.

Pavlátová has also recently scored at Annecy with her latest feature debut *My Sunny Maad* (2021), for which she won the Grand Jury Prize. Having been five years in the making, this Czech-Slovak-French co-production film is a loose adaptation of Petra Procházková's award-winning book *Freshsta* (Frišta), in which the author describes the experiences and everyday family life of a young woman married in Afghanistan. Although the original script by Ivan Arsenyev was intended for a feature film, the production company Negativ, headed by Petr Oukropec, decided to make the film animated. Due to its nature, animation makes it possible to show even the often-taboo reality in a mediated way and to present even the aspects that might seem too harsh in a live-ac-

tion film. Despite the initial concerns of the producers and the director herself about the suitability of the chosen subject matter, they succeeded in creating a multi-layered film with complex, highly realistic characters and situations that not only faithfully depict the environment of Kabul, but also the mood of Afghan society after the fall of the Taliban. The story of Herra, a student from Prague who falls in love with her Afghan classmate Nazir and follows him to his native country, is full of humanism and successfully depicts a little-seen combination of Western mentality and Eastern culture. Thanks to its ambiguity and authenticity, *My Sunny Maad* is nowadays often (rightly) compared to internationally acclaimed animated "classics" such as *Waltz with Bashir* (Vals im Bashir, dir. Ari Folman, 2008) or *Persepolis* (dir. Vincent Parronau, Marjane Satrapi, 2007). The film has the potential to attract international audiences not only with its strong theme and quality animation, but also with its sophisticated international language version, which features Dari Persian in addition to Czech and English. The different languages do not only serve as varied means of communication, but also have an essential function of meaning. And although it is a co-production, Pavlátová's style is still evident in the work – despite the dramatic nature of the subject matter, openness, playfulness and humour seep into the film, the understanding portrayal of traditional values of Afghan society is mixed with feminist attitudes, and the simple, yet obvious artistic stylisation is not lacking either. With this film, Pavlátová proved both to herself and to everybody else that it is never too late for an experienced film-maker to make a successful feature debut. What is perhaps even more important, though, is that in the endless flood of mediocre animated feature films produced in the Czech Republic after 1989, she confidently demonstrated that complex subject matter can be handled convincingly and with passion, never mind the feature-length animated format.

×

→ My Sunny Maad



I'm a fragment collector

Interview with Ondřej Vavrečka

Miloš Kameník

Ondřej Vavrečka – a graduate and teacher at Film and TV School of Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (FAMU), Department of Editing and Center for Audiovisual Studies), also works with music, poetry, theatre, performances, and visual arts. As a director and cinematographer, he has made several feature films: *Beginning and Lion* (Počátek a lev, 2009), *Ultimum Refugium* (Ultimum Refugium, 2011), *The Interposed* (Mezi námi, 2014), *De Potentia Dei* (De Potentia Dei, 2016, Award for Best Czech Experimental Documentary at the Jihlava IDFF, Special Mention at the Andrej Stankovič Awards). Last autumn, the film *Personal Life of a Hole* (Osobní život díry, 2020) premiered at the Jihlava festival and was subsequently released with Andrea Slováková's short experimental film *Five Hundred Plateaus* (Pět set plošin, 2020).

Vavrečka's work has so far stood aside from the interest of the wider public and often also of critics. In its creative freedom, it may remotely resemble the works of Jan Němec after 2000 or of Petr Marek. Neither established generic frameworks nor formal conventions apply to it. Vavrečka's films exploit everything that the film industry allows for. His source material is mostly documentary in nature, observational footage of political or public events is interspersed with interviews or short impressions. Starting with *The Interposed*, a number of playful, spontaneously performative scenes and animations featuring Vavreček's colleagues, friends, acquaintances, and strangers are added. The initial theme of the film is always explored through sub-motifs, often interconnected associatively. Vavrečka shoots exclusively on film stock, he structures his material in an unusual manner, and due to the lack of "film science nomenclature" his films tend to be classified as "experimental."



At the Q&A after the premiere of your current film *Personal Life of a Hole* (2020) at IDFF Jihlava, you said that you are not a cinephile. I wonder where your fascination with cinema comes from?

We had a very good senior year Czech teacher at our grammar school, Vladimír Nezkusil. He wrote excellent textbooks for high schools, recited with us, had a creative writing club. And once in class, when we were discussing the avant-garde, he said: “The beginning of the Soviet Union was connected with the avant-gardes and among them were the ‘montage workers’ who made films. Like *Battleship Potemkin* (Bronenosets Potyomkin).” And I thought: “Really? Film and montage workers?” What a word! In connection to films, of all. That’s when it started. I imagined films as various lines, ladders, jumpers, pulls and pistons, like a machine that jumps and goes back and forth. Like a golem or a robot, a strange, interconnected entity that one can construct and hold in one’s hands, a living organism-machine, mechanical and living at the same time. Something like playing the organ. When you play a fugue, interweaving different voices, you are the living thing, and the mechanical part is the pedals, the various pipes and pistons that are used to change the registers. Then I went to the Faculty of Humanities where Martin Čihák lectured, and somehow it opened up again for me and that’s how I got into film. I also made a film with a friend of mine, but we never finished it because I smashed his face under the influence of rum and then we weren’t friends any more. It was all very wild. It was supposed to be about how he paints and how a painting is made.

So the cinematic language that you still use today was formed on the basis of these montage ideas?

I also liked visual poetry, that’s one thing. The poetics of the typewriter. And I like children’s traffic playgrounds, it’s

such a small world within the big one, and at the same time everything works in there, concentrated to the maximum. I’ve also liked puzzles since I was a kid.

How do these things translate into your films?

In *Personal Life of a Hole*, for example, there’s a chapter on a “cultural hole” where I made up an etymology that looks like the real thing. The word “culture” comes from the *colere*, which means to cultivate, like growing corn. And when you spell the word “anger” in French without the accents, you also get “colere.” The same word! So we have this “angry culture.” In addition, there is Ondřej Skovajsa, an angry folklorist who rails against written culture. I like playing with various languages.

Those are the inspirational elements and motifs you employed, but how did you define the film for yourself in the stylistic, somewhat “cinephilic” sense? Did meeting Martin Čihák and the avant-garde open doors for you, for example?

Among other things, yes. For me, film is generally a means of not being afraid. I can do whatever I want there, it’s about surprising both myself and others. I am constantly working on this “not being afraid.”

Similarly to, for example, Jan Němec who was not afraid after the Velvet Revolution?

I like him a lot, but he had this special ambition, which his editor Michal Lánský told me about – to piss off the audience, and to piss them off real good. That’s not my ambition. I enjoy teasing people and pulling their leg within the dramatics frame of a given film, but I’m a truth-teller, I’m all about the “higher truth.” Similarly to the Masaryk’s famous credo: “Fear not and steal not.”



Fear not and make films.

Which means to steal! Yeah, but making films is an act of dying.

How do you mean? That the captured reality ceases to exist?

Exactly. And then the montage brings a new one back to life. When shooting a film, one needs to respect that each fact is montaged, and then to edit it in a way that makes the filmed bits of the montages come alive. To shoot in a montage-like way.

Have you ever tried to make a film without editing?

I wanted to, but the montage is everywhere. I tried to do a five-minute take, it's fun, but maybe I'm too impatient. It looks great, but I think the more important thing is... Bob Dylan didn't rehearse either, he just went straight recording because he needed that live moment. And that's the most important thing for me, that's why I base my work on documentary films, where the live moment is present and adds certain authenticity.

How did you come to study at VGIK? I don't know many people of our age who know Russian and went to the east to study.

I thought to myself: "Hey, where's the oldest film school? In Russia. Cool, let's go." Everybody goes to Erasmus to loll in the West, that pissed me off. So I went east. At that time, I was dating a Russian opera singer by coincidence, we met in Prague at the gatehouse of FAMU. She wanted the scores for Bellini's operas, so I got them from the library and went there to see her. It was New Year's Eve and I thought how good it would be to be there with her. I went to the VGIK, I didn't know a word of Russian, they didn't know a word of English, so I went for this Old Slavonic gibberish and

said: "Hi. I want to study here!" And the Slav brothers understood each other; they took me to the head and said: "OK, why not. We'll find someone here who will go to your country in exchange." It took a month and a half, then Ilya Tomasevich came to Prague, and I went to Russia. Ilya and I met briefly. He then founded the Department of Editing at the Moscow School of New Cinema; they have been repeatedly inviting me there to teach. And that was it. I spent six months there and it was bombastic. The school itself is not that good, but I had a lot of freedom, I read and translated a lot, I learned Russian, I always watched films all day on Wednesdays, so I got to watch a lot. The workshops sucked, which I came to understand after 14 days, but the lectures on Russian literature were good, even though I didn't understand Russian at first. I also went to the theatre a lot, like every other day. VGIK students have a card that allows them to go to theatres for free, and I've seen some good pieces.

How are Russian theatres different from ours?

It was a long time ago, maybe it has changed a lot, but I liked the fact that unlike us, they were not afraid of pathos, i.e., that something is suddenly happening in us and there is an inner transformation, which is important. Inner transformations are fundamental things in our lives.

And we tend to mock them.

Exactly. Czech jokes are beautiful and profound, but the real change in life happens during the poignant moments otherwise there is no change. I mean *pathos* in the original sense of the Greek *pathein*. I think I may have been influenced by Eisenstein a little as well. The moment of pathos, a passionate clash of two things when change happens. Maybe it's a bit of a mechanical idea, but that's another thing. It's funny how allergic we are to the word *pathos*.



Maybe it's because pathos is often artificial and fake, and we don't trust it in art.

But sometimes even the humour is contrived and fake. Things can be both good and stupid. It's funny how blind we are to that in this country. It's a category we don't want to see, and yet the poignant moments happen to us. After all, life is made up of moments that carry pathos and make transformations happen. So that's what I enjoyed in Russia. Of course, there is some terrible ballast and useless things, but this is the essential thing that is present.

Do you work with pathos in your films?

I'm a fragment collector. If you perceive fragmentation as isolated phenomena, the fragments contain pathos. You can imagine that the fragment is a piece of something bigger that is no longer there, that has had to undergo transformation, breaking off and getting lost. So maybe the very form that I use is made up of certain micro-theatrical moments, like when glass is being crushed.

When your films are talked or written about, words like "experiment" or "essay" are usually used, but I don't find them descriptive enough. How do you understand your films?

The word experiment bothers me terribly. As if every creation is not both an experience and a test. I am sure that I make normal films. They have a bit of everything, but I can't help it, for me it's normal, even if people call it experimental or what. What else to call what you do if not "normal?"

There are certain conventions about what feature, documentary and experimental films should look like. Can you enjoy a feature film conceived in a traditional way? Of course, I can. I watch them and enjoy them a lot.

As an author, do you have a strict rule that you want to make films in your own way? Aren't you be tempted to make an 'abnormal' film from your point of view, perhaps something genre-specific, with actors and more in line with the conventional ideas of what films should look like?

That's how I always start. I say to myself: "Ondřej, you're starting a new film, now you're going to cut it all down and make it as simple as possible." And then it always slips into this normality.

During the filming or even before?

I make these pictures first and then it snowballs somehow. Like I said, I'm a collector, so I collect ideas and pictures, and then it just emerges and connects itself. But back to your question about me making, say, a crime film. A year ago, I saw a play read, *2084* by S. d. Ch., and I thought: "Yeah, that's a great script, I'm going to record this play based on this performance. Theatre in nature." I asked the author and he said I could use it, so I started working on it. And now the editor Benjamin Kolmačka, who I'm writing the new film with, and I threw out that whole line. This always happens to me. But I'd like to try theatre directing, that would be fun.

What do your scripts and film themes look like? I remember once before a screening in Jihlava you showed around a sketchbook where you had some graphic diagrams drawn.

I've got it right here (*he pulls out of his backpack the script for Personal Life of a Hole in the form of two sketchbooks full of pictures, drawings, collages, clippings and notes; editor's note*). This helps me a lot to sort through it. I brought it on purpose so that we wouldn't just talk. This is directly about *Personal Life of a Hole*. One contains minor things, the

ideas one has, short texts, for example about Beethoven's last sonata, because that's a structurally beautiful piece, the way its duration differs when played by two different pianists. So these kind of extracts, a little diary, extracts from books...

So this is a kind of initial materialization of inspirations and impulses that you then translate into the film form?

Exactly. Sometimes it's even very precise, here I wrote how many meters of stock and what material I'm going to use, here I have a poster draft, etc.

Do you shoot exclusively on film stock?

Yes, I do. Every film is an opportunity for a new beginning, for something new, and there are so many possibilities that one needs to cut down on them, and the film provides you with exactly that. It's also very pedagogical, in a way it guides you internally. And how do you become a virtuoso? By playing certain instrument for a long time.

Do you edit the stock directly?

That's what I did in college, now I edit on the computer. But you know what, both when I was in school and worked with the stock, and now, even though I'm editing in Avid, it's still ingrained in me, and I still do it the same way. I'm constantly working with my hands, even if it's in my head.

Is it a bad thing if the viewer of your film doesn't understand all the motives?

It is not. Although the films are made with great precision, gravitating towards meaning. I think that the experience of not understanding, and that's where English speakers have a huge disadvantage, for example, is incredibly activating, educating, and opening for a person. It's one of the reasons I make films like this. Not understanding is important for us to feel alive. The normal progression of life, or the progression of love that lasts, is to make otherness even more different. We love what we are not, and at the same time we have to feel something for it because we love it. And that relationship is refreshed by the otherness, by the transformation. The important thing is not to fall sleep in relation to anything. To be there, to be present. And that's why I want to make the film *Fighting for Presence* (Boj o přítomnost).

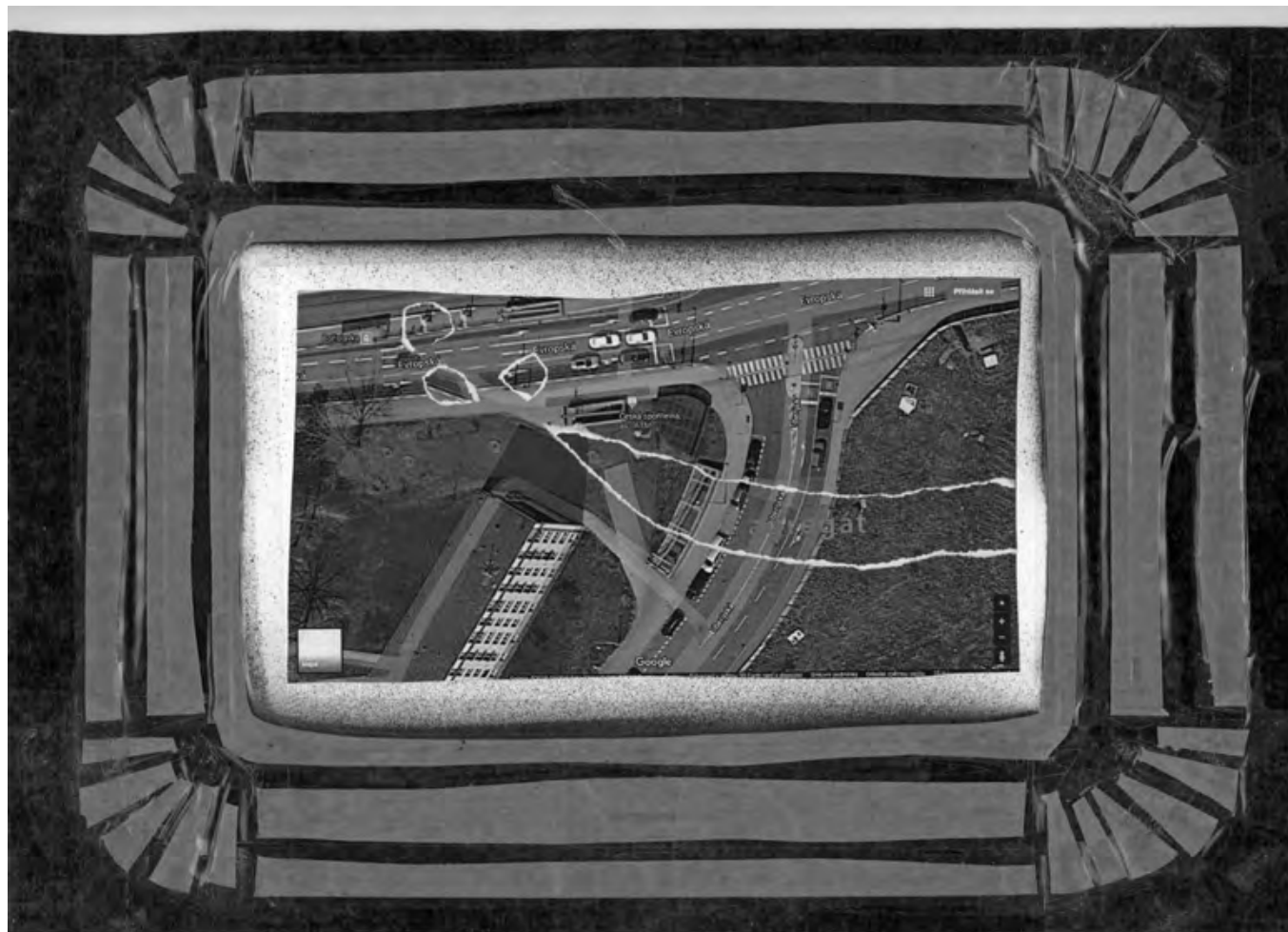
How important is working with humour to you? I'm asking because in your films, humour is not only present in the situational playfulness of the scenes, but also in the formal processes, in the editing, in the sound...

(peacocks screeching) Now *their* work with sound and editing is something! I hope you'll keep it in the article.

If it was an interview for Czech Radio, I would leave it there.

Thanks.

×



FEELMS SMITHS

Athamor: The Alchemical Furnace	(Alchymická pec, Czech Republic 2020)
Written and directed	Jan Daňhel, Adam Olša
Cinematography	Adam Olša, Jakub Halousek, Jan Daňhel
Cast	Jan Švankmajer, Eva Švankmajerová, Jaromír Kallista, Pavla Kallistová, Tomáš Kalous, Miloš Chlustina, Kamila Magálová
Runtime	117 min.

Getting to Know Through Playing

"I will listen to people on the same wavelength," defends Jan Švankmajer a working compilation of his latest feature film *Insects (Hmyz)* [2018], which was seen by first viewers at a test screening. However, the producer Jaromír Kallista sees things differently. In his opinion, the film still requires a lot of work to be easier to digest for people outside the circle of surrealists who took part in the screening. Half indulgent, half reproachful, he tells his friend and colleague: "You don't think about your viewers at all." Švankmajer does not deny the statement. He is convinced that if he began to submit to demand, he would cease to be authentic. The essence of the conflict of opinion between the two men is a question lying at the same time at the heart of the documentary film by Adam Olša and Jan Daňhel: (How) can imaginative thinking be sold?

Both creators also participated in making the film *Insects*. Daňhel as an editor, Olša as a cameraman of documentary sequences. At that time, they were approached by Kallista and asked whether they would not make a film about Švankmajer and his creative practices. They agreed and spent three years in the company of the author of films such as *The Garden (Zahrada)* [1968], *Dimensions of Dialogue (Možnosti dialogu)* [1983] or *Alice (Něco z Alenky)* [1988]. Daňhel, who is a member of a surrealist group and has known Švankmajer for a quarter of a century, was in the position of an insider. Olša was a man from the outside who tried to penetrate and better understand the world of tactile poetry and scatological paintings. Each penetrated Švankmajer's universe from a different starting position. Thanks to this, the film is not a monologue but resembles a lively dialogue of several voices, which, however, complement each other symbiotically. The trust Kallista and Švankmajer placed in directors allowed them to penetrate not only the master's privacy but also – and above all – the depths of his mind. This created a different documentary about a famous person than what we are used to in this country.

Although portraits are one of the most popular Czech documentary formats, rarely there is a film created that presents the person portrayed in their complexity, with all the contradictions and doubts. What predominates are documentary monuments shot with undisguised admiration and uncritical respect for social actors. The absence of a critical distance is usually not reflected in any way. The texture of the film is smooth, nothing disturbs us in the reception of the official biographical narrative. Such portraits are permeated by

gratitude to artists for letting the film crew into their privacy. In return, they usually lack confrontation, dissenting opinions or an effort to better understand the controversial and unpleasant chapters of the life story of the person concerned. There is no effort to oppose a view full of respect and recognition. The form is usually a chronologically arranged band of flattering talking heads, interspersed with illustrative archival shots. *Athamor: The Alchemical Furnace* shows that it can be done differently, with a greater invention and less effort to please the audience and the documented person.

Above all, Daňhel and Olša do not try to fit Švankmajer into a box, which they would create for him in advance, or to submit to a certain formal concept. Thanks to the long filming time, they did not even have to push him into certain situations and answers. They just needed to wait. They did not direct him, did not create artificial situations. They used the places where Švankmajer was at the moment, and normal daily activities and situations. From them, they dug deeper. As a result, they do not tell a fixed-structure story with a clearly defined storyline, divided by turns in history or his life. They do not proceed systematically. Their film, cut simultaneously as it was being shot, is organic, associative, and has the same instinct that Švankmajer talks about in connection with the collection of fetishistic objects: He is not creating a catalogue but chooses what he finds interesting at any given moment. The authentic expression, which is of great importance to him, also characterizes *Athamor: The Alchemical Furnace*, in which the reality is revealed through play.

The film is reminiscent of a network intertwined with situations and interactions that occurred during the filming, beginning with the post-production of *Insects* and ending with the opening of an extensive exhibition at the Eye Filmmuseum in Amsterdam. Therefore, on the horizontal axis, the storyline is still going forward. Švankmajer presents his films at festivals, receives awards, participates in author readings... The shots of various meetings from his travels in the Czech Republic and abroad are interspersed with longer stops that non-chronologically map Švankmajer's life and zoom in on his system of values and world of thoughts. Following the example of alchemical experiments, more and more ingredients are added: obsession, magical thinking, infantilism, imagination, unconsciousness... Just like surrealists are not interested in an artefact, for Daňhel and Olša, the cognitive process itself is more important than the result. At the end, there is no great wisdom or grandiose

point. The animated Švankmajer only changes the shape of his head a few times, sticks his tongue out at us and then the subtitles appear.

The alternating heads, with which the film ends, well capture the freedom that the authors of the documentary allowed Švankmajer. Instead of one “definitive” version, they present many forms of it that are not mutually exclusive but exist simultaneously, which is also reflected in working with time. The film was shot with a digital and an eight-millimetre camera. Although the grainy black-and-white shots of the eight capture recent events, they resemble underground images from the times of the so-called Normalization period. Past and present, youth and old age merge. Openness to coincidences and capturing situations in their immediacy contribute to the variability and diversity of the film shape. Unlike classic portraits, *Athamor: The Alchemical Furnace* does not resemble a piece of marble, but a malleable mass, plasticine or modelling clay, with which Švankmajer also likes to work.

General thoughts on food, fetishes, the end of mankind and Western civilization are occasionally disrupted by a shot of a fouling cat, or pigeon pattering on a sidewalk, for example. Kallista’s serious speech is glossed over by a replica of “Alenka thought” from the first feature film he produced for Švankmajer. In a film made with a belief that the most remarkable things happen on their own, moments of embarrassment, falls and collisions are more welcome than rigid seriousness. Reflections on erotic fixations or memories of children’s traumas are just as important as walking the dog or preparing a steak tartare shot in great detail. The aim of the numerous subtle tactile details used is not to copy Švankmajer’s manuscript; the authors do not recycle his poetics but put it in a different context. Excerpts from Švankmajer’s films are used to comment on and contextualize what the actors say and do. Thus, they do not only have an illustrative function, but they connect individual shots into coherent sections.

The most fundamental of the contrasts, on which the whole film is based, seems to be the contrast between Švankmajer and his deceased wife Eva, presented by older shots, memories and dreams. *Athamor: The Alchemical Furnace* begins with Švankmajer’s half-serious complaint that only old people appear in the film. Therefore, he shows us photographic evidence that they were not always old with Eva, that they too were once young, beautiful and desirable. Also, Švankmajer’s last monologue, with which we probably get the deepest inside him, concerns Eva. Švankmajer recalls how he handled her death and how he could not accept it at first. The photo from the introduction therefore also seems in retrospect as an expression of the desire to keep the world in the state that has already passed away, the desire to return to the immaculate state of the past. However, *Athamor: The Alchemical Furnace* proves that in order to return to the original experience, which, according to the Surrealists, is the most grateful source of imagination, one does not have to rejuvenate. Just keep one’s perspective and distance from one’s own ego. The result can be a documentary that Švankmajer made about himself, that gets to the point through humour and finds meaning in seemingly insignificant and banal things.

Rather than a traditional summarizing portrait of someone’s life from birth to retirement, *Athamor: The Alchemical Furnace* is an exploration of Jan Švankmajer’s personality and various ways of telling about his distinctive way of thinking and creating. The creators were able to tune in to him and created a playful, tactile and semantically layered mosaic from more than a hundred hours of film material that does not pander and is accessible to those who are not in the know at the same time. If at the beginning there was a question of how to sell imaginative thinking, *Athamor: The Alchemical Furnace* gives a satisfactory answer to it by its very existence.

× Martin Šrajer



Cook F**k Kill

(Žáby bez jazyka, Slovakia – Czech Republic 2020)

Written and directed

Mira Fornay

Cinematography

Tomáš Sysel

Cast

Jaroslav Plesl, Regina Rázlová, Jazmína Cigánková, Petra Fornay, Irena Bendová, Roman Lipka, Bohuslav Zářychta, Lucia Steinerová, Jan Dolman, Jan Alexander

Runtime

116 min.

The Game for Real

When Czech or Slovak filmmakers, respectively, dare to experiment here and there, in addition to failures (e.g. *Daria* [*Daria*] (directed by Matěj Pichler, 2020)), interesting and valuable films are also made (e.g. *Little Crusader* [*Křižáček*] (directed by Václav Kadrnka, 2017)), which ripple the somewhat stagnant waters of local production, even though they do not bring commercial success due to the audience's lack of interest. Such a fate, including controversies even within the community of critics, probably awaits the third feature film by Mira Fornay *Cook F**k Kill* (*Žáby bez jazyka*) [nominated for the Czech Lion for Best Film and Best Director]. Within the post-revolutionary cinematography of both republics, it is a piece of work incommensurable with anything. It works with the theme of domestic violence not in the form of a social drama, as might have been expected (this category includes her previous works *Little Foxes* [*Lištičky*] [2009] and *My Dog*

Killer [*Můj pes Killer*] [2013]), but of an absurd and surrealist drama. The screenwriter and director has been gathering material in women's and men's prisons and therapeutic groups for two and a half years. They then became the stepping stone to her hyperbolic story with fairy-tale and mythological elements in the dimensions of ancient tragedy.

Mira Fornay wanted to find out the causes and roots of the most hidden and tolerated violence, which from an external point of view seems illogical. It works on the principle of a vicious circle, where the roles of victims and aggressors mirror, pass on and vary. In the very first picture, a choir composed of small-town gossips clarifies the chain of violence with a non-traditional version of a fairy tale about a hen and a rooster, which is worth quoting: "The rooster and the hen went for the nuts. The rooster climbed a tree and threw them down to the hen. And with one of them, he poked her eye out. The hen wept: 'Why did you poke my eye out, roost-



er?' 'Because the nut tree shook hard.' 'Why did you shake, nut tree?' 'Because the goat tore off my leaves.' 'Why did you tear off its leaves, goat?' 'Because the shepherd didn't feed me.' 'Why didn't you feed her, shepherd?' 'Because the housekeeper didn't bake bread for me.' 'Why didn't you bake bread for him?' 'Because the pig overturned my dough.' 'Why did you overturn her dough?' 'Because the wolf wanted to eat my young' 'Why did you want to eat her young?' And the wolf says: 'Because I am a wolf.'

The causes of aggression, the "history of violence," can be traced back to various injuries, harm and damage caused through generations; by a sequence of wrongs we get to the "inherited sin" or the principle of evil embodied by some being (wolf), which suffered no injustice, so has no reason to take revenge and to justify its own wrongdoing. It is something elusive, a stigma that can only be dealt with difficulty.

A choir on the shore of the lake speaks to a young woman submerged in water near a frog. The prologue, therefore, offers the central symbols of the film, which will only be de-crypted gradually.

In the centre of the relationship entanglement of the eight main characters stumbles Jaroslav K. (Jaroslav Plesl), whose wife Blanka (Jazmína Cigánková) denies him access to children. She hid them at her grandmother and Jaroslav just helplessly rattles the gate of the locked garden where a dead dog lies. In desperation, she hands the old woman a pistol, which she still carries with her. The old woman won't unlock the gate, because Blanka has the keys. She will give them to her only on the condition that her mother-in-law, Jaroslav's mother Dorota (Regína Rázlová), transfers her apartment to her. Jaroslav, therefore, sets off to his mother and then on a pilgrimage to complete a set of tasks that will bring the entire ensemble of the family drama to the stage. From the disintegrating duo of Jaroslav and Blanka, the tentacles run to long-divorced parental couples. Dorota shows readiness to donate Blanka the apartment only when her ex-husband, Jaroslav's father Kamil, cooks her lunch. He will do it if Blanka's father Gustav, now living with Dorota, kills an ox. Gustav, however, needs the knives that his ex-wife Jana buried somewhere. The goal of Jaroslav's one-day odyssey are children who are allegedly in danger ("Adamek is lying in the grass and not moving"). Under a generally accepted purpose, however, only the interests of adults and their problems are hidden. The mantras "It is about the children" and

"We are doing it for the children" form a kind of sacred aura of dysfunctional families, often lined with religious symbols (Jaroslav has a rosary on the mirror of his ambulance, the old woman prays with the children before eating, the choir intones the Father).

The sequence of services and counter-services in the manner of the traditional fairy tale about the rooster and the hen makes the interconnectedness of all persons more visible. In the core of their relationships, there is a perversion - sexual and emotional. The child imprint determines a binding model of coexistence so that absolutely horrible acts (murder, suicide, incest sex) are perceived by their actors and observers as normal. In families where domestic violence is perpetrated, different laws rule compared to the surrounding world.

The story has three versions. In the first, Jaroslav comes to his mother to ask for the apartment. With a troubled look, he humbly prepares a meal for her, while the imperious mother greets him without a word, dressed only in a face mask, reminiscent of the persona from an ancient drama. Although the exteriors (small town, park, lake) have their meaning, the plot seems to take place on stage. The scenes give the impression of a performance of an amateur ensemble; the clumsiness of non-actors and the declamations of professionals correspond to the fact, or at least the possibility, that Jaroslav stages individual situations in his mind while looking for the optimal solution, and tries to imagine what would change if he behaved differently at the given moment. Lengthy scenes, pauses in negotiations and dialogues, which look improvised or documentary, are carefully thought out and timed by the director, and add the necessary authenticity. They refer to the Czech new wave, to the early works of Miloš Forman and Ivan Passer. In addition to that, Mira Fornay is certainly acquainted with the world artists, especially the postmodern. The narrative of time loops has been widely used since the 1990s (*Lola rennt*, dir. Tom Tykwer, 1998 [Lola běží o život], *Groundhog Day*, dir. Harold Ramis, 1993 [Na Hromnice o den více], *50 First Dates*, dir. Peter Segal, 2004 [50x a stále poprvé], *Edge of Tomorrow*, dir. Doug Liman, 2014 [Na hraně zítřka], *Before I Fall* [dir. Ry Russo-Young, 2017], but we can already find it in Jacques Rivetto (*Céline et Julie vont en bateau*, 1974 [Céline a Julie si vyjely na loď]). *Cook F**k Kill* may have jumped into our waters from David Lynch's universe, as the dead dog, ominous sounds, choir warnings, and a double in the mirror point out. The handheld camera corresponds to



Jaroslav's ambivalence and takes over his subjective view or follows, to the point of chasing, his movements and contrasts with the static shots of the scenes. Together with the dark shadows on a sun-drenched summer day, this dynamics is used to build dramatic tension. Even if the handheld camera and the non-actors were, out of necessity, the results of modest production, in the end, they are adequate for the artistic expression of an idea that does not necessarily need beautification of external effects.

Regina Rázlová represents a narcissistic, hysterical type of mother whose hug protects and suffocates her son at the same time. She makes Jaroslav an obedient slave to the calculating Blanka, supporting his hurtful feeling of a deprived poor man abandoned by an infidel. Then, she stylizes herself in the role of a wronged poor thing, so it becomes obvious where her son picked up his manipulateness, buck-passing and lying. It does not seem likely that such a good and pliable man, committed to the family, would be capable of something evil. The essence of the aggressor's nature and the mechanism of his reaction are revealed by a sudden reversal when the still water turns into a murderous beast. Jaroslav kills his mother in a sophisticated, pre-calculated way. But that's not the end of it, another turn follows. He apologizes, begs, calls the police, and that finds Blanka, a policewoman on duty, on the spot. But Dorothy's limp body gets out of mind as Gustav needs to speak to his son-in-law to find out if he really loves his daughter. This is where the conscious production and the first manifestations of fluid identity take place. Blanka talks about experiences from her childhood and Gustav and Jaroslav play them out. Cruel attacks, bloody wounds, torment and humiliation are labelled by Gustav as expressions of love for his wife: "I loved her." Unfortunately, the still surviving archaic Machismo, one of the roots of domestic violence, is a social phenomenon, not just a matter of personality pathology in individuals. The scene explains why some people voluntarily, almost automatically, become bullies' partners. The aggressive behaviour they witnessed at an early age has left deep scars in them, and although they have a negative attitude towards it, they unknowingly look for it.

Sex and emotional blackmail cement violent relationships. Aggressors try to bind their victims to themselves and prevent their final liberation following their separation attempts. Their arsenal of weapons, apart from being very attractive, include promises of mending their ways, suicide

threats and touching remarks of would-be idyllic beginnings of the relationship and happy prospects. Jaroslav reminds Blanka, whom he accused of infidelity and rudely scolded after having returned to the house under construction, how they met. That was when he "saved" her from the locust because Blanka has an insect phobia. Today he has brought it from his mother's weird neighbour. He releases the gin from the bottle and makes Blanka utterly terrified. In another illustrative summary, the author shows how psychopaths, masters of hypocrisy, seem to be ideal partners at first, saving a loved one from a painful past, so that they can immediately drag them back into it, condemning them to repeat the trauma from their childhood. Even though she finally realizes she is dealing with an incorrigible type of person and wants to get rid of him, she is unable to do so because she has already internalized the aggression and is turning it against herself. Blanka mechanically reproduces what Jaroslav told her: "I'm stupid. I don't understand anything. I do everything badly." The victim apologizes the abuser, forgives him indefinitely, accepts him back, believes his promises, and blames herself for the "failed" relationship.

Gustav suddenly appears in the house, and this time Jaroslav answers his question with a word ("I love your daughter just as much as you loved her mother.") and an act, and his physical attacks become approved and appreciated.

An old lady, the owner of the jukebox, in whose delusion Jaroslav willingly plays the groom, is constantly playing the slow and sweet song *Everyone Meets Great Love Once* (*Každý jednou velkou lásku potká*) [originally Sinatra's song *Everybody Loves Somebody*]. The game cabinet represents the illusion of love, used for defending pathological relationships. It breaks into shards and endangers the life of Jaroslav and anyone who succumbs to it.

The fairy-tale journey for the key to the garden begins with the archetypal sexual act of Jaroslav and his mother-in-law Jana after a pagan dance of a kind by the fire and digging up the knives. The killing of the sacrificial animal also has a ritual character. In addition to family couples, Blanka's new boyfriend, policeman Petr, an investigator of the jukebox assassination, also takes part in the journey. On the way to Kamil's magnificent mansion, the procession carrying the killed ox stops in a park by the lake, where Dorota was buried in the previous version. The lake represents the hatchery and burial ground, the mother waters into which Jaroslav dives, the



waters of birth and death. It is a frog environment, a key icon of the film. While thinking about the meaning of this symbol, please allow a biological digression: tongueless frogs are frogs of the Pipidae family, living exclusively in water. Since they have no tongue and teeth, they don't make sounds, they are "dumb", but they can hear well underwater. An apt image of the victims kept in an enclosed space, unable to speak up, ask for help, publish information. They are brought up this way, threatened to remain silent and conceal the truth. In addition to the scientific parallel, we find the metaphor of tongueless frogs in F. G. Lorca's drama *The House of Bernarda Alba* (*Dům Bernardy Alby*) about women scraping along in an isolated environment, which outsiders deem unbearable and disgusting.

However, the frog speaks to Jaroslav in the voice of the girl Ranita (rana means common frog): "Do you remember me? When you were a little boy, we played together. Mom dressed you like a little girl. You knew that having pleasure means knowing yourself." Food is then prepared and served in Kamil's villa. Rather than communion and sharing, it is a substitute for emotional saturation. Dorota, who circulates the family album, declares in front of the participants of the feast that Jaroslav, the son of a renowned doctor, had a happy childhood and got everything, without having to put in any effort, but that he is a loser, a mere ambulance driver. Moreover, Kamil says bluntly that he wanted a daughter. Jaroslav then returns to the children's position in his former room. We can only speculate whether Ranita is his deceased sister or Jaroslav's imaginary other-self. Her existence remains shrouded in mystery, but Jaroslav's basic feeling of not being accepted and desired in life becomes apparent. With a suicidal jump into an empty pool and rebirth in a woman's body below the surface of the lake, he moves to the third part. Kamil is happy about his daughter (Petra Fornay), there is a more harmonious atmosphere in the family. Jaroslav(a) [Jaroslava is a women's name] trium-

phantly holds the decree for the apartment and goes with it to the old woman. The children are all right. Jaroslav (a) tries to get Blanka by proven means, seduction and promises. Even in the feminine form, however, it is still him, and his character manifests itself; the frightened children run away from him to the treehouse. But the baton has already been passed on to the next generation, the eldest daughter attacks him/her with a gun. However, the victim becomes an innocent dog, now mourned by the old woman.

Again and again, Jaroslav gets into the same situations, which he tries to solve differently, more effectively, according to the advice "When a person makes a mistake and realizes it, they don't repeat it". However, the optimistic statement does not come true in life; instead of one mistake, Jaroslav makes another, and because he is unable of real self-reflection, he gets caught in the cycle of self-apology and building castles in the air. Magical conditionals seemingly change the past and the present: "If something had been different in the past, this wouldn't have happened..." The antihero is inevitably set for destruction and self-destruction. The frog does not turn into a prince, a futile endeavour of love. Even though it is not meant to be kissed here, but masturbated with instead.

With amazing emotional strength, Mira Fornay demonstrates that the supposedly strong ones are weak at the core and that the ones who hurt others have been hurt themselves. These are sick people and should be treated accordingly, but that does not relieve them of responsibility. After all, even Hitler had a difficult childhood.

Hard to digest, uncomfortable for followers of simple causality, *Cook F**k Kill* opens and removes the brand of taboo from an important social topic, which itself is praiseworthy, but even without that, the film has the value of an exceptional artefact.

× Zdena Mejzlíková



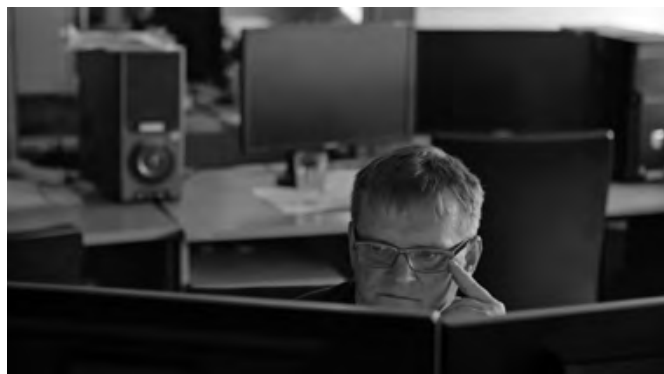
A New Shift	(Nová šichta, Czech Republic 2020)
Written and directed	Jindřich Andrš
Cinematography	Tomáš Frkal
Music	Eliška Cílková
Runtime	91 min.

From coal miner to programmer

This could be an advertising slogan: how to become an IT specialist even if you have worked in a mine for more than twenty years. And basically, it is a kind of a social advertisement. The life story of Tomáš Hisem and the documentary film *A New Shift* by Jindřich Andrš suggest that similar things are possible on both sides of the camera: both in real life, which often lacks drama, and in film, which sometimes struggles with authenticity. When Andrš's short film *The Last Shift of Thomas Hisem* (Poslední šichta Tomáše Hisema) received the Special Mention Award at the 2017 Ji.hlava IDFF, it was primarily to express the general interest in the subject matter (a short but intense insight into the working environment of the Ostrava miners at the Paskov mine) and also to acknowledge the way in which this short film was made (Tomáš Hisem used a GoPro camera to shoot several sequences capturing his last shift). *A New Shift* became the best Czech documentary of 2020 at the same festival. The two works are interconnected, of course, with part of the short film appearing at the beginning of *A New Shift*, but it is only with the feature-length format what gives Tomáš Hisem's story an *authentic* sense and sufficient narrative power.

In documentary films, the narrative is very much dependent on editing (and the choices made during script editing). The *authenticity* of the subject matter usually does not allow for a sufficiently coherent narrative that would be understandable, attractive and, last but not least, believable to the viewer, given the realistic basis. Moreover, even in reality one can encounter events so absurd and obscure that they would hardly be believable in a film and could even be described by many as "fake." The situational portrait of a specific person is an attractive approach (not only) for the Czech audience, offering "live" characters and their stories, depicting an environment that remains hidden to many (the documentary film *Caught in the Net* [V síti, dir. by Barbora Chalupová, Vít Klusák, 2020] was very successful because it offered the opportunity to look into things that are difficult to truly get to in reality), or just showing the problems and difficulties of contemporary society (see, for example, *The Limits of Work* [Hranice práce, dir. by Apolena Rychlíková, 2017]).

Tomáš Hisem quit working at Paskov Mine after more than twenty years. He shyly reveals his future career path to the journalists waiting outside the mine and addressing



selected miners who have just finished their last shift. The functional (the documentary staging here feels *natural* and shifts the activity from the filmmakers to the characters) and humorous (the media often co-creates the image of a successful career path worth following) distance kept when observing the key life decision of the main character gives the viewer enough room for interpretation already at the very beginning of the whole film. Tomas Hisem would like to work as a programmer. With this, the narrative of his journey can begin. A retraining course on various kinds of programming languages at Technical University of Ostrava is just one of the necessary steps that the main character has to take in order to be able to wish for success, which of course cannot be guaranteed in advance. Tomáš Hisem spends his evenings studying the language of websites, changes his life habits, and rediscovers the meaning of living with a partner. The ordeal of sending out CVs, receiving rejections, attending job interviews and further self-studying is followed by the viewer as a sequence of partial events interrupted by static images of the landscape (to correspond with calming down) or the industrial town of Ostrava (to correspond with expectations or disappointments). For the viewer, two narrative lines intertwine in the film, with the central one, focused on Tomáš Hisem trying to live up to his intentions, gradually losing its dominance. The second line, shaping up in the background yet still very noticeable, offers a gradual discovery of the specific social environment in which real people live, work, and have fun. Tomáš Hisem chants and frolics during the soccer games of Baník Ostrava, visits the local pub where he chats with his friends, and also takes care of his children. His doubts about his own choice and the doubts of the people around him are mostly presented in dialogues, in discussions with friends, but they are also highlighted in the narrative by individual situations in which Tomáš Hisem often receives only the advertising materials of a given company but does not get a job there. The end of *A New Shift* is, frankly, predictable, even though it is clear that it follows the actual course of events (in fact, Jindřich Andrš talks about the alternatives that the filmmakers had to prepare for, especially when it came to the ending of the whole film, in an interview for the *Film and Doba* magazine, also available in this issue).

There is nothing interesting about mines, they are just holes in the ground

It is actually surprising that we do not have lots of documentary films about the Czech labour market, despite the fact that it is, at least in my opinion, an attractive topic and for most viewers it is something with which they have more or less intensive and personal experience. Going to work, doing some kind of job is more often an accompanying plot associated with the central narrative line, or it becomes part of a specific presentation of a distinctive individuality; typically in documentary films about prominent actors, singers and other artists, whose profession becomes a life mission. While *The Last Shift of Thomas Hisem* was more of an experiment in conveying to the viewer, in a rather intense way, the everyday experience of miners plunging under the earth, *A New Shift* rises to the surface and projects the main character's journey to a new job. In the case of this Andrš's film, however, it is not pure observation, we are not watching Tomáš Hisem from a distance as he tries to make his way in a very competitive environment, but we are offered a complex narrative that allows some aspects – especially those focused on the social or political context – to merge with the environment in which the story takes place. Individual phenomena of the labour market, such as retraining courses, various employment projects, job fairs and conferences dealing with career plans, appear in the film either as part of the reality Tomáš Hisem has no other option than to navigate in, or they become the subject of conversations, often with an ironic subtext. The most interesting phenomenon

in this context are the job interviews which the protagonist attends, although in some cases it was certainly the work of chance that made it possible to capture such a situation. It is in these moments that the character of Tomáš Hisem is captured “in the new reality,” in the uncertainty fed by an increasingly desperate desire for the job he wants.

The perspective of an individual life or work schedule is also evident in Andrš's previous films. In this respect, *The Last Shift of Thomas Hisem* is just a sketch experimenting with a purely subjective point of view, limited by the beam of a miner's headlamp, but some of the techniques that were refined in Andrš's feature debut were already present in his student film *Mike and his Ultras* (Mike a jeho ultras, 2016). MikejePan, an eccentric YouTuber who systematically breaks all kinds of traffic rules and films his arrogant dealings with the police, is brought before the court for one of his more serious offences. Andrš follows not only the court proceedings (which, however, take place behind closed doors, which means that the viewer is deprived of a substantial summary of the facts and must make do only with the statements of the accused himself and his fans) but also – in the first place – an incongruous group of people who have come to support the YouTuber for various reasons. *Mike and his Ultras* escalates during the actual film screening, which MikejePan attends in person and after which he is forced to face questions from the audience. The director partly acts as a commentator of the film's plot, but the central perspective remains the one of the individual development of the main character or, alternatively, of other characters, manifested in the film mainly in the form of short conversations. Andrš clearly wanted to capture a particular group gathered around the central character (let's leave aside the eccentricity and the problematic nature of the people), but no attention is paid to the broader context, though crucial to the subject matter; on the other hand, it is possible that the material filmed simply did not allow for a broader perspective. Nevertheless, this strategy is also evident in *A New Shift*.

In another Andrš's student film, *Chronicle: Jiří Brožek* (Letopis: Jiří Brožek, 2017), a highly specific, self-reflexive look at a distinctive film editor, the work schedule is (understandably) depicted as a life mission, a fate that the main character is able to comment on in an apt and ironic way. *A New Shift* thus offers a peek into the author's previous works, even though they are student projects, characterized primarily by an effort to tell a story even though it may mean losing contact with reality. The author's commentary is evident in the style rather than in the captured reality itself. The commercial sphere, oriented towards spreadsheets, graphs and command lines, is captured in quiet (almost meditatively separated) images of the individual characters gazing separately into the screens of computer monitors, while the space in which Tomáš Hisem spends his free time tends to be noisy, in sequences favouring dynamic editing populated by interconnected characters. Perhaps the author tried to avoid stereotypes so hard that he unintentionally created a new one: the concept of “lifting people from poverty” often serves as an argument for optimistically oriented views on the possibilities offered to a man in the world of finance and business (see, for example, Hans Rosling and his book *Factfulness*). Tomáš Hisem's journey is certainly commendable in reality and can be used as an example worth following, but in a documentary film, it takes on a slightly different meaning. It is our duty to keep asking what the creators had to do to go from a dirty Tomáš Hisem climbing a monstrous machine deep underground to the Tomáš Hisem sitting calmly in front of a computer monitor; not in reality, but in an artwork. *A New Shift* is a film about the hope that each of us can have. And I hope that there will soon be hope even for those who have not had any whatsoever.

Mistakes	(Chyby, Czech Republic 2021)
Directed	Jan Prušinovský
Written	Roman Vojkůvka
Cinematography	Petr Kobloušek
Cast	Pavla Gajdošíková, Jan Jankovský, Ondřej Kokorský, Ivo Gogál, Jan Kolařík, Eva Hacıurová, Monika Načeva
Runtime	99 min.

Making Mistakes

Director Jan Prušinovský became famous for his TV series (*Okresní přebor*, *The Fourth Star*, *Gnome*, *Most*) [*Okresní přebor*, *Čtvrtá hvězda*, *Trpaslík*, *Most*] and his feature films *The Snake Brothers* (*Kobry a užovky*) [2012] and *Sunday League – Pepík Hnatek's Final Match* (*Okresní přebor – poslední zápas Pepíka Hnátka*) [2015] were among the better ones made in the Czech Republic in the past ten years. He has accomplished what not only filmmakers but artists in general rarely succeed in - to appeal to professional critics and ordinary consumers alike. With his social dramas from the environment of the so-called ordinary people of the lower (formerly working) class, he does not target a limited circle of intellectuals and festival gourmets, as is often the case in this particular genre, but the widest audience. His new film *Mistakes* (*Chyby*) aroused considerable expectations and curiosity as to whether he could cope with the genre of romance in which he places it.

The love story of a shop assistant Ema (Pavla Gajdošíková) and a roofer Tomáš (Jan Jankovský) begins with a chance meeting, which grows into a serious relationship struggling with the shadows of the past. This is revealed in the introductory flashback, where young Ema shoots a pornographic video. And from here, one can already guess the whole storyline, which is one of the main flaws of the film since the script is not much more sophisticated than the scripts of porn films. The cards are dealt from the beginning and it is clear what mishap will occur and what it will result in. Simplicity and straightforwardness, although not always bad as such, are associated here with predictability and schematicity. While Petr Kolečko (signed under *Okresní přebor*, *Most* and *Gnome*) is able to use exaggeration, original ideas and absurd humour, the amateur filmmaker and screenwriter Roman Vojkůvka adheres to clichés, while humour is probably supposed to be represented by vulgar pub one-liners. The



flat nature of the allegedly sensitive and somewhat gloomy Tomáš is made special by his interest in growing cacti. Unexpectedly, cheerful and immediate Ema bursts into the stagnant waters of his survival between work and the pub. She is attracted to Tomáš's stability, which could provide her with safety and protection from the consequences of a turbulent youth, which tarnished her reputation in her hometown and antagonized her own mother. After a while, she gave up her easy earnings; not knowing why she began to resent her actions and chose to make do with the salary of a shop assistant in a hypermarket - only because she did everything from adolescent love to that provincial would-be director before she realized that this pimp, in fact, had only been using her commercially? In any case, she now wants to settle down and anchor in a marital port with a rude but reliable bloke, whose nature is strikingly symbolized by a stark succulent hiding the potential to suddenly come into bloom one day and surprise with its fragile beauty. The character polarity of this couple and, until recently, the not very acknowledged desire for a calm, traditional bond, enabled the transformation from a bar acquaintance into a promising partnership.

The space around the central pair is filled with standardized figures. Best friend - chief villain (Ondřej Kokorský), folk pub sage (Jan Kolařík), experienced mentor - father, or more precisely, stepfather (Ivo Gogál), caring mother (Monika Načeva). And to that, the rural fellow citizens, whose more or less obviously communicated outrage the young couple has to face. This social class spends free time, as *Mistakes* suggest, masturbating at Internet dirty stuff and sitting around the restaurants of the fourth price category. Of course, their ability to express themselves also falls into this category. Be it. Art should be close to the people, comrades used to say.

And the people show a double morality in the discrepancy between reality and virtuality. Everyone watches porn, considering it a normal part of life that does not need to be wondered about. They do not realize that by their "passive" participation they help to keep the porn industry running. Brave actresses, as distant, untouchable objects, with whom they are in contact only indirectly, are not subject to any ethical criteria. However, the moment such an actress turns out to be someone close to them, they apply a different standard than the one for the unknown people (and themselves). In this essentially amoral double standard, in addition to the proverbial Czech smallness, turns out that something as natural shyness in the unconsciousness survives, to which the substitute satisfaction, poorly replacing real relationships,

does not seem completely kosher. But since following this feeling would place excessive demands on individuals, which they are unwilling to meet, they reflect the pseudo-moral demands on the outside. In this case, on creators of naughty videos. Their viewers and users are in the clear.

Even Tomáš declares himself a judge and somehow forgets that Ema tried to confess to him a long time ago, but he refused and didn't want to hear anything. Is he sorry about the thing itself, which lead to the imaginary tarnishing of Ema, disrupting their exemplary monogamous cohabitation, or rather about his own disgrace in front of his neighbours and companions? They seem to be more important to him for he is ready to forgive his treacherous mate in no time, while with Ema, although her "guilt" against him is very controversial, he does not intend to forgive. From his narcissistic offence he could not move on to the question of whether his sweetheart really deserves condemnation for her youthful sin; he did not think about that pornography and prostitution have accompanied humanity since time immemorial, with the only difference being technology, or the well-known fact that former prostitutes become faithful and devoted wives. In this regard, *Mistakes* quite successfully take on the role of agitator against personal and social prejudices. However, this potential intention or message did not follow through when Tomáš's patriarchal point of view is eventually also accepted by Ema, who, like him, wears sackcloth and ashes in the final, purportedly touching scene full of mutual apologies.

Strong points of the film include the performances of the main protagonists, whose faces and civil performance, which have not yet been discovered for the film, add authenticity to *Mistakes*, together with small-town and rural locations shot almost in a documentary way. Even the simple story leading to the not surprising morale can be perceived and appreciated as authentic, in fact. Real life triumphs over the virtual, the emotional bond and physical closeness of the other person carry more weight than prejudice; we are all fragile, vulnerable and flawed beings longing for love. The expected happy end did occur, the lovers have returned to each other; only the problem of the aggressive environment that may not allow them to live in peace remains open. However, love is ready to overcome everything. Some eyes in the packed screening room water, the purpose has been achieved. But the format of hour-long television production, for which the screenplay was originally intended, would have sufficed.

× Zdena Mejzlíková



The Man with Hare Ears	(Muž se zaječícma ušícma, Slovakia – Czech Republic 2020)
Directed	Martin Šulík
Written	Marek Leščák, Martin Šulík
Cinematography	Martin Štrba
Music	Ivan Parík, Miroslav Bázlik
Cast	Miroslav Krobot, Oldřich Kaiser, Táňa Pauhofová, Alexandra Borbély, Zuzana Mauréry, Zuzana Kronerová
Runtime	104 min.

Schematic Guide to Rectification

Following twenty years of socially critical works (*The City of the Sun* [Sluneční stát, 2005], *Gypsy* [Cigán, 2011]), documentaries and a forthcoming road movie (*The Interpreter* [Tlumočník, 2018]), we can feel magical realism from Martin Šulík's work once again. It was with its help that he built a unique position in Slovak cinema in the 1990s. While other debutants (e.g. Roman Petrenko, Štefan Semjan or Martin Valent) were never given the opportunity to make a second feature film, Šulík confidently began to cultivate his author's poetics. The return to magical realism allows us to examine the changes that the director's formal strengths and his sense for detail have undergone over the years, which allowed him to describe the moral state of post-revolutionary society.

The Man with Hare Ears (Muž se zaječícma ušícma) is based on a television project that Šulík and screenwriter Marek Leščák were preparing in 2016. Ten episodes, each of

which was to deal with a different profession, were to capture the direction of Slovakia in contemporary Central Europe. However, the work never came close to realization. Three years ago, the creators used the themes and made what we know as *The Interpreter*. Its success at festivals probably enabled the duo to develop their latest film.

Šulík's film can be summarized as a narrative about ageing, contemplation and looking back. The introduction of the film, in which the writer's Josef (Miroslav Krobot) home library collapses on him, represents a turning point in which he realizes the temporal nature of his existence and begins his journey to reconcile and rectify old sores. The second storyline in monochrome colours follows a man with Josef's face, a kind of his metaphorical shadow, which acquires rabbit ears after eating the game.

The Man with Hare Ears quite fits into Šulík's poetics of fragments, which he was creating on the background of the



tradition of episodic film stories. It is typical for him to divide his films into chapters with free causal links. Surprisingly, he already found the peak of this tendency in his second feature project, *Everything I Like* (Všechno, co mám rád) [1993]. Although we can identify the same characters and a certain psychological development across the chapters of this film, the order of the parts remains ambiguous and Šulík refuses to say how much time has passed between the episodes. Šulík subsequently began to dampen this provocation, which brought him the Grand Prize from the International Festival of Young East European Film in Chotěbuz and Prix Europa. However, fleeting stories, pearls and figurines have remained in his narratives.

In contrast to Šulík's films from the 1990s (marked by his cooperation with screenwriter Ondřej Šulaj, which ends with a short story from the omnibus *Prague Stories* [Praha očima..., 1999]) *The Man with Hare Ears* contains a distinct unifying plot - which makes it more compact but also more schematic. Josef travels from one character to another with the wish to inform them that he is expecting a child with a much younger Katarina (Alexandra Borbély). On his journey, he is confronted with various forms of friendship, parenthood or infidelity. The patterned sequence with which Josef moves between points of interest is masked by the appearance of random or unlikely encounters and various stylistic choices. However, the construction principles are still legible.

Šulík's male hero has changed. He is now quite active and does not perceive the strokes of fate as the strange sociopaths in *Tenderness* (Něha) [1991], *Everything I Like* or in *The Garden* (Zahrada) [1995]. Šulík's protagonists no longer sit in the corner and eat away directly from the jars. Josef is actively involved in the world - he desires to change his life before Katarina ushers their baby into it. However, during the narrative, Šulík shows that Josef's determination is not enough and certain mistakes will continue to paralyze him. Here comes the use for a plethora of colourful supporting characters who recall Josef's past with articulated dialogues.

The world inhabited by these characters is also no longer under the works of time as in the director's previous films. Nature no longer grows through Šulík's Slovakia, which could help lead the protagonist to purification. However, spirituality, which, according to Jaromír Blažejovský's dissertation *Spirituality in Film*, permeated, for example, *The Garden*, still plays a major role in *The Man with Hare Ears*. Its adoption in the final act will offer Josef a new view of the world and lead him out of the crisis.

In *The Man with Hare Ears*, we continue to move through an incomprehensible world, to which we make sense only within us. The protagonist confesses that he does not believe in the Christian God, but he considers the idea of the universe and the sense of our being to be a basic human need. However, it is a table with the ageing stages of a person with a biblical theme, which falls on him in the opening scene and thanks to which he sets out on his journey. The healing end, in which the protagonist is offered a symbolic return to the mother's womb, is then a moderate reflection of the ostentatiously transcendental finale of *The Garden*. Spirituality thus still serves the director at least as a narrative means.

Since Šulík develops the relevant topics without any problems already in the main storyline, the presence of a parallel black-and-white story is worth considering. Is this really a short story that Josef is writing? Is it the hero's fantasy? Rather, it is a form of commentary that provides the main storyline with the look of general validity. The scenes from the secondary storyline mainly clarify the ambiguities through Krobot's distinct speech. Symbolic phenomena thus acquire a clear character. At the same time, in another setting, recognizing them and finding relations across the storylines would have been a nice challenge. In any case, the symbolism of transformation is interesting in that it does not associate animal features with instinctive behaviour, but on the contrary with pausing and introspection. The hare ears, which reflect Josef's efforts to listen to his loved ones, are a very simple metaphor, however. Moreover, our interpretation is guided by a voiceover: "He was learning things he should have never known..."

Thus, only the link to *Case for a Rookie Hangman* (Případ začínajícího kata) [1970] awaits the decipherment, or its breadth and thoughtfulness, to be precise. Thanks to his work on *The Key for Determining Dwarfs* (Klíč k určování trpaslíků) [2002], Šulík is well acquainted with Pavel Juráček's creative process, and it is certainly no coincidence that the secondary storyline begins with a collision with a hare. Instead of capturing a pocket watch, the hero eats the hare here, but he sets out on the journey anyway. However, he remains completely in control of Josef's direction in the "real" world, in which Juráček's motives of self-deception, manipulation or shared myths are difficult to find. Thanks to this interpretive challenge, however, Šulík's film can live on, at least for the time being.

× Marek Koutesh



BOOKS

A Book About Vojtěch Jasný

Jiří Voráč, now a professor at the University of Brno, has been interested in the exile work of domestic filmmakers since his student years. In 1993 he published a university textbook on this topic⁰¹, which he developed into a book⁰² decades later. From the filmmakers he worked on, he first made a comprehensive monograph of Ivan Passer (1933–2020)⁰³ and then focused on Vojtěch Jasný (1925–2019), who was his friend. He first spoke to him at the Karlovy Vary Film Festival in the summer of 1990⁰⁴ and then organized his retrospectives, exhibitions, and even delivered a “laudatio” when Jasný received the Doctor Honoris Causa award.⁰⁵

He published magazine studies about him⁰⁶ and wrote reviews on his films, namely on *All My Good Countrymen (Všichni dobří rodáci)*⁰⁷ and *Which Side Eden (Návrat ztraceného ráje)*.⁰⁸ He participated in the publication of a pictorial publication composed of Jasný’s author’s photographs.⁰⁹ As part of his university research, he worked with the support of the Czech Science Foundation for almost twenty years on a book about Jasný, determined to capture his Czech and foreign work, as well as a crucial edition of Jasný’s manuscript

01 Jiří Voráč, *Čeští a slovenští filmoví režiséři v exilu*. Olomouc: Vydavatelství Univerzity Palackého v Olomouci 1993.

02 Jiří Voráč, *Český film v exilu*. Brno: Host 2004.

03 Jiří Voráč, *Ivan Passer. Filmový vypravěč rozmanitostí aneb od Intimního osvětlení k Nomádovi*. Brno: Host 2008.

04 Jiří Voráč, „Světobčan z moravské visky. Rozhovor“. *Moravské noviny*, 1990, No. 31, p. 5.

05 <https://www.jamu.cz/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/laudatio-jasny.pdf>

06 Jiří Voráč, „Exilová tvorba Vojtěcha Jasného“. *Film a doba*, 1999, No. 1, p. 3–11; Marie Kotková, Jiří Voráč, „Proměny Vojtěcha Jasného“. *do – revue pro dokumentární film*, 2005, No. 3, p. 39–49.

07 Jiří Voráč, „... melancholická je duše Moravy“. *Scéna*, 1990, No. 18, p. 5; Jiří Voráč, „Všichni dobří rodáci“. *Illuminace*, 1999, No. 2, p. 177–180.

08 Jiří Voráč, „Návrat ztraceného ráje“. *Film a doba*, 1999, No. 2, p. 102–103.

09 Marek Pokorný, Jiří Voráč, *Vojtěch Jasný. Photo*. Brno: Moravian Gallery in Brno 2010 (in cooperation with the Prague publishing house KANT).



↳ Jiří Voráč, *Vojtěch Jasný. Filmový básník v exilu*. Brno: Host 2020, 600 pages, ISBN 978-80-275-0246-2.

memories and other sources.¹⁰ Thanks to the Brno publishing house Host, a book called *Vojtěch Jasný* subtitled *Filmový básník v exilu*, gets published after many years of delays. It mainly draws from Jasný's diary notes and publishes his other texts, but contrary to earlier intentions, it only looks at the artist's foreign work.¹¹

The book, which numbers exactly six hundred pages (including the imprint), consists of an introduction, six sections and several supplements (calendar, filmography, sources and literature). Abundant, continuously inserted appendices mediate facsimiles of director's manuscripts (written by hand and on a typewriter), newspaper mentions or family and work photographs. Many photographs capture scenes from films or theatrical productions; we can also find shots of Jasný's co-workers and friends there.

The first three sections describe the individual stages of the director's emigration. Voráč divided them into several time planes: the first section is called The Czech Period (1968–1978) and deals with the first years abroad, when Jasný, a long-time communist, who resolved his 25-year membership in the party by deciding to stay in exile, is continuously trying to maintain the so-called creep hole ready and tries to negotiate free residence and work both in the homeland and abroad. He even suggests international co-production, which he would like to shoot in Czechoslovakia, even though he had already been prosecuted (and convicted in absentia) for illegally leaving the republic at that time. In Jasný's case, it is clear that the newly-established regime was initially willing to turn a blind eye if the artist made a "repentant" film and renounced his most harmful titles. It remains unanswered whether he was really subject to "even a deviant belief in the validity of the horoscope," as one of the quoted State Security reports reads. To what degree was Otakar Vávra right, when repeatedly described Jasný's planned projects as unfilmable, even though he allegedly acknowledged their quality after completion?

The next section is called The European Period (1978–1984) and can be characterized by the director's words, which can be found at the beginning of the book: "In the West, following the example of medieval mercenaries, I worked as an honest film mercenary. I was hired around the world to work for the theatre, film, television. I mostly shot based on foreign texts." Let us add that he also taught at art schools. The entire almost fifteen-year journey through Europe (he lived both in Austria, where he obtained asylum and later also citizenship, and in Germany) was hampered by the longing for his homeland, which he only got rid of by moving to America. That is what the third section, The American Period (1984–2015), deals with. After the fall of the communist regime, he travelled back and forth - even for work - between overseas and his homeland. In the last decade of his life, he moved to the town of Bystré, to which he became attached also thanks to the fact that he had shot there his most famous work *All My Good Countrymen* (1968), and then to Přerov, where he settled

with his new, thirty-four years younger partner, who then became the sole heir, as we can read in *Kalendárium*.

Voráč draws here mainly from the *Diaries*, in which Jasný used to write his feelings and thoughts (he had been keeping diaries since 1964 and they number over twenty thousand pages!), but also from numerous occasionally kept *Film Notebooks* and *Memoirs*, which he wrote in the late eighties. He also helps himself out with documents from domestic archives (including those of security forces), or periodicals, and incorporates the testimonies of people with whom Jasný came into contact, especially of various producers. Naturally, he also studied in detail the secondary literature related to Jasný's exile - I would perhaps add only Tereza Adámková's diploma thesis, which deals with Jasný's cooperation with the German writer Heinrich Böll.¹²

The next three sections are edited materials written by both Jasný and his wife Květa (1924–2012). A completely new item, published for the first time, is *Květiny vzpomínky* (Květa's memories), recorded shortly before her death. Jasný's texts had been freely available earlier: less than a decade ago, extracts from *Memoirs*, which had been written for the Czechoslovak broadcast of Radio Free Europe in the late 1980s, were published in six issues of *Divadelní noviny*, and the script of the never-realized parable *Komíníček a korouhvičky* was published in *Iluminace*.¹³

Jasný spent decades thinking through this project, which takes on a different shape and meaning depending on the current social and political situation - from the early sixties until 1992. It was even included in Barrandov's film studio production plan, but in the end, it lacked the necessary funding. However, Jasný had more unrealized plans: he was preparing his own version of *Falstaff*, which was supposed to be embodied by Jan Werich (and Shakespeare was to be played by Jiří Voskovec). Perhaps it would be interesting to publish even this text, which is currently available to the public only in the library of the National Film Archive.¹⁴ However, Werich himself also turned this material into a play.¹⁵

Voráč's book brings many interesting details that shed light on the fates and often difficult creation of Jasný's works. For example, we learn that the original version of *All My Good Countrymen* lasted three and a half hours, but a representative of the Cannes festival, who allegedly cried with emotions during the screening, said it was too long. Only after shortening the film to almost a half (based on the proposal of Jan Kučera, a teacher of film composition at FAMU, who is, however, not mentioned in the film's subtitles), was the film accepted to Cannes and won an award for direction. This version was then screened in Czech cinemas. I cannot but ask: have the omitted parts been preserved? Is there any hope to restore the original shape?

Another interesting fact is that censorship pressure did not subside even after the fall of the regime. There was a problem with presenting the document *Why Havel? (Proč Havel?)* [1991]. On the one hand, the president's advisers -

¹⁰ <https://starfos.tacrcz.cz/project/GA408%2F02%2F1117>, <https://starfos.tacr.cz/cs/project/GAP409%2F11%2F0591#project-main>

¹¹ It is not the first publication that describes the fate and artistic legacy of Vojtěch Jasný. More than two decades ago, a book was published that included both the director's personal memories and twelve film lessons. See Vojtěch Jasný, *Life and Film (The Labyrinthine Biographies of Vojtech Jasný) [Život a film]*. Prague: National Film Archive 1999.

¹² Tereza Adámková, *Vojtěch Jasný a jeho cesta k Heinrichu Böllovi*. Brno: Janáček Academy of Performing Arts in Brno 2013.

¹³ Vojtěch Jasný, „Ikarské lety“. *Divadelní noviny*, 2012, No. 1–6, p. 16; Vojtěch Jasný, „Komíníček a korouhvičky“. *Iluminace*, 2003, No. 1, p. 115–146.

¹⁴ https://ar1.nfa.cz/ar1-nfa/cs/vysledky/?field=ANY&term=film-falstaff&kvant=all&search=Naj%C3%ADt&op=result&guide=&limv_DATE_1=&limv_DATE_2=&zf=SHORT&sort=DATE&pagesize=10&asci=1

¹⁵ Werich's translation and adaptation of Shakespeare's *Henry IV* with the dominant figure of Falstaff (*King Henry IV* Prague: Dilia, 1964) already rehearsed two stages in the same year, the Mahen Theater in Brno and the S. K. Neumann Theater in Prague. Five years later, the play was also published as a book - William Shakespeare, Jan Werich, *Falstaffovo babí léto (Falstaff's Indian Summer)*. Prague: Svoboda 1969 (verses translated by Jan Vladislav, literally written by Jiří Voskovec). It was first performed under this name a year later at the Petr Bezruč Theater in Ostrava.

namely Michal Žantovský, Jiří Křížan, Petr Oslzlý and Ladislav Kantor - demanded the removal of the scene, which according to them ridiculed Havel (which they achieved), on the other hand, the then Czechoslovak Television refused to present it. It only appeared on the screen, in the still edited version, five years later. Voráč, however, also discovered an opinion that the film seemed too exaggerated, celebratory, a bit kitschy. But what Voráč himself thinks about this work, we somehow can't find anywhere. What I find even more serious, however, is that Voráč focused only on Jasný's work in exile and completely omitted the domestic one. I am afraid that the gaping hole will hardly be filled (unless the author himself intends to do so).

Displacing oneself from the text is what I would call Voráč's approach. Although the author composes a very laborious and detailed unique mosaic, he vividly reconstructs Jasný's actions and the acceptance of his works, he completely displaces his attitudes and opinions. Jasný himself admits that abroad, where he had to settle for mostly television projects, he never approached the heights (or depths) he reached in Czechoslovakia. And from my own viewing experience, I can confirm that some of his works are almost impossible to watch, such as the television transcript of Zamyatín's work *My* (Wir, 1981). In the times of the so-called Normalization, Jasný was one of the creators pushed out from the public consciousness. Later, his foreign films, which there are almost forty, could only be seen at specialized screenings, very few made it into television broadcasts.

One last remark: a valuable part of the book is detailed filmographic data, certainly the most complete that can be found in the world. I would add that only a few films could have been watched on a television screen in our country. For example, the documentary *Impressionen über Herbert von Karajan* (Imprese o Herbertu von Karajanovi, 1978) was presented in January 1993 by the Czech Television and *The Great Land of Small* (Velká země malých, 1986) was broadcasted by Prima in November 1994. *The Peanut Solution* (1985), Jasný's first film made on the North American continent, even has two Czech titles: In August 1990, the Czech Television came up with the title *Dům plný strachu* (House Full of Fear), and in April 1994, TV Nova renamed it *Arašídová pomazánka* (Peanut Butter).

× Jan Jaroš