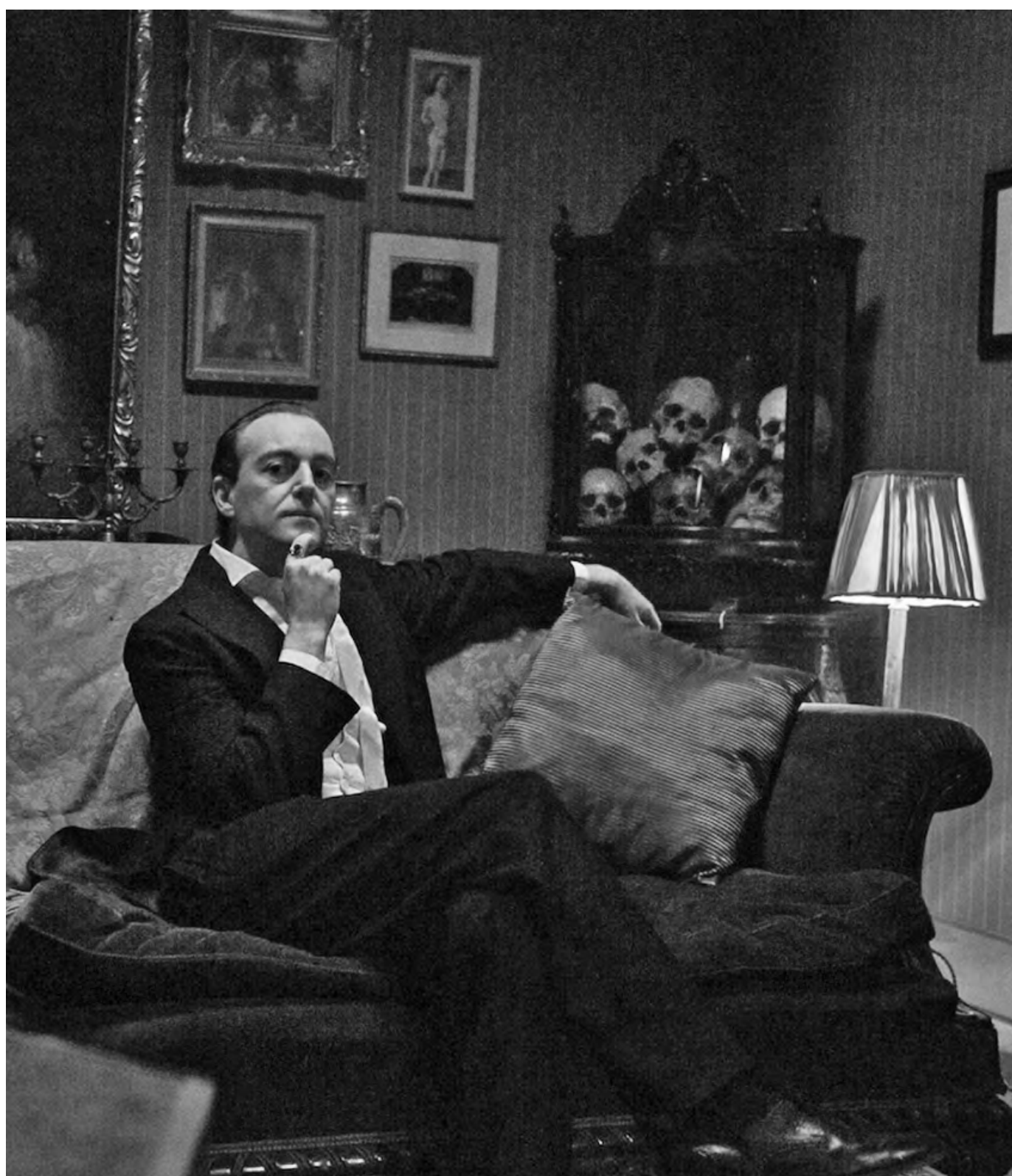


FILM

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2022 — SPECIAL ENGLISH ISSUE — FOR FREE



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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

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Free of charge

Place of Issue
Prague, Czech Republic

Date of Publication
November 12, 2022

Cover photo
Arvéd (r. Vojtěch Mašek, 2022)

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



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At gunpoint

Remarks on Czech feature films of the past season

Jaromír Blažejovský

The pandemic reduced the number of screening days and cinema viewers by around two fifths. Domestic films represented around 37 % of cinema admissions, which was an increase by more than half. Some of them postponed by a year, new films were hitting the cinemas one after another. There were even several premières a week in the summer in case their release would again be prevented by a future lockdown. Already short-lived enough, the films became even more short-lived: they flashed in front of some viewers and then disappeared. Only a few remained in the chart for several weeks: the sad comedy *Prvok, Šampón, Tečka and Karel* (*Prvok, Šampón, Tečka a Karel*, dir. by Patrik Hrtl) entertained more than 600,000 viewers; another *Karel* (dir. by Olga Malířová Špátová) – this time Karel Gott – attracted 390,000 viewers overtaken by *Zátopek* (dir. by David Ondříček) with nearly 400,000 viewers. Also *The Old Blunderbuss Mystery 2* (*Tajemství staré bambitky*, dir. by Ivo Macharáček) has shown great endurance, with the number of viewers still growing after two months since the première. With 293,000 viewers, also *Mothers* (*Matky*, dir. by Vojtěch Moravec) stayed in the chart for a long time.

Topping the list are films striving to say something profound about Central Europeans and their history. Depending on the way they try to appeal to the audience, we can divide them in, let's say, low-cost art films and high-budget projects of Hollywood style and ambitions.

Red and black

Last year, the first among the first was *Occupation* (*Okupace*), late debutant Michal Nohejl's anecdote about a drunk Soviet officer sneaking into a party of local theatre actors at a night in the "normalization" period. The film makes fun of national chatter and blabber about the Munich Betrayal, August 1968, resistance, and all the Czech traumas we love to babble about even when we are not drunk. It suggests that Czechs might not be capable of their own subjectivity, only opening their space to external forces, adrift amongst fits of resistance and resignation. In a faithful and scary way, Nohejl's satire depicts the knot of attachment and threats, the Slavic curse bringing such horrors because it claims inseparable brotherhood with safety catch off. The stereotype is malicious and intentional here: a Russian must be dead drunk,



he brings petrol and a gun, but at the same time, he bears the legacy of high culture, knows the Bolshoi Theatre and Maya Plisetskaya.

The story operates on the verge of ethics when the Czech actors dress as the Nazis to intimidate the intruder. This breaks the unwritten taboo that common fight against Hitler is a sacrament that is never called into question. In a costume comedy, a carnival turn upside down is acceptable. The warning that we cannot do without an occupier is the most serious threat. But I don't know if the authors would use the same gag a year later when it's the evil forces the film is directed against who use the term "Nazism" for their propaganda.

Occupation is immune to criticism of historical inaccuracies which prestigious portrayals of the past must often face. Not trying to make a period impression, it goes for costumes, set, and music that are bewitching rather than authentic. More important are the sketched attitudes in the confrontation of a typical boss having made a "sacrifice" through his conformism, an alleged rebel, a "dissident", and a mysterious young lady. The artistic stylization of the film is aligned with the red line *Occupation* teeters on: the subdued colours are dominated by red shades. The impressive mise-en-scene together with Jan Baset Střítežský's cinematography makes the intimate confrontation on the wide screen a devilish experience.

Also Jiří Havelka offers a portrayal of Czech national character in his *Emergency Situation* (Mimořádná událost) inspired by a driverless train ride in February 2019. Indeed, a good many citizens had felt like living in a state not driven by anyone until recently. Society is represented by a driving instructor with his alcoholic wife, an annoying mother with her daughter, Mrs anti-communist, a precocious boy, an undertaker, a false pilot from England, three young rockers – one of them is supposed to be half-Romani –, a girl dressed as a parrot, and outside a youtuber on a trip and a local politician. The whole thing is mockingly accompanied by rhythmic Balkan type brass music.

Emergency situation offers a lot of attractions. One of them is definitely the moving train, the most impressive object to be filmed since the Lumière brothers. Some gags work. Other ones are not so funny. Or I didn't get them. I had had no idea about the woman stuck under the root or the deer having escaped with a shotgun; I googled both when I came back from the cinema. The most dangerous passen-

ger is the hunter. His father had been a Gestapo informer, he was a State Security collaborator and moreover, he is a racist and is afraid of Muslims. The story also includes the terrorist attack by pensioner Balda having put a tree on the track to make the crime look like it was done by immigrants. Czechs are racists and xenophobes, says Havelka. Well, good. Actually not so good. And what's next? The film shows that even a complete idiot can control the situation if they have a firearm in their hands. This makes us think of politicians, left-wing and right-wing ones alike, who have their picture taken with rifles or guns.

Occupation and *Emergency Situation* serve as a test whether parables about national character can still bring some knowledge like in the golden 1960s. Havelka's *Owners* (Vlastníci, 2019) were a successful metaphor seen by many viewers. *Occupation* achieved a similar effect. Thanks to intense promotion, *Emergency Situation* attracted excited crowds in the first week. However, their interest waned quickly. The film did not offer a mirror the audiences would recognize themselves in.

Ivana Pauerová Miloševičová also contributes to the debate about national character with her documentary *Peculiarity of Fisherman's Soul* (Svéráz českého rybolovu), with a trailer seemingly inviting to a comedy. A group of fellows well stocked with beer and cigarettes go fishing to Norway, warm up Czech dumplings and goulash from home there and don't bring back any fish. This is how the Czechs deal with the long-desired freedom: they don't need to travel anywhere as they bring their limited horizons anywhere with them. In line with the masculinity crisis, the film confirms that men are idiots, or at least drones.

Also Mira Fornay inclines to zoology in her third opus *Cook F**k Kill* (Žáby bez jazyka), where she juggles neo-modernist tricks. The weird family grotesque crushes the viewer with cruel sequences, not providing any orientation, support, or comfort: the first episode might be the last, the second one the first, the third one the second – wait, no, the plot goes in a circle. Paramedic Jarin is first a man and then, or actually before that, he is a woman. His wife is a policewoman whose father Gustáv lives with Jarin's mother Dorota who Jarin cooks for and kills her with peanut butter. Jarin's father is supposed to cook a lunch for Dorota and Gustáv. The girl Ranita masturbates in a lake with a talking frog and Gustáv's ex-wife's friends accompany us like a choir. The uncertainty about everything including the narrative and its



meaning makes the film a tottering plane threatening to destroy everything like when in a film, things fall from the window on a pavement.

Also Miroslav Bambušek, a trained philosopher and practising theatre artist, is one of the angry men in their 40s who try to put something in our heads; a smart aleck type of person who quotes classics. His *Blood Kin* (Lidi krve) looks at the fates of Sudetenland Germans through the filter of German romanticism. A Czech brute behaves like a beast, and a noble German is an embodiment of grace. “The desert grows: woe to him in whom deserts hide” – Friedrich Nietzsche’s warning was already used by the Mexican director Rodrigo Plá in his family drama *The Desert Within* (The Desert Within, 2008). The line from a song by the underground band DG 307 that goes “you will meet blood kin on your way” sounds like a reference to the Nazi concept of blood and soil. The long exposition in which the weird pilgrims set out into the dark landscape is like a Stalker-like introduction into a spiritual mode. The dark image and narcotic banality are only sometimes interrupted by a flash of amazement.

Also two co-production films by Slovak directors turn to the past. Ivan Ostrochovský’s black-and-white *Servants* (Služebníci) evoke the suffocating atmosphere of a seminary in the normalization period, pointing out the story of the secretly ordained priest Přemysl Coufal who was probably murdered by the State Security. It is as if we were watching a game of chess with pieces stuck in invariable positions. God is not present, and no one thinks of him either. Everyone smokes a lot.

Already Jan Němec proved with his *Diamonds of the Night* (Démanty noci, 1964) that holocaust experience can be made into a festival film. And László Nemes showed with his *Son of Saul* (Saul fia, 2015) that it can become an audience hit. Peter Bebjak learned his craft making horrors and masters the film language more than most people. I watched his *The Report* (Zpráva) in a sold-out cinema, which was not really common during the pandemic autumn. At the time, the work had been sold to be released in several countries. The true story of Adolf Wetzler’s and Rudolf Vrba’s escape from Auschwitz has three parts: preparation of the escape, a journey through the woods resembling *Diamonds of the Night*, and meeting a Red Cross representative in Žilina. There it is clear how difficult it is for the civilized world to believe horrors, let alone to resist them. Just like the Romanian author Radu Jude who mockingly quotes obscene statements of

political and intellectual figures in his pamphlets, Bebjak also added racist, xenophobic, fascist, homophobic, and other right-wing statements from Central Europe. Nearly politically incorrectly, he lumped together opinions driven by different motivations, summarizing the fascisizing mentality.

Runners and refugees

David Ondříček’s dreamt-of and hard-earned megafilm *Zátopek* did not fulfil the foolish expectations that a biography must bring a clear moral opinion, especially when it comes to communism. It reminded us that many of those who contributed to Czech and Slovak post-war successes were members of the Communist Party. Emil Zátopek is portrayed in part as a sly fellow, and in part as a useful idiot who tries to escape the regime to the safety of the cheering crowds in the stadiums. The film added to the list of stereotypical scenes that fail to reconstruct how people felt about the time they lived in but show what today’s authors think about it. An example might be the incredible scene in which a mad anti-communist comes at Zátopek in the autumn of 1968 and furious like the Řeporyje mayor, he calls him a bolshevik. Having signed the “Two Thousand Words” manifesto, Dana and Emil Zátopek were respected faces of the “revival process”. The savage fell to that era through a wormhole from today. The authors don’t take into account that different post-war decades had different dynamics, and in their interpretation, the Stalinist era and the reform year of 1968 have the same brownish stylization. The marathon runner Ron Clarke comes to visit Zátopek after the invasion, reads about it in the newspaper on the plane, sees armoured vehicles and signs supporting Dubček in the streets of Prague, but the sport officials are already all scared and forbid to speak about politics. This was definitely not what the spirit of autumn 1968 was like. What is more credible is the relationship level: a man always disappoints the woman, even if he thinks he is trying not to. The Czech film industry needs big stories, and the work did deserve the imaginary silver medal from the audience and from the critics.

Another ambitious film-novel from the post-1948 period became an outsider: Zdeněk Jiráský’s *Krystof* (Kryštof) based on a screenplay by Kristián Suda, sometimes going by the name of Josef Kurz. The melancholic elliptical narration explicitly deals with elementary wrongs: the expulsion of Germans, shooting at the borders, operation K against monasteries, collectivization, confiscation of property. The result



is obviously a product of determined efforts to give artistic shape to a textbook. The narration plays with the ascetic style of a spiritual film and works with intertextual links. Saint Christopher carried Christ and allegedly also pilgrims across a raging river; in the film, he carries emigrants across the borders. Impressive is the motif of a village cinema with *Border Village* (Ves v pohraničí, 1948) on. A few years ago, Zdeněk Jiráský had been about to direct *Shadow Country* (Krajina ve stínu, 2020), which was directed by Bohdan Sláma in the end, and which became the event of the year. Promoted in the media but nearly not screened in the cinemas, *Krystof* is not so good but is still worth watching for some.

Tomáš Hodan promised that with his debut *The Last Race* (Poslední závod), we would finally find out what happened to the skiers Bohumil Hanč and Václav Vrbata who had died in the Giant Mountains on 24 March 1913. He defined himself against the allegedly biased film *Sons of the Mountains* (Synové hor) directed by Čeněk Duba in 1956, in which “the Communists erased from history” the German sportsman Rath having found Hanč in the snowstorm. However, played by Otakar Brousek, the character of Emerich Rath does appear in *Sons of the Mountains*, and Rath himself briefly appears there as well playing the gamekeeper. And František Kožík didn't hide his credit either in his book of the same name. In *The Last Race*, the skiing drama is framed by an implausible framework narrative from 1959, in which a couple managing a chalet is afraid of a German – a member of a recognized minority of around 250,000 – becoming a boilerman there. They are also afraid of trade union holidaymakers, even though most winter holidays at the time were organized by the ROH (Revolutionary Trade Union Movement) involving nearly all employees. Hodan and his characters probably confused the trade unions with the Communist Party. What sounds funny is Rath's question: “Do you know that story?” The adequate answer would be: “Sure, I saw it in *Sons of the Mountains*, the film you played in.”

Pale nights of authors' confessions

With his sad film *The Way Home* (Cesta domů), Tomáš Vorel completed the loose trilogy: *Out of the City* (Cesta z města, 2000), *To the Woods* (Cesta do lesa, 2012). Ludva Papaš (Bolek Polívka) suffers from dementia, probably due to the chemicals he uses in farming. Honza (Tomáš Hanák) “follows the booze” and wants to hang himself on a chain.

The world is a poison and even hysterical organic alternatives won't solve anything. The story staggers like the drunk men and Tomáš Vorel Jr.'s performance in the role of young Ludva is rather shaky. The youtuber Dominika Mína Elischerová plays a luscious part when she seduces him in an angel costume. In its pessimism, *The Way Home* is the most Vorelesque film since *Stone Bridge* (Kamenný most, 1996). The critics gave it low ratings. They want Czech films to be about something but when they are, the critics castigate them for schematism and ideology.

Death is also the subject of *Bethlehem Night* (Betlémské světlo), a film conjured up by Jan Svěrák based on his father Zdeněk Svěrák's short stories. Zdeněk Svěrák plays the writer Šejnoha who has funeral dreams and erotic fantasies, is disoriented in the modern world, suffers from senile confusion, and is haunted by characters from his own short stories. The accusation that Šejnoha thrives on “banalities and obscenities” serves as an apology for the whole film. As expected, the ideologizing critics rejected the film for its banal and obscene moments. *Bethlehem Night* is another work whose authors look for way out of the creative crisis in the topic of creative crisis. This might be the reason why Jan Svěrák played with the film so much, making every scene special. When the foam of disappointment dissolves, we may appreciate the self-irony and wit which the film isn't short of.

What has stayed with me from the past season is Jan Prušinovský's *Mistakes* (Chyby), one of the few contemporary films where the characters have manual labour jobs. The hero Tomáš is a roofer just like the screenwriter Roman Vojkůvka. The story uses the archetype of a woman marked by her past. In old novels, she used to be a courtesan or prostitute, seduced and abandoned; here, it's online porn. This Ema was so well played by Pavla Gajdošíková that right on the first meeting in the bar, I had a gut feeling of disliking her – and I didn't even know of her problem yet. Ema is not strange because she has acted in a porn film; she acted in one because she is strange. The porn was related to her ex. We are watching a woman trying to restart her life with a new relationship, to erase her past. However, you cannot erase traces left online. You can't do it in your life either. Your past actions count: poor people are haunted by restraint, politicians by sexual, plagiarist, or otherwise indecorous scandals. Why should porn be an exception?

Mistakes is an open film that can be considered from different perspectives. It follows a moralising line, but the



viewer is free to experience dissociation, confusion, or identification. It is a lesson about the risk taken by anyone starting a relationship. Already the Czech relationship specialist Miroslav Plzák used to emphasise that the genders are not equal in this respect: women risk much more. Feminist-minded reviewers criticize the film for not being told from the point of view of the victim, which should always be the woman according to their ideology, with the man always being labelled as a predator and patriarchal dumbhead.

Two Ships (Marťanské lodě) is a personal confession of the singer and guitar player Martin Kyšperský; he plays himself in the true tragic story of his girlfriend, psychologist Alena Černá (1988–2016). In the film directed by the documentarist Jan Foukal, the heroine's name is Eliška and she is played by Eliška Křenková with whom, as aptly pointed out by Mirka Spáčilová, you can never go wrong. The result is a testimony of inexplicable suffering, of suicide as a misfortune that happens to the victim. What is great is the evocation of time, the feeling of shared presence of a couple, still together. The authors discovered interesting locations in Brno and its surroundings, and by contrast, what's missing here is the big social world. At the end, Martin makes a dramatic water jump, especially for us viewers.

With his comedy *The Man with Hare Ears* (Muž se zajčima ušima), Martin Šulík came back to his roots of using himself and quotes as resources. His new film is a portrait of a once successful writer who is used to controlling relationships and God; Miroslav Krobot did a great job playing him. Like his peers, the old man now has problems with his wife, children, young mistress, and fading inspiration. The concept of an artist as a parasite feeding on his surroundings is no surprise. Self-centred like the usual artist, the egoist sometimes behaves silly, and takes the right attitude at other times. *The Man with Hare Ears* bows to the New Wave, especially to Pavel Juráček from whose *Case for a Rookie Hangman* (Případ pro začínajícího kata, 1969) Šulík took over the migrating hare motif. The eating sequence reminds one of Jan Švankmajer's fleshy twitches, and the intrusive graphomaniac alludes to Hynek Bočan's comedy *Nobody Will Laugh* (Nikdo se nebude smát, 1965) inspired by Milan Kundera's short story. The family conflict unravels like in an American drama of the past century. Very 1960s-like is the changing of colour and black-and-white shots. Even the beautifully slow pace is of that time. Like in the golden 1960s, the film does well in both mainstream and art cinemas.

The screenwriter Petr Pýcha and director Olmo Omerzu presented their *Bird Atlas* (Atlas ptáků) about an ageing and dying businessman who is lost in the online world and is tricked. The model story has not much in common with local reality: Róna is a boss of a private company with a long tradition built by his father, which wouldn't have been possible before 1990. The story leans on two twists expected by the viewer, and one the viewer must imagine. The film was tailor-made for Miroslav Donutil who played the most unlikeable of all his arrogant pain in the necks. What makes the film interesting are songbirds assuming the role of the narrator and chirping various pearls of wisdom. The widescreen format is well suited for birds, and less so for interiors.

Playfulness, deliberateness, and tormentingness: these words characterize Šimon Holý's low-budget authorial debut *Mirrors in the Dark* (Zrcadla ve tmě). Each and every element can be seen as functional in terms of possible interpretations: a 10-minute long shot of a face, jump cuts, black-and-white image. We can't mind the fact that the topic of the film is ordinariness considering that the dance performance of *Maryša*, the rehearsal of which we witness, is just as fruitless as the self-image of the dancer Marie and her relationship with František. It is not even clear to which extent Marie's experiences from the outside world happened in the past, in parallel, in the future or in her imagination. In the good old way, all credits are at the beginning and at the end, we only see the desired sign "End".

Czech films can be divided into films and films with Jiří Langmajer. The other group includes the already fifth feature by the self-taught director and traveller Rudolf Havlík *Lifeline* (Minuta věčnosti), made as a way out of the Covid boredom. A heart surgeon and his daughter wander through the landscape of Iceland. Lucie reproaches Petr for being a grump; sometimes she gets sick, faints, or disappears. This is accompanied by voices from a valve surgery, dull music, or female vocals. The film with disconnected image and sound is tiring with its monotony and its eighty minutes feel endless.

Heart, spikes, mystery

The ancient tradition of problematic films for children is revived by the screenplayer Kateřina Kačerovská and the director Petr Oukropec. What was once the product of a year's work of the entire Marcela Pittermannová's production team is now to be condensed into one film with guaranteed continuity with the golden era thanks to Pitter-



mannová's presence as a dramaturgist: *Martin and the Magical Forest* (Mazel a tajemství lesa). In a scout camp, a slightly spoiled boy goes through socialization and there is also an environmental plot: nature resists plundering, plant beings need a mirror, comb, and scarf. Live action scenes are combined with animation. As is usual here, the precious children's film premiered in July – a sure way to kill it in the cinemas.

And another disappearance of a summer premiere followed soon: *The Sleeping City* (Spící město) filmed by Dan Svátek based on the first part of Martin Vopěnka's trilogy. The devastating post-apocalyptic sci-fi benefits from the dread caused by the story about a black ambulance: all parents fall asleep, and children must take care of themselves. They are threatened by evil priests, a paedophile German, childless people. Why are so many people that the children meet defective? A title and commentary regularly announce how many days have passed since falling asleep. The narration, minimalist and suggestive at first, is sleepier and sleepier and falls apart into dream sequences. The world has gone wrong, and things will never be the same.

With *The Old Blunderbuss Mystery 2*, Ivo Machráček made a costume fairy tale that unfolds in a funny, brisk, nice way. Already the first TV part from 2011 was originally meant for the cinemas; the second one is truly a great film with rich image and sound. The first part was made under Prime Minister Petr Nečas and Minister of Finance Miroslav Kalousek; the second one under Andrej Babiš. So the thieving councilors want to manage the kingdom like a firm. As robber Karaba says: "Some people rule for living, others make pots and yet others rob." Frauds sell false miraculous pots. However, robbing is forbidden both "above and below". There are also songs and the plot is fun, even though it turns the traditional fairy tale story upside down. Instead of the princess, for the time being a minor, it's the queen who is on the way to a happy end, and her chosen one is the grandpa. By mistake, the king dissolves the army and has no choice but to lead a peasant revolution.

The best-selling contemporary novelist Patrik Hartl adapted his first novel *Prvok, Šampón, Tečka and Karel*. After the epidemic lockdown, the longed-for locomotive brought hundreds of thousands of viewers. Hartl showed professional narrator's certainty and added a bitter note. The comedy can boast a first-class cast – even in the small parts –, the always welcome female singers played by men, and unexpected turn of events. The cold Karel played by Martin Hofmann was

a success; by contrast, Martin Pechlát's *Prvok* is played far too eagerly. Also the drunk scene looks forced. It is symptomatic of a decent film that when the heroes strip naked in public to prove that they are "no motherfuckers", the most they show to the camera is their bottom. Patrik is simply not as bold as *Prvok*, *Šampón*, *Tečka*, and *Karel*.

Above average were *Mothers*, made by the debuting Vojtěch Moravec based on the screenplay by Vanda Zaplatílková and the actress Sandra Nováková. A knot of stories about women steering their relationships is not a romantic dating comedy, but a testimony of what follows: pregnancy, birth, postpartum period, childcare. Adequate semblance of reality, manageable portion of problems, changed stereotypes. Even Jiří Langmajer is less of a womanizer here than in other films. The narration sticks to a female point of view, but it can also be critical of patriarchy. Men are not just dummies here but loving men trying hard.

Far behind *Mothers* was *Modern Father's Diary* (Deníček moderního fotra) made by another debutant, Jan Haluza, based on Dominik Landsman's best-selling novel of the same name. He flooded it with symphonic music of Hollywood style imitating a drama that never happens. Haluza, a trained film scholar, did what beginners usually do: he let special effects run wild to show off what he knows and can and to make a truly "filmy" film. Tereza Ramba played her Nataša perfectly; Jiří Mádl desperately played a desperate guy. But maybe that's the way it should be because his Dominik doesn't feel well in his father role either. But what's so special about a dad taking care of a baby? After all, a normal guy can feed a baby, change its diapers, put it to sleep, and tell stories – without grimacing like Jiří Mádl.

Bringing Jaroslav Fuit back to cinema work after 12 years, also *Only for Tereza* (Jedině Tereza) has Hollywood-like ambitions. The slush takes place at Christmas, on New Year's Day, and on Valentine's Day, it premiered in September and only attracted 32,000 viewers. The heroine's profession is original – she makes shoes. The twist with the charming photographer and alleged lover being her father sounds like from the 19th century. The authors crammed the film with songs and music as if they were afraid they're boring. And they are, indeed. By way of an intellectual apology, they injected the work with postmodern double encoding in the form of allusions to *Matrix*, *Titanic*, *Dirty Dancing*, *Three Wishes for Cinderella* (Tři oříšky pro Popelku), etc. Oh, dear, is that supposed to be funny? To bedeck a silly story with



references to well-known films so that the viewer feels like watching those famous films a little as well? It is not fair for a reviewer to ask over a failed film what the heck the Czech Film Fund threw their money at. But *Only for Tereza*? What the heck the Czech Film Fund threw their money at?

The tragicomedy of manners *Adored* (Zbožňovaný) was written and directed by the hyperactive Petr Kolečko. A senior paediatrician has led a double life with a wife and a colleague-lover. Now he is retiring and wants to end his affair because his wife is a better cook. Men are idiots, women are hard, lines are witty, actions are implausible. Stuffed chicken wins over universal brown sauce. The image is again stuffed with songs, the author uses parallel montage.

Love on the Spikes (Láska na špičkách) directed by Petr Zahrádka based on the screenplay by Adéla Kroupová is pathetic. A former prima ballerina rehearses with village children and their daddies ballet blanc to succeed in a bizarre Prague competition. The village looks like those living in the capital imagine it: a romantic homestead with a mill, a reformable drunkard, and a gentleman grandpa as a chief of the fire brigade.

Monotonous in its stultifying warmth is *Heart to Heart* (Srdce na dlani) by Martin Horský who tried to replicate the success of his positive debut *Women on the Run* (Ženy v běhu). Unlike in the not so old Viewegh's and Vejdělek's films, there are no cross-generational relationships anymore. It's each to their own: a pre-school boy to a pre-school girl, a school boy to a school girl, a gay to a gay, a dog to a bitch, an elderly man to an elderly woman. People smile, nobody gets angry, only two bad guys do bad things. Like the ancient *Bachelors* (Bakaláři) TV series, the screenplay draws on children's one-liners. Accompanied by boring music, the film has a sweet-sour taste just like the pickled sausages eaten in tons in the film. To make the film less Prague-centric, one character is from Bratislava, one bitch is from Brno, and one family lives in Florida.

The remake of the Polish Christmas megahit *Listy do M.* (dir. by Mitja Okorn, 2011), which already has four sequels, was titled *Wishes to Santa* (Přání Ježíškovi) and filmed by Marta Ferencová. Bittersweet touches that work in the Polish environment have lost their emotional intensity in the Czech version. For instance, the motif of homosexuality, with which the original work took the side of liberals in the local cultural war, appears flat in our context. The result is a boring, unfunny, poorly acted film, and the only interesting thing about it is

the way Brno turned into an angelic Christmas city.

Based on the screenplay by Eva Twardzik Urbaníková, the queen of woman's novels, Marta Ferencová's next opus *In Summer, I'll Tell You How I am* (V létě ti řeknu, jak se mám) certainly had no pretensions to winning the Critics' Award either. The parallel stories of several couples deal with the proportion of reliability and freedom: one marriage is falling apart because of the unbearable attachment of the young lady; the only thing that works in another relationship is sex, but the woman would like more; another woman lives in a happy relationship but is stalked by her ex; and there is a daddy despot. The characters must have attractive jobs: TV host, soldier participating in the Afghan mission, dentist, lawyer, restaurant owner, politician, prime minister. The result is shoddy: unfocused image, terrible sound mix, an array of annoying songs. The authors of kitsch know how poor their stories are, and that's why they try to drown it out with a parallel discotheque.

Nearly nothing happens in Jakub Kroner's comedy *Happy New Year 2* (Šťastný nový rok 2. Dobro došli) based on the screenplay by Adriana Kronerová. It is neither romantic nor a comedy. Emília Vášáryová is having a good time in Croatia. This is where the Christmas heroines have moved to – those that the authors imagine someone remembers from the first part. The film is reminiscent of Soviet comedies from the times of the theory of *beskonfliktnost'* (conflictlessness) when a story was supposed to be happy just because the characters were happy. When somebody gets drunk, it is supposed to be funny. That's why nearly every man gets drunk, and the ladies at least hold their wine glasses. To make it even merrier, one guy wears a Santa Claus costume. Sometimes someone uses a swear word – but only the Croatians. The soundtrack beats with rhythm like Serbian brass-band music. The final wedding dance number imitates Bollywood.

Alcohol, blood, faeces

A special category is made of crazy, corny, and sticky genre films. They don't play it safe like the romantic comedies, daring to use more self-irony, creativity, and cramped effort, or even experiment. In their laboratory, the authors try what funny things could be mixed in our context.

Closest to the mainstream is *The Art of Passion* (Kurz manželské touhy) made by Radek Bajgar based on the screenplay by the successful Mirka Zlatníková. Misleading the viewer, it appears to be another silly romantic comedy,



and then it turns into an anti-romantic detective story. The plot volume won't go beyond a TV micro-comedy. Within the ninety minutes, the story doesn't move much and the sleepy rhythm is sometimes interrupted by a funny line. The film feels like a by-product of *Holiday Village* (Osada) as it features seven actors from this TV series who excel here just as passionately, playing opposite personality types though. The funniest are the two detectives played by Jana Plodková and Radek Holub.

Made by F. A. Brabec based on Filip Rožek's book and in the name of stray dogs, *Gump – The Dog That Taught People How to Live* (Gump – pes, který naučil lidi žít) attracted nearly 250,000 viewers. Declaimed by Ivan Trojan and accompanying the simple plot, Gump's long moving monologue reveals the truth about what dogs feel. Gump runs a lot in front of the camera, but we don't see him pee or drink.

Critics received warmly the smashingly escalating slasher film *Shoky & Morthy: Last Big Thing* (Shoky & Morthy: Poslední velká akce) packed with funny lines. With this film, the extravagant Andy Fehu made a half-step towards the mainstream; let's consider the about 30,000 viewers a success. The film only leveraged a part of the horror potential of the ghost stories about the Domašov nine crosses and a dead bride. But Tomáš Magnusek in the role of a youtuber making an artificial excrement overshadowed even the ambitious Štěpán Kozub as Shoky.

Štěpán Kozub acts hard in the sadistic thriller *Repulse* (Hrana zlomu) by the amateur director Emil Křížka. At random, the messy narrative shows a despotic woman tormenting her son, forcing him to torture a pregnant captive while a marital crisis reaches its peak in a nearby household. If the critics welcome this midnight attempt as enrichment, the standards of this genre must be very low. Also Adam Hobzik's worn-out, stale-marihuana-filled debut *Punch and Run* (Ubal a zmiz) lacks lightness, trying to revive the atmosphere of Žižkov and Guy Ritchie's 20-year-old poetics.

As his directorial debut, the actor Michal Suchánek made the black comedy *The Party* (Večírek), which is unfortunately not as funny as its namesake made by Blake Edwards in 1968. Alumni hold a housewarming party; they look forward to and are afraid of their schoolmate Prasopes coming but what arrives instead of him is a funereal notice. Then they take an old bus to the funeral, and we figure out that Prasopes hanged himself. They are joined by an intrusive vacuum cleaner seller who is a parody of Leo Popper from Ota Pav-

el's short stories. When you really don't know what to use to make people laugh, try Hitler: there are Nazi salutes and jokes about the Terezín ghetto. The actors are great. When Zdenka (Tatiana Dyková) got drunk, I expected her to throw up. It didn't happen, and the film therefore can't be criticized for being predictable. It feels like Lucia Klein Svoboda's *Bohemian Avenger* (Mstitel) avenges on the public taste. She makes us watch an unlikeable alcoholic roaming the city before leaving for Mars. Jakub Štáfek a Martin Kopp wrapped their 2016 online series for the cinemas under the name *Vysehrad: Seryjal*. Swift, but monotonous: it's again the same situation in which the desperate hungover football player Lavi Lavička wakes up and fails at something.

*

The Czech film industry is dominated by people in their 40s. They remember socialism from their childhood, they grew up in the wild 1990s and started their career in the stable and later polarized years of the new millennium. Typical of them is a slow and late start and long breaks, which makes them actual (Michal Nohejl) or seeming (Miroslav Bambušek, Patrik Hartl, Jan Foukal) debutants at the mature age. Younger authors (Jan Haluza, Adam Hobzik, Šimon Holý, Tomáš Hodan) are in love with old genres, stories, and forms. The older generation (Martin Šulík, Jan Svěrák, Tomáš Vorel) tends to take stock, even though they are not so old yet.

We have a robust film industry producing many feature films. It is great that people go and see some of them. Even though there is sometimes some running in them, there is still little movement, they stick to old patterns or try to be almost defiantly nonconformist. Is it the medium that is tired, or is it the world? *Mistakes* and *Occupation* are two films that are worth discussing. The weakest link remains the distribution and cinemas which are together not able to ensure that every viewer in the country has a chance to see every new Czech film close to home.

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A synecdoche of reality: films by Václav Kadrnka

Janis Prášil

Václav Kadrnka is one of the most prominent contemporary Czech directors. His specific handwriting is unparalleled on the domestic film scene, he speaks the universal language of spiritual film, his films are beyond local standards and appeal to audiences all over the world. This is for instance illustrated by the fact that his debut *Eighty Letters* (Osmdesát dopisů, 2010) was shown in the Forum section at Berlinale, *Little Crusader* (Křižáček, 2017) won the main international competition at the Karlovy Vary Festival, and *Saving One Who Was Dead* (Zpráva o záchraně mrtvého, 2021) was nominated⁰¹ to receive the Crystal Globe in the same category.

Born in Zlín, graduate of the Zlín Film School and of the Department of Directing of the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts (FAMU) and a longtime friend of Vojtěch Jasný, Václav Kadrnka divides the audience into two parts: those who expect a story and fully drawn characters from a film, and those who are looking for anything else. The members of the first category will probably be frustrated by the slow pace, static scenes, and characters that mostly

communicate by looking. They won't like the story either, as it's very simple and doesn't include any side stories. This is reflected in the reviews on viewers' websites presenting a total rating slightly above the average⁰² thanks to the other part of the audience giving the film high ratings, on the contrary.

They don't mind Kadrnka's disgust for Aristotle's drama, which the author considers outdated and not suitable for film and appreciate his freedom of interpretation. According to the director, you don't need to understand a film, but you must feel it.⁰³ To this end, he has developed an ascetic style based on simplicity. His films so far have been marked by three constants:⁰⁴ emptying the space and meaning-making work with the second plan, the motif of absence of a loved

01 The main competition section of the year included other Czech films as well: *At Full Throttle* (Láska pod kapotou, 2021) directed by Miro Remo, *Every Single Minute* (Každá minuta života, 2021) by the documentarist Erika Hníková or the Czech-Slovenian co-production film *Bird Atlas* (Atlas ptáků, 2021) directed by Olmo Omerzu.

02 *Eighty Letters*, *Little Crusader*, and *Saving One Who Was Dead* have been rated 55%, 50%, 59% at ČSFD, respectively, and 6.6, 5.8, 6.9. at IMDB, respectively (as of 20. 05. 2022).

03 Viktor Palák, „Václav Kadrnka: filmu není třeba rozumět, ale cítit ho“. *Foolmoonzine.cz* [online]. 28.06.2017 [cit. 15.05.2022]. Available at: <https://www.fullmoonzine.cz/clanky/vaclav-kadrnka-filmu-neni-treba-rozumet-ale-citit-ho>.

04 Dagmar Šimková, „Václav Kadrnka: Zpráva o záchraně mrtvého je o rituálu nad tělem, rozhodně ne o traumatu“. *Totalfilm.cz* [online]. 23.02.2022 [cit. 15.05.2022]. Available at: <https://www.totalfilm.cz/2022/02/vaclav-kadrnka-zprava-zachrane-mrtveho-ritualu-nad-telem-rozhodne-ne-traumatu/>.



one, and children's characters as a symbol of grace and acceptance. Reflected in physical reality in Kadrnka's films, his spiritual world is based on Trinitarian ontology.⁰⁵

Pari intervallo

It's 1987 and the 14-year-old Vašek is visiting offices and doctors with his mother. They expect them to issue travel documents for them to leave Czechoslovakia and join the father and husband in Great Britain. In his debut, Kadrnka included a part of his teenage years, relying on letters his mother wrote to his father at the end of the 1980s. The film only captures a part of nearly two years of her efforts to receive the travel permit. As if walking through a Kafkaesque castle, she is waiting for doctors, assistants, and National Security Corps members to let her cross the thresholds of their offices. She is forcing her way through a tangled web of forms, applications, and regulations representing a paper golem standing in the way of anyone wanting to leave.

You can't say that *Letters* really stick to historical facts, at least not as much as classic dramas about that time. Deliberately suppressing the presence of totalitarian features, Kadrnka deals with how the normalization period deformed human minds and souls rather than with external realities. Subdued colours, the uniform environment of waiting rooms, receptions, and staircases, people whose faces we can't see and who don't communicate to each other, reflect the apathy and passivity cultivated in the normalization society. When Vašek looks around, he can see legs, backs, and napes of human robots indifferently moving on their tracks as if the external world didn't even exist.

According to the critics, Kadrnka torments the viewer with the way he portrays the rigidity of the regime and the suffocating lack of freedom.⁰⁶ If we expect a historical drama from the normalization period, an expressive comment like this would be appropriate. Instead of a thrilling story about a fight with representatives of the totalitarian regime, we watch a woman visit offices or write letters, we watch the son's waiting. The body language of both characters, not talking much, is reduced to looks, gestures, movements. Already in his debut, Kadrnka defines the basic principle of his handwriting: totality. What matters here isn't totalism, but the qualities of being total, complete, whole. The world portrayed by his films is always incomplete; a character is always missing, and the aim is to find him or her and achieve completeness, wholeness.

It is not hard to realize why the characters desire completeness: it is part of human nature. We long for it since birth – the moment when we separate from the mother and start being on our own. We want to be provided this completeness by our parents, and later by our partners or children. We start families, surround ourselves with friends, we even believe in a higher-order family for all these beings to contain our world and fill it on both physical and metaphysical levels. Just like the mother desiring to get together with her husband. She had a major head surgery and now she needs a loving and safe environment only her husband can grant her. That's why she focuses all her attention on him and neglects her son.

When not trying to get the travel documents, she writes personal letters to her husband, "talking to him", while Vašek keeps waiting for her. His father is too remote and abstract; only his mother is physical embodiment of love. Contrary to the absent father, she is a flesh and blood person the boy can snuggle up with. Whereas the woman lives in hope to achieve completeness, Vašek lives here and now. The source of his anxiety is nothing but a deep-seated fear of death disguised as separation anxiety. The only cure for this existential anxiety is his mother's physical presence. For Vašek, she is the one who scares death off; when she is with him, Vašek

⁰⁵ Trinitarian ontology is a doctrine about one God existing as three persons. Essentially, God is one, but he is not alone. The relationships in the Trinity are based on the fact that all three parts are inseparable. The Father is not complete without his relationship to the Son, to the Spirit, etc. Ctírad Pospíšil, „Cesty k trinitární spiritualitě“. *Teologicketexty.cz* [online]. [cit. 20.05.2022]. Available at: <https://www.teologicketexty.cz/casopis/2000-4/Cesty-k-trinitarni-spiritualite.html>.

⁰⁶ Kamil Fila, „Osmdesát dopisů mučí diváky prázdnotou 80. let“. *Aktualne.cz* [online]. 27.04.2011 [cit. 10.05.2022]. Available at: <https://magazin.aktualne.cz/kultura/film/recenze-osmdesat-dopisu-muci-divaky-prazdnotou-80-let/r~i:article:698270/>.



lives, when she leaves, the boy is surrounded by nothingness and hurtling into an abyss.

The fear of nothingness is aptly illustrated by the scene of Vašek's waking up in the morning. When the boy wakes up and finds out that his mother is not next to him, he calls her, looks for her in the apartment, running head-first to catch the bus and force his presence on her. However, instead of a loving embrace, he gets a look of reproach and cold reception. For his age, Vašek can look like a clingy child extremely fixated on his parent representing a deified icon to him. With fascination, he follows her every gesture, the way she walks, and perceives the unique way of her existence. The mother comes across as an active and independent element, searching, running, arranging, and never resting, while the 14-year-old boy is more like a waiting object reminding one of a piece of luggage standing where we have left it.

The power the mother has over Vašek is terrifying. This dreadfulness comes out in disturbing details, such as the hem of her dress inappropriately sticking out of the wardrobe, the cleanly furnished apartment reminiscent of an abandoned nest or the breakfast on the table waiting for Vašek like a good-bye message. Horror-like is the moment when the mother picks the son up at the reception. Whereas we can hear the steps of people going through the door of the office, we can't hear the mother come. She appears suddenly, like a Hitchcock film character, like a ghostly presence with a look full of restlessness.

However, the mother is not just scary, unpredictable, and powerful to Vašek; she is also an angel, a beautiful un-touchable being similar to the heroine of Tarkovsky's *Mirror* (Zerkalo, 1975). The connection between Kadrnka and Tarkovsky is no accident. Both authors use the motif of family as a religious metaphor and connect the sensual and spiritual, the physical and metaphysical. The author of *Letters* refuses to perceive his film as autobiographic; he just uses a story from his own life to tell the story about something that goes beyond individual experience. The essence of this trans-personal experience is the character of the father, who is fleeing, absenting, and immaterial, and yet all expectations and hopes aspire to him. The more he is missing, the more intense is his presence in the minds of other characters.

However, it is possible that the object of the mother's obsession is not her husband, but the idea of a complete family. Vašek is obsessed with putting together, too, stick-

ing a picture of Pangaea into his notebook, or watching with fascination how an old man in a hospital waiting room peels an Easter egg. In great detail, the camera shows the hands and face of the old man; the paintings made by the hands of a loved one crack wonderfully and the soft fragments of the eggshell gracefully fall on the handkerchief on the man's lap. The silent observer Kadrnka can grasp the poetry of everyday and give it a metaphorical level. The effort of his characters is like an attempt to connect continents or fragments of an eggshell. But the people are still haunted by a tormenting desire for totality. This desire is the basis of life and at the same time the cause of the permanent restlessness, anxiety, and fear.

Letters portray the desire for totality, while at the same time asking if the achievement of such totality is even possible. It is clear that the eggshell or continents will never connect again. In this aspect, the characters' attempts to regain totality is a quixotic quest because all physical ends with death. However, Kadrnka didn't make a film about hopelessness. He portrays the normalization period as an allegoric space offering escapes and possibilities behind the close doors, in waiting rooms, and at receptions. Vašek's mother is able to open these gates. When she receives a letter from her husband, it is as if she saw tangible evidence of the existence of a metaphysical being. In Kadrnka's films, earthly efforts represent preparation for spiritual unity on a higher, immaterial level.

The spiritual concept of the world in his films is best expressed by terms taken over from the most abstract art discipline: music. The music in *Letters* is significantly marked by the spirituality of the film. In addition to the church cantata *Ich ruf zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ* by Johann Sebastian Bach, there is also *Pari intervallo* by Arvo Pärt. The Estonian spiritual minimalist composed the organ piece when his stepfather died, quoting the Romans in it.⁰⁷ He composed it a few years before Kadrnka's father emigrated. The name of the piece

⁰⁷ "For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's." Romans 14:8 (B21).

points to two parallel voices maintaining constant distance for the entire duration of the composition; just like the characters of the mother and son.⁰⁸ They walk side by side, but they never intersect.

Impaired consciousness

Due to a serious stroke, Kadrnka's father fell into a coma. The director and his mother kept visiting him in the hospital, talking to him eight hours a day for a week. When the father woke up, he remembered every word they had said.⁰⁹ Based on this experience, the director made *Saving One Who Was Dead*. However, he doesn't see his third film as autobiographical. He transforms his family members into characters with religious attributes and just like in *Eighty Letters*, even here his father is a transcendental being the mother and son are trying to connect with.

In this film, the hospital represents a house of prayer. The place we associate with body treatment becomes transcendental space. Together with the French cinematographer Raphaël O'Byrne,¹⁰ Kadrnka created a visual language transforming the 1920s interiors of the Franz Josef building in the Olomouc hospital¹¹ into an abstract place. Both authors like static shots with hidden movement. The waiting scenes in the film don't express rigidity or stiffness, but inner action generating underlying thrill. Kadrnka requires the same "motionless dynamics" from the actors. Limiting their body language, movements, and gestures, he wanted them to work in a muted mode. Zuzana Mauréry and Vojtěch Dyk usually stand and express themselves mostly through looks in their eyes.

The sterile and dehumanized hospital environment becomes a surreal place dominated by pastel tones of yellow, brown, greenish-blue, and violet. O'Byrne transformed this typically hospital-like colours into an aesthetic dominant. He did similar magic with light and composition, creating an interior resembling a temple and a place of inner silence. In Kadrnka's film, hospital is not just a building, but a body as well. The pipes taking away the waste generated during the reconstruction resemble bowels. It is as if the house was voiding all filth, getting rid of all corporeal and becoming immaterial. The long canvases veiling the façade resemble human lashes covering the windows of the sick. They shade, lock, separate the world inside from the one outside.

The isolation of the characters from the external world is also illustrated by the unusual portrait image format with a 4:3 aspect ratio. It is not stylistic eccentricity though. In this way, Kadrnka wanted to create a picture without a horizon, confined space reflecting the fear settled in the characters' minds. The portrait format functions as a means of subjectivation. Whereas the vertical expresses individual human experience, the widescreen format objectivizes and puts the characters into a larger context. That's why the image mostly focuses on the vertical. Faces with a portrait frame resemble icons and become an archetype.

Kadrnka works not only with the horizontal and vertical, but also with the symbolism of the first and second plans. In the tangled web of corridors, staircases, and elevators, we move not only to the left and right or up and down, but also front to back or vice versa. We move between the "foreworld" and "rearworld". The front world is the common one the mother and son come from. The hospital represents a middle world; a gap in which souls connect to bodies or disconnect from them; a ritual space where mortality meets immortality. But hidden behind the rear wall, there is another world resembling the Garden of Eden. This scene is extraordinary explicit for Kadrnka; we would perceive the existence of the hidden world even so. In terms of movement symbolism, it is interesting that the Garden of Eden is not in the upper plan, but in the rear one. The mother and son visit the father on the upper floor, but what they are looking for is right in front of them.

Saving One Who Was Dead is not about evidence of God's existence, but about a process of overcoming fear. For medicine, the body is a broken machine that it needs to diagnose, measure, document, and fix. It uses incomprehensible language resembling one of a sect. When the body stops functioning, the brain and mind die as well. Doctors say that people whose mind is disconnected from the body are "in a castle". Their body is lifeless, but contrary to a sleeping person, there is no movement under their lids. Their mind is broken. However, it is the apparatuses monitoring the brain and heart activity that, in Kadrnka's view, turn from tools of science into tools of the spirit and can detect things that are invisible to the human eye. The same subliminal frequency is shared by the music by Irena and Vojtěch Havel, resembling with its minimalism and melancholy the compositions by Béla Tarr's main composer Mihály Víg. Just like modern medical apparatuses, the delicate stream of music can detect the slightest flurries of energy, such as the attempts of the soul to connect with the body.

At the beginning, the mother and son try to wake up the father's body. They talk to his eyes, arm, leg. They look for the right word, sentence, mantra to activate his movement system. When they realize that the father's soul is not trapped in the body, but is somewhere far away, they start addressing it. Only then they achieve the moment of acceptance, they stop pressing and fearing.¹² Kadrnka portrays acceptance as a liberating feeling the characters paradoxically find close to death. It doesn't mean that they are free only when they experience the mortal nature of a loved one. They are free because they can defeat their own fear of death. It is when we find ourselves close to death that we might be able to be more human.¹³

The characters in Kadrnka's film are human and inhuman at the same time. They don't have human psychological qualities and don't go through inner development – they are what they are. They are not transformative but transgressive, connecting the material world with the spiritual one. They are super beings living in a parallel universe of a kind. They don't feel fear or pain, they are fighters and to achieve their aim, they expend tremendous energy. However, this energy flows under the surface. Static scenes in Kadrnka's films can build up suspense and waiting and gazes represent dynamic actions.

Comments on eternity

At the end of his life, Jaroslav Vrchlický wrote a stylized poem *Little Crusader of Svojanov* (Svojanovský křížáček) which he dedicated to his son. It was only published once, in 1906. Kadrnka based on it the middle part of the loose trilogy about searching for a loved one. Compared to *Eighty Letters* and *Saving One Who Was Dead*, his *Little Crusader* is more

08 Arvo Pärt Centre [online]. [cit. 10.05.2022]. Available at: <https://www.arvopart.ee/en/arvo-part/work/257/>.

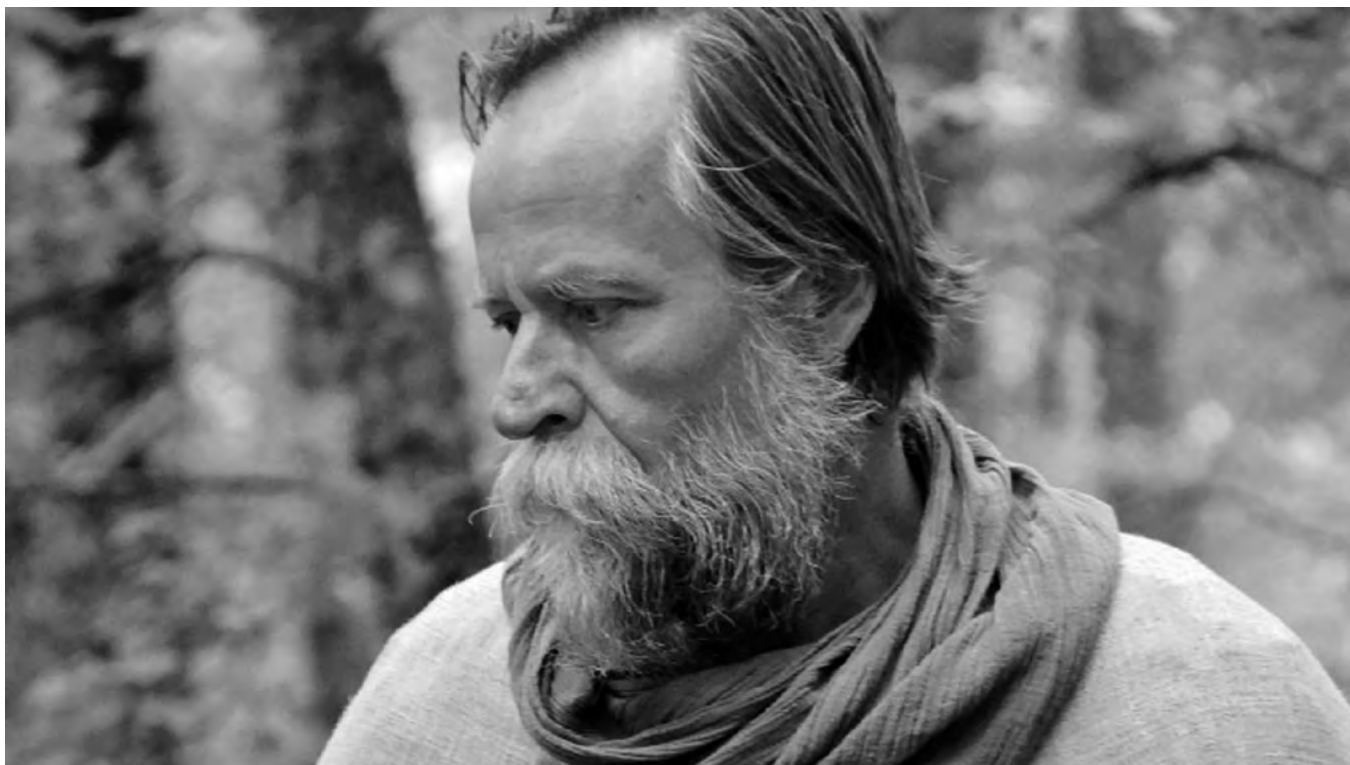
09 Dagmar Šimková, c. d.

10 Originally, a Spanish cinematographer was meant to work on *Saving One Who Was Dead*, but he declined because of another project. It was Kadrnka's friend Eugène Green who recommended Raphaël O'Byrne to him. With every new film, Kadrnka changes the cinematographer to bring a new perspective and experience. For *Eighty Letters*, it was Braňo Pažitka and Jaromír Kalina and for *Křížáček*, it was Jan Baset Střítežský. Ibid.

11 Some shots were made in the Kroměříž and Zlín hospitals as well to give the interior a more modern style. Ibid.

12 Dagmar Šimková, c. d.

13 Ibid.



abstract. Taking place in the 13th century during the Crusades, it tells the story of the Knight Bořek of Svojanov who embarks on a journey from Bohemia to Italy to find his son Jeník, who together with other child soldiers went to Jerusalem to free the Holy Sepulchre.

For the first time, Kadrnka tells a story set in ancient history. However, we won't see a depiction of historical realities and characters. After three years of research and studying, the author concluded that medieval authenticity is actually an artificial construct and product of our interpretations. That's why he came back to myth and metaphor Vrchlický works with as well. It is in this way that we can best grasp the Middle Ages, being rough and purely spiritual at the same time. It is a time of bloody Crusades and spiritual writings by St. Francis or Thomas Aquinas.¹⁴

Little Crusader is also so far Kadrnka's only film taking place in the exterior. The filming took place in the south of Italy, in Apulia, from where Crusaders set out on ships to the Holy Land in the 13th century. Kadrnka approaches landscape like the interior. Just like the interiors in *Eighty Letters* and *Saving One Who Was Dead*, here the exteriors reflect the spiritual aspects of the world. Once again, the author empties the space, rids it of layers of historical reality and creates generic landscape. Dusty paths, treetops, sea water, endless horizon represent a temple of a kind, in which people look for connection with God. Kadrnka gives special attention to transitional spaces in which contact will be established. It's usually doors, windows, corridors, staircases, or elevators. In the exterior *Little Crusader*, this function is taken over by drawbridges, piers, trapdoors on the stage, or castle and temple gates.

The landscape in *Little Crusader* is not only generic, but also surreal. The further from home the father gets in his search, the more the world moves away from common reality and gets closer to a dream. He can see places that are only suspected. He imagines the Judean Desert resembling the sea. Light-headedly, he walks on the sand dunes overgrown with tufts of grass resembling lashes of a closed human eye. It is as if he was walking on a giant face, representing a speck in a feverish dream about infinity. The landscape acquires new meanings

thanks to the music by Irena and Vojtěch Havel as well. Kadrnka calls their compositions "comments on eternity".¹⁵

The absence of a loved one has been the leitmotif of Kadrnka's work so far. However, in the centre is not his or her finding, but the process of searching. It is interesting that this process concerns more the viewers than the characters themselves. Instead of characters with human psychological qualities, Kadrnka creates archetypes, symbols of fatherly love or purity. Unlike the viewer, the characters are what they are and don't develop. They are rather our guides so that we don't get lost once we see the world in its complexity. In *Eighty Letters*, it is the father having emigrated to Great Britain, in *Saving One Who Was Dead*, it is the father in a coma. In *Little Crusader*, the disappeared character is the son. The nature of their world is metaphysical. The search for these characters is the search for God. That's why Kadrnka portrays this process as a highly personal one, as a family drama about searching for someone we are familiar with, someone we love and whose presence we desire.

Interesting is the status of the character of the little Jeník. The father shows to bystanders the portrait of his son sewn on a fabric. With his voyage getting longer, the threads unravel and the face disappears, just like Jeník's appearance disappears from the father's memory. When he bumps into a group of child soldiers, he can't even recognize the features of his own child. The fact that Jeník loses individual features is not only due to the fact that he fades away in his father's memory. He gradually becomes someone else, turns into an icon, dematerializes. He ceases to be a son, a child, and becomes a symbol, fulfilment of an ideal, a soldier of God. Also, the children's characters in *Saving One Who Was Dead* have a changed status. The group of little patients with little devices measuring their heart activity run around the corridors in their pyjamas. They are angels, generic delicate beings, just like the little Crusaders. In *Little Crusader*, too, children are a collective character – they are all one; blond angels dressed in armour and white coats.

By working with archetypes rather than with authenticity, Kadrnka's *Little Crusader* can resonate even now. The presence of child angels about to free the Holy Sepulchre is a

14 Viktor Palák, c. d.

15 Ibid.



symptom that something is going on in society, that humankind has arrived at a point where it needs saving. The decay of moral ideals and values is aptly reflected in the scene of a theatre performance seen by the father during his search for his son. A figure of a child soldier shows up behind a curtain; it might even be Jeník. However, when a Lilliputian in children's armour appears instead of him, the audience laughs and throws coins on the stage. It is one of the few situations where the otherwise intimate film comments on society as a whole.

Whereas the father and son in *Little Crusader* are active elements that are constantly on their way, leaving somewhere and coming somewhere, the character of the mother is static. She becomes a dominant feature of the composition, a part of a stage scene similarly to stylized live pictures in Sergei Parajanov's *The Colour of Pomegranates* (Sayat Nova, 1969). However, in Kadrnka's films, immobility is disguised action. It is concentrated energy directed to the audience. Maybe that's why in his films, the characters of mothers come across a bit scary and otherworldly. Jeník's mother is no exception, looking like an apparition or a fresco scene in her blue dress within the massive walls of a medieval castle. Her x-ray-like look dominates the space, showing the depth of her sadness, pain, and love towards her son.

The aim of Kadrnka's films is not to tell a story, but to guide the viewers on their journey to the dimensions of our reality we normally don't notice. Descriptive realism lays outside the director's interest. It only provides a framework of a kind, in which the individual meets the universal, and the visible world meets the invisible one. It is this invisible world that Kadrnka expresses with a specific visual language best described in music terms, maybe because music is one of the most abstract kinds of art. Kadrnka emphasizes mise-en-scene, movements, composition, and colours, transforming the world known to us into abstract images bringing the principles governing our lives to the fore.

These principles are reflected in the origin of his films as well. Kadrnka speaks about a synecdoche of reality; about his films being fragments of reality because they connect with actuality. For *Eighty Letters*, he applied for a grant six times and he didn't get it in the end, just like the heroine vainly visiting offices for several months to get travel documents. When the filming of *Little Crusader* was coming to an end, Kadrnka's father had a stroke. He "fell asleep" just like the film hero. Dealing with death, *Saving One Who Was Dead*

was filmed during the Covid-19 pandemic in a condemned hospital building.¹⁶

All this is part of Kadrnka's complex point of view. With his films, he shows that we can perceive reality in a different way than we are used to. We are used to thinking in binary categories: we can either be here or there. However, the author opens the way for duality: being here and there at the same time. Such being is indeed disturbing and frustrating, but typically human. That's why just like the characters of his films, we desperately look for totality and unity.

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¹⁶ Jindřiška Bláhová, „Lidstvo přijme virus do života“. *respekt.cz* [online]. 04.05.2020 [cit. 15.05.2022]. Available at: <https://www.respekt.cz/rozhovor/lidstvo-prijme-virus-do-zivota>.

It is the film, not the author who is supposed to speak

Interview with Milan Klepikov

Bohdan Karásek

For a long time, I had known Milan Klepikov as an author of film essays. (My oldest memory is from the very early days of Czech Internet when I read his article about Petr Marek's films saying that "the FAMU [Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts] failed the recruitment procedure with PM"...). His headstrong style and ingeniously funny, gently sarcastic tone were truly unmistakable.

Then word got out that this long-standing writer about films was preparing his own film and a few years later, the film was done. At the time, Milan was 55 years old. *The least* that can be said about this late film debut is that it does not lag behind the earlier writing works by its author, which I believe is itself quite remarkable.

The film *Preparations for Film T* (Přípravy k filmu T) was made without much assistance, with few crew members, with a minor contribution from the Czech Film Fund. The most expensive budget item were the rights to Paul Hindemith's music. (At one point, the film heroes sing its snatches in the exact pitch as the original – which is by far not the only manifest of the musical direction of the late debutant.)

The film had its world première at the Jihlava International Documentary Film Festival at the end of October 2021, having received Special Jury Recognition in the Czech Joy section. The distribution première was about a month later, on 26 November 2021 in the Edison Cinema. Until March 2022, the film was seen by 328 cinema viewers.

It would be cheap to complain about lack of interest (of ordinary as well as professional viewers nominating films for instance for the Czech Film Critics' Awards), and the author does not do it. But I as the interview author and undisguised fan of the film probably can do it.

We decided to make a mail interview, with the undisputed advantages of this choice for our purpose outweighing the undisputed disadvantages...

You had not always been a filmmaker; you hadn't been one until recently. *Film a doba* readers know your previous identity – it stays with you. I think that it also gives certain qualities to your film, even though it doesn't dominate it in any way (we might come to this later). First, I want to ask you quite a brutally investigative question: When did you first seriously felt the urge to make a feature film?

I have always imagined a film, my film. In other words: I don't remember times I wouldn't do this. It was quite late that I realized that I can actually make one. But it had been clear much earlier that it was inevitable. Wait... a feature film? The final film lasts 93 minutes, but I wasn't thinking about the length in advance. A film should decide by itself how long it should be.

Could you be more specific about the barrier preventing you from realizing that you can make a film? I think that it is obvious from the film that you are a filmmaker. In hindsight, this means that you could have made your film at any point earlier...

I think that I am generally very slow with taking up the inevitable – it's definitely not just this film. But that's rather my business, sorry. Let's just say that there is an author who had obviously been in no hurry... but in the end he did something.

I am interested in the transition between two identities – from a film studies writer to a practising filmmaker. We know it from history, for instance from the French New Wave, where one stage was obviously a preparation for the other one. Your case is again specific. Or is the only difference that they were in a hurry, and you weren't, again? How do you feel about the balance of the two identities in your case?

A writer behind the camera, if you wish to call it that, is not something we wouldn't have in other periods, e.g., in the 1920s and 1930s there was Delluc, Epstein, Clair, Cocteau. And it is not a phenomenon bound to one country; not something that could not be just as significant... let's say in Germany. I don't like pointing out the French New Wave as something extraordinary in the history of film; I wrote a longer text about it some ten years ago. In this context, what immediately springs to my mind is how long time ago, Alexander Kluge impressed me with his answer to the question how he defines himself as an author. I am quoting

from memory: "I am a writer. But what I miss in books, is music. That's why I make films." I love this. And I also like how Kluge completely leaves aside the image in his answer. Which is something he doesn't do in his films, though. But then he says impishly to the mike that he actually kind of makes books producing music. And these objects are called films. You mention "two identities", but there is actually just one. A hermit from the Fårö Island makes a film, then he makes a "film text", then he writes a book, then another text, this time a literary one: what he only changes here is technical means, and not his identity. However, he masters both the means equally well, which is out of the question for our debutant. I don't have to make any "preparations for an essay", but I had to make "preparations for the film". The author remained the same – with the same opinions, same interests – but from his thing, he made a step to an insecure field as a beginner.

Am I right that with the name "*Preparations for Film T*", you are referring to this self-reflected insecurity?

Yes, but I am not more insecure than anyone who would find himself in a country speaking a different language. Instead of "preparations", I should have said "drafts", because I draft things for myself and others. It's kind of a sketchbook. By definition, there is no guarantee a sketchbook could be presented as a finished work capable of full communication with the recipient. But is is not excluded. And I thought what I would hand in would not be a semi-finished product and that it was part of the assignment not to hand in one.

I see, "sketchbook" as an independent genre – and not just a phase of a process. A good idea! This is bringing me to screenwriting. The "sketchbook genre" is not really in line with the idea of traditional screenwriting. On the other hand, I know that at one point during the filming, you were looking to cooperate with a screenwriter.

And I still am, because I wish for a film – just like for *Preparations* – not to be a monologue from the very beginning. However, I really don't accommodate traditional screenwriting. Open parenthesis: now we could discuss what we imagine to be traditional screenwriting. The way it is taught in schools, I assume. Because I can't think of any truly significant film in history made with traditional screenwriting. Close parenthesis.



Well, this sounds like a verbal attack on all screenwriting departments of the world, but okay. “Traditional” may be a misleading term. What I probably mean is the concept of a dramatic text which is meant for a film but has to function on the text level as well. (A well-done text like that can be published as a book, like many screenplays of the above-mentioned hermit.)

Now I have the screenplay for *Preparations for Film T* in a written form as well. I first made the film and then I wrote the screenplay down... which is completely opposite to what is customary here. I don't have any literary ambitions around it, but I could easily publish it, even though I don't intend to.

I still assume that for you, screenwriting had a preparatory aspect to it, albeit not in the traditional sense. How did you work with it?

You are free to take the sketchbook method literally; I described it to the audience in *Jihlava* as well, to prepare them for what they would see. You sketch one thing after another, but not haphazardly, because you have an idea of the images that should be on the screen one day and what they should evoke. You also have an idea of how to open the film and how it will end. Because you know your ideas on filmmaking for quite some time. And you know yourself for even longer. Because you are the screenplay. You and your relationship to non-me, to everything given to you by the people behind the camera and in front of it. It could include the relationship to the other screenwriter, but I didn't have one.

I think that it is important to mention what is given to you by the people behind the camera and in front of it. It might be related to a possible definition of “anti-screenwriting” ...

The word anti-screenwriting suggests that any deviation from the traditional screenplay is a “non-screenplay”. This is unacceptable. If anything, we could call it an “essay-like film”, which also has quite a history, but at the same time, there are still many things that haven't been tried and wait to be given a try. This is what screenwriting can ALSO look like. It is definitely not anti-screenwriting.

Well, I would rather call it directing. But I don't want to get lost in definitions too much. Maybe it just means that in an “essay-like film”, the boundaries between

screenwriting, directing, and many other things are much more permeable than “traditionally”?

It is not about boundaries being more permeable; it is about them ceasing to exist! For quite some time, I have been thinking about a retrospective collection of films I appreciate most called *No Limits!* I guess I should finally realize it. Opening their eyes and pricking up their ears for the first time, new-born babies grasp sensations the relationship between which they only just guess. In a relatively short time, they tune into the “traditional perception of the world”, which has its advantages: the children find out that boundaries have their advantages. It is much later that they might feel like denying one tradition or another and crossing the boundaries. This is an attitude, you could say a conscious adult attitude, that I feel in the words you are using – when we apply it to film. However, my position is different: I don't want to make boundaries more permeable, I don't want to do “anti-” things; I want to try and go back to the beginning. This is the first proposal in my sketchbook, and that's why it is “demonstrated” right at the beginning of the film – let's say for didactic reasons.

What exactly do you mean by “demonstrating”?

After Karel Hynek Mácha's verses, there is a moment of darkness and then for the first time, some images appear, followed by sounds. This is for me the moment when the new-born film blinks several times for the first time, not yet knowing what it actually saw in those brief twinkles and how significant the seen and heard will be for its subsequent 93-minute-long life.

I see. When you put it like this, it seems crystal clear. I mean, I see it in the film retrospectively, and my experience becomes much richer even though at the time, I didn't get the meaning of the new-born's blinking. But I am still convinced that I was touched by the film in a way when watching it. This brings me to say that in an essay-like film, each and every viewer kind of puts together their own film: this openness is part of the “deal”. But still, you as the author certainly don't want to be stolen the film completely by the viewer. You can't be (or at least I definitely feel that you don't want to be) a reckless author. And “no limits” cannot mean “everything is allowed”. To what extent do you need to control the dialogue author – viewer?



Being a reckless author is not recommended – if only because it always quickly becomes boring. Once, when I agreed to sit on a festival jury, I had to watch multiple “crazy” films in a row, which certainly didn’t make me happy. Then there are films that I appreciate very much: obscure, hermetic films where it is clear from the very beginning that many viewers won’t find their way to them. These might be neither better nor worse than another group of films that, by contrast, want to “talk” to the viewer – where the talking is already part of the assignment. Since I belong to this group, I must create minimum conditions for the film to “touch” the viewers, as you put it. Leaving the viewer indifferent and unimpressed would be an issue – unlike elusive meaning.

Between the young characters of the film and you as its author, there is a very special, possibly latently contrapuntal relationship. They are there “on their own” and “for you” at the same time. On the one hand, they are independent of you, as it were, but on the other hand, you (sometimes rather blatantly) control them. You and them differ in age, experience, and attitude toward life, the film is full of their voices, but still: together their voices somewhat make up a statement that is yours. Or, to put it differently – I as a viewer don’t feel the urge to ask whose is whose in the end. How do you see this “polyphony”?

Yes, this has been my intention from the very beginning. In different films of the above-mentioned essay-like type, it is not possible to tell exactly: is it one of the characters speaking, or is it the film’s author, or their compound of sorts? And it doesn’t even need to be an obvious intention, like in Resnais’s *Providence*. If we agree that “it is the film that should speak”, just like in painting, where it’s obviously the painting that should speak (rather than the person portrayed or the painter), then let’s allow the film to absorb and soak up all the world has to offer, and not to let different voices stand side by side, but to make them its own. I haven’t made an introspective film, but it is obvious that I have neither made a portrait of today’s young Czech people and what they live by. An example: I connect them with music that doesn’t belong to their world, but to mine. Well, when I don’t let them sing whatever they want. I seize on anything that might come in handy: from Král’s remark about Savarin Café to visible imprints of the Covid-19 invasion. I seize on faces, grimaces.

In the film, you constantly make present the fact that you are its author – you become its character yourself. It might again be related to the blurring of boundaries: you are both “here and there”. Only in the sound, “behind the film”, as it were, you “own up to yourself”, at the same time attesting to the distance of your character to the others. (Sometimes in a humorous and ironic way, like in the entire passage with the “parental reprimand” for the permanent smoking of your heroes. Other times, it’s with a touch of existential alienation. And yet other times, it’s in yet other ways...) When did you realize that the film can’t do without your character?

Just like Darja and Adam aren’t in the film just on their own, but they partially yield to something that’s not them, I also don’t make up one character, for example an autobiographic one, that I would suddenly come to consider irreplaceable. When I am talking about moving from Nusle close to Bílá Hora, I am not lying, on the one hand, but it is as if I am promising a personal confession I am actually not up to at all – neither in the spoken, nor written text. Later on, I utter a few sentences again, praising a development project in Na Příkopech that will destroy the memorial site one day that Petr Král is worried about. It is obvious that at that moment, I play someone who’s not me. It is me who is reciting the rhythmical litany towards the film end, but my words are passed between Darja, Adam, Ivan, and Diviš as well. And who is it that speaks in the passage about cigarettes? Is it the author? Anyway, you suspect that

the stylized reprimanding parent is someone with quite the opposite attitude; someone who is delighted to see how much the love for nicotine suits our heroes and with his commentary and the way he puts it, he wants to enhance the comic effect of what the image shows. (I am glad that the audience laughs at this point really loudly.) So, I can only repeat what I have already said: it’s not the person portrayed or the author who should speak. It is the film that should speak. This is something I had wanted from the very beginning (even the inclusion of my own “acting”) – even before I could know what images I would get. I can’t tell how different it is from Bohdan playing in Bohdan’s film, you tell me.

In Bohdan’s film, there are traditional boundaries: Dušan’s character is only “there”. I definitely wouldn’t want for the viewer to see a character on the screen and to think, every time: “look, this is the film’s author”. It is different in your case, isn’t it. You let this viewers’ perception into the game – even though at different moments, you switch between different “acting” registers (even the slyly blasé presentation about the development project is sarcastic, in the end, and I see your actual attitude behind it). Personally, I still see here the “character of the film author”. And I thought that this was what you wanted; that by this self-revelation, you knowingly thematize the otherness, remoteness of yourself in the relationship to the young actors (for instance when you say that you live in this country without actually living here...).

In the short story *The Street Window*, the narrator is removed from the life on the street and complains about it on the one hand, but on the other hand, thanks to his rather privileged position, he can better take in the whole and the mutual relationships. And he has the means to get closer to his fellow men. The camera is a telescope. Empathy is a microscope. Suddenly, I am as close as possible. Sometimes even closer than they are to each other. Secondly, the character of the author indeed is in my film, but it is really a *character*, thanks to which I can be as remote as possible from anything pseudo-documentary, I can play as much as possible, and achieve indistinguishability between revealing and hiding. When I want to say something that is important to me or that I really think, I do it through some sentences – only some! – said by Ivan, Anička, Diviš, or Petr Král. I select from what they had given to me during the filming. I never say it by myself. And what is the indistinguishability good for? It is necessary – both for me and the viewer – to arrive at an insecure field; a wobbly one, a dangerous one to a certain extent, and even a dubious one from the point of view of moralists. I believe that only in a field where you *a priori* cannot be certain of anything, something new can bear flowers. If that is not the case, we always end up with the usual something that I have never really liked and that I can’t stand today: an art film.

Let’s take for instance the long speech of the “author’s character” towards the end of the film – if it was to be taken seriously, you would certainly get into a philosophical argument with many people (me included). If it is meant to demonstrate the insecure field, I have to say that its mimicry (that is the impression that you are saying what you actually think) is relatively strong.

Great, thanks. Well, strong... many people are looking for strength. Martin Mareček is looking for it and so am I – the two of us are looking at very different places though. Film is entertainment – we are in agreement on that with the classics. I agree with them most of the time, anyway. In Jihlava, I compared this to minelaying. Ideally, the viewer runs over our field – not like a hunted animal, but like someone who loves to move – and sometimes steps on a mine; I would of course like for this to happen as often as possible. The mines won’t kill anyone; the injuries should generally be pleasant. This will certainly not always be the case for everyone, but *en gros*

they should be pleasant. Some people might go to the cinema to suffer and be angry; but not me. So, the mines explode one by one, and the viewer thinks: is this even possible, did I just see or hear that? They stop snoring in the armchair and are forced to take a stand and articulate their disagreement to themselves... and at the same time, they look forward to the next explosion being even a bit stronger. Meaning nicer. And how can I make the explosion stronger now? asks the bomb expert. For instance, by switching to the first person. And it works, as you can see.

Well, even this answer made me run a bit. (After the première of *Preparations*, a friend of mine also mentioned Vachek's name in an overjoyed reflection in front of the Edison cinema. I didn't feel like it but hearing your answer, I thought of his words – not literally, of course!) Let's get back to what your actors have given you – all those young people in front of the camera. What fascinates me is that they are never strained, they are always themselves, whether they are fulfilling your wish or showing their own initiative. I wonder how you worked with them and what your communication looked like. (A remarkable example is for instance the scene where Darja describes to Ivan her feelings when she was an infant, how she was afraid of open life space and how safe she felt in a swaddle blanket. But the scene takes place at a strangely and consolingly desolate dumping ground / parking lot...)

Landscape with furniture – this is truly ideal because you can live in it quite decently, talk or lie down comfortably, with a loved one, if possible, but at the same time, the outside world keeps intervening: here it's the passing cars or children riding on chairs. Intimacy, but in the open air, non-isolated – this is ideal. You can't or shouldn't do without air and sun. In this particular scene, Darja and Ivan talk about a topic given to them: how someone who is at the beginning imagines a possible end (their own, of their loved ones, of the world). Now when they are twenty or when they were little children and the idea occurred to them for the first time. I don't know what I should say about them being natural. This is not really about sensible creative decision making; it reminds me of allergology: if I found a forced moment in the material shot, I would be *physically* unable to stand it and I would immediately discard it and possibly even delete it. Watching other films, I can stand a lot but in my own film? Never! So, I have

no choice: I have to find human beings about whom I know in advance: these two/three won't build a wall between them, they will want to talk to each other, react to each other, be together, play. The Swiss publishing house Diogenes once published a book of Fellini's ideas named after a sentence of his: *to play like children*. The German word for live action film is *spielfilm*. I am not the right person for a traditional live action film, but if you need a *spielfilm*, just let me know. I can tell quite well and soon if there is the right energy between the casting candidates, which could flow between them and the camera as well. However, my basic instinct is no guarantee that I will actually find them. To put together Adam and Ivan, who didn't know each other but who made the right connection basically at first sight was a great start.

Does it mean that Adam and Ivan were invited to the same audition and were chosen at the same time?

Yes! Looking for the girls was much tougher and longer. And to find the child actor, without whom the film would be unimaginable for me, was the most difficult thing of all. I tried several actors when I finally found Mr Diviš Votoček, who was (then) twelve years old.

Why couldn't you imagine the film without Diviš?

Apart from the two little respondents appearing after the closing credits, Diviš represents the youngest generation in the film. Today, we are obsessed with granting equal rights; however, I would give equal rights to children first. A child is still seen as a semi-finished product, as a not-yet-completed-adult, which I have always disliked. At least in some countries, such as in Germany, they are thinking about lowering the age of voting. I think that there are many boys and girls who have their head screwed on right in many respects, are well oriented and even take a smarter stand on many matters than their parents. But I was looking for someone who could present my idea of "children's adulthood" and to make it believable on the screen! Diviš is Mr Judicious even at his age, so he didn't have to pretend anything at all. Just before one of the false ends, he could take over after Petr Král.

The more we talk and I recollect and remember the details and the whole of your film, the more I realize that in the end, the film is actually pretty straightforward. What a surprise, because it doesn't appear to be so. Just the fact that it was made by a film "theoretician"



or “scientist”, properly complemented by formal “colourfulness” from the very beginning of the film, would make one think it must be some kind of a film intellectual cipher – but at the end of the day, it’s not the case. It is a simple, straightforward film! Or... at least I think that it would be very helpful for a viewer, who is suspicious in advance, to try to see it this way when watching it. Or do you disagree?

A theoretician! To avoid destroying pigeonholes and barriers in our own heads, it would be better not to build them at all, first thing. But the contrary is the norm, as I found out. I am not talking about you! Reviewers always write that a film is such and such because it was made by a woman, an African American, a queer person, any activist, a person with a degree in certain field or for instance a handicapped person. And at once, the reviewer has a key to the film or even to a cipher, if the author was also labelled an intellectual. Do I review films like this? Now or in the past? I hope I don’t. I don’t want to watch a film by any member of the above-mentioned groups, and that’s why I constantly beg in my thoughts not to be bothered by those; when I read a poem, I require the author to prove that he is a poet – and nothing else. A poem can of course be mysterious, but it is not necessary. And as you rightly say, there is nothing really mysterious about *my* film. What is there at the beginning: a few lines with a clear message and one emphasized word, a few figurative hints allowing to identify and maybe even feel a little something, Effenberg’s merciless, but again not really incomprehensible diagnosis, then some thoughts of two normal boys about their future after the secondary school, a dialogue of a boy and a girl about how to make use of time that slips through our fingers so quickly and irreversibly. And all the things to see and hear next will be just as simple.

What comes to my mind with all that, even with the “children’s adulthood”, lowering the age limits, etc.: what would be the age of your target group? Or does “no limits” apply even here?

Definitely. The film is watched by people from, let’s say, the literary field; people to whom names like Effenberger, Petr Král, and Stanislav Dvorský aren’t unknown. Sometimes they tell me something about it. The truth is that I was even more interested in how and if the film is received by the peers of Darja et al. Sometimes someone told me they were captivated by the film. Now and then, someone put something on

paper or computer, which was for me a confirmation that the contact had been made successfully. In the end, they called me from FAMU, from the Department of Documentary Film, and told me that like every year, the students will analyse a film on the entrance exam. Feeling honoured, I said yes and after that, there was another decent batch of reactions. Threatened to remain my soliloquy of sorts because of the pandemic and distribution invisibility, in the end, the film received the communication it had been made for, after all. Without it, it would feel “unfinished” for me. Next time – if there is a next time – I of course wouldn’t mind the journey to the partner/viewer to be a bit less under-the-counter than now.

This interests me too: how do you see the distribution possibilities of your film? Unfortunately, the world of distribution and promotion is full of boundaries and pigeonholes, be it made up or actual ones...

It is hard to tell what the possibilities are. It is certain that there are viewers of films like ours, and there are many of them. They just won’t find out about us. When they get to the film or the film gets to them after all, at that moment we have won completely, regardless of whether the viewers agree or disagree. This can be said, in all modesty. The problem is just the WHEN. In the system as is.

For me, your film clearly employs something I generally see as a poetic principle, in this case applied in the film language... This is something still very few people do. In the Czech Republic, I can only think of Ondřej Vavrečka (and certainly Vachek) who do it with the same intensity and compactness – I hope I haven’t forgotten someone. It reminds me of what the situation is for Czech poetry *sensu stricto*, in the literary field. Do you think it might be the case that no one really expects poetic principles from filmmaking, and the distribution plans must be adapted to this? (The same is true of literature, and hence collections of poems have a printing of several hundred copies...)

Groucho Marx once said: I refuse to join any club that would have me as a member! I love this sentence. And after a second’s hesitation, I deny any relationship to the two gentlemen you mentioned. I very much appreciate them as a viewer, but I decline with thanks to become a member of the club of applied poetic principles. I wouldn’t help myself much a moment after we agreed that I am not a member of the filmmaking



ing theoreticians' club. Even though you mean well, of course, and you don't choose your words haphazardly. But you know for yourself how your own films are labelled and if you have nothing against such pigeonholing, I would; after all, for years, vainly but relentlessly, I have been removing labels from the foreheads of long-dead directors, that someone keeps sticking on them. This is actually related to what you are asking about. Let's leave it to others to marginalize us, but let's not marginalize ourselves by saying well, we make kind of weird films. One makes films where members of a certain social group keep discussing relationships, the other one uses too compact poetic principles. It is not that I would say: I want to make such and such films (and not any other), and one of the possible labels would be the one you propose. Many people certainly work this way: they first define their position and only then they take the camera. I skip this stage, irresponsibly. It is enough that at some point, someone slips me a form where I must tick if it's a live action film, a documentary, or a hybrid documentary. Feeling forced, I of course tick the crossbreed, to make them happy. On the contrary, what I will certainly tell the actors or colleagues is that we are trying to make a fun film, as far as possible, and that we can't do without fun. I haven't made a deeper introspection of "my specific way". Only after finishing the film, I admit just to myself: oh my, the film is very much like me... but what can you expect, right?

You speak about inner sovereignty, and I speak about self-awareness relative to the external world. Let's hope it's not contradictory! At the end of our interview, I will still stick to the topic of "viewers" – but now I think of a specific one. (And sorry, this might be a bit of a tabloid question, but...) Can you imagine Petr Král's reaction to your film? Would you be interested in what he thought about it?

Of course I would – if only because for more than two years, he had been asking rather eagerly in every e-mail how we were doing. I think that we can say I didn't misinterpret him in the film. I have no idea if he approved it as a whole.

That was meant to be my last question. But I can't help myself. Seeing how comfortable you feel in the film-making shoes and now after this interview, I will ask – in a postscript – again and in a different way: Isn't it a shame that you haven't made more such films (or more genuinely *your* films) until now?

At this point, I am much more interested in seeing whether I could make another film than in thinking about what could or could not have happened earlier. I do feel comfortable in the shoes, but it hasn't been so from the beginning. My greatest motivation is viewers' dissatisfaction – that really energizes me. It is basically as old as my interest in film, and it is not only about the present, but about the entire infamous film history. In addition to the accumulated antipathy, which is a good fuel (even though I never go to the cinema thinking how wonderfully bad it will be – I am not such a masochist), there has always been a pinch of hope that something decent could be done in a film and about film. That it was the case, now and then, was something I have been trying to point out during the activity I have been doing for the past twenty-two years. And then I said once that I would add my own "summary of proposals" for consideration. And this is the film we are talking about. So, it's not really a biographical breaking point; there is certain continuity. But it's still the beginning.

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FEELMS SMITHS

[Preparations for Film T](#)

Screenplay and direction

Director of photography

Editing

Cast

Length

Distribution

Premiere

(Czech Republic 2021)

Milan Klepikov

Milan Klepikov, Jiří Holba, Filip Novotný

Jiří Holba

Ivan Kunc, Adam Čepelák, Darja Miková,
Petr Král, Diviš Votoček, Anna Brabcová
and others

93 min.

Klára Khine Distribution

26 November 2021

Endings without Disasters, Disasters without Ends

In contrast to the blockbuster joy of the second half of last year, Milan Klepikov's light debut entered the cinemas at the end of the year. The attention of the film public, however, had turned to it already in October during its premiere at the International Documentary Film Festival in Jihlava, where it also won the Special Jury Prize of the Czech Joy section. The film is deliberately more of a sketchbook rather than a complete cinematic work; an experiment close to the practices of the French New Wave and a distant cousin of Jean-Luc Godard's *Goodbye to Language (Adieu au Langage)* [2014].

From the Jihlava festival, where I attended the premiere of *Preparations for Film T (Přípravy k filmu T)*, I travelled to Prague by train, sharing a compartment with young film studies students who spent much of the journey commenting enthusiastically on the film. Their enthusiasm reminded me of my younger self, and probably a bit like Milan Klepikov, I felt like a collector of moments. The small, seemingly insignificant ones that ultimately set the course for the whole.

Preparations for Film T is the author's inventory of such a collection, as well as a collage reflecting formal and content approaches that the author lacks in the usual film environment. It is a record of the journey he has taken in search of an ideal form of expression, and to which he has invited his young protagonists and viewers themselves. It is a winding road, full of new perspectives that reverberate long after it is left behind. However, the alienating effects such as the slowing down or disconnection of image and sound, stroboscopic-like cuts, endless repetitions or the insertion of graphic text into the image are above all a game, a pun, a Dadaist rocking horse.

Here, poetry collides with environmental issues, the bustle of the Prague metropolis with rural nature, societal themes with personal space and relationships with addictions. The old world intersects with the new. And everything is torn apart. The poems of Karel Hynek Mácha, Petr Král and others are pervading the film. Poems about the end of the world, death and the role of youth in this burnt-out existence. It was the current generation of twenty-somethings that became the main group Milan Klepikov decided to focus on. Moreover, he also used it to record his own insecurities in part. From the very beginning, we follow the three protagonists - Adam, Ivan and Darya, who are left with their own names and are largely documented in their natural environment, with directorial impulses for heightened creativity and philosophical reflections. The main topics therefore naturally include the most generational - school, relationships, family, technology, but also death, social engagement and environmental issues. It is the last level mentioned that is reflected the most. The protagonists, the Extinction Rebellion movement, but also other prominent figures such as Diviš and Anička comment on. Each of the characters represents a certain psychological profile and, despite the relative generational interconnectedness (Diviš is the youngest of all, although his mental age is hard to determine), they relate to the world differently in many ways.

It is Anna Brabcová who serves the admitted purpose of connecting the world in front of and behind the camera. Several scenes reveal the background of the filming as she works - recording sound. This film blurs the boundaries of the possible, making no distinction between preparation and action; the director's voice enters the scenes (diegetically and



non-diegetically as voiceover) and reshapes them to his own image. Reality and fiction roll around the streets in one clump, while in fact, the direct clash between them is not even the point here.

The Form has Devoured the Function

So, what is it that really matters and what is Klepikov trying to tell us between the images? In the beginning, it seemed as if he was a mentor to the youth, fatherly lamenting over their cigarette intoxication, trying to lead them to think about the world, to act, to connect with nature. However, the ease of carefree summer days spent at the cottage is suddenly struck by the Coronavirus, naturally disrupting the filming process and the personal lives of the actors and filmmakers. It enters directly into the plot, in which the accentuated darkness of the future becomes an even more far-reaching and, above all, palpable norm. This moment becomes a turning point in which even Klepikov himself begins to lose the hope and confidence of an older and more experienced person. Resigned voyeurism comes to the scene, critically scanning life on the streets and in the surrounding households from the isolation of the apartment. The narrator's voice laments his own inability and unwillingness to understand and merge with the world. The young protagonist's exasperation gradually merges with his own, culminating in a compelling speech pleading for the world and human nature as we know it to remain as it is. The fear of taking away the mistakes and pettiness reveals the shadows of his own personality while paying homage to the ancient and the colourful.

Young non-actors also walk through the current world with respect for the past. Individual locations, which are mostly connected with refurbishment and renovation, function as meaning-making elements. They function as the last islands of the world that we have already come to know and explore well. A number of scenes were filmed in the environment of Strahov's drive-in cinema, a place that has been given a new life, as well as a country cottage, the second of the main locations, which the trio of Adam, Ivan and Darya contributed to renovating with their own hands. It is the scenes in which the three of them paint its roof and reflect on the world in the rustle of the forest and their own reflections are permeated by pre-made shots of the bustling Prague streets, dotted with people in masks and protesters. Putting the idyll and bustle in contrast, one could easily miss the point that both worlds are plagued by the same fear of the end and the same desire - preservation.

And that is exactly what Klepikov is primarily after. He artfully parades the remnants of beauty through the streets, looking for admiration and insight. He puts his attitude to being out in the open. Authentically, naturally, sensitively. There is a reason why he also lets in the project plans for the development renovation of the Savarin building complex amongst the varying lines - a criticism that does not seem to belong here at first glance. However, it is meant for Petr Král.

Despite the efforts to capture a lot, many things inevitably disappear. Just like people. But this film is afraid to really let it all go, shying away from a real ending. And so it layers several of them on top of each other, just in case. Like sketches of what the possible. Sketches of open-ended plot lines that he tried to group all together into one cluster. Non-linear, non-chronological, and yet strangely functional. Or is it?

The youngest generation now sits in a wheelchair, unaware of what awaits them, still carefree in many ways. And somewhere in there, Klepikov sees himself as well, which, as always, he communicates to us through formal means - in this case, through the text in the image.

This deed is more of a poem than of a film, a multi-layered linguistic pun, a blazing fire in the field of the apocalypse. A flea market catch. It does, however, deserve to be considered a film thanks to its restlessness and constant need to be caught in motion. And with these courageous steps, he reaches out to all of those who know that the only possible destination is the journey. And one must always prepare for it.

× Štěpánka Ištvánková



Saving One Who Was Dead	(Czech Republic, Slovakia, France 2021)
Director	Václav Kadrnka
Screenplay	Václav Kadrnka, Marek Šindelka, Jiří Soukup
Director of photography	Raphaël O'Byrne
Music	Irena Havlová, Vojtěch Havel
Cast	Vojtěch Dyk, Zuzana Mauréry, Petr Salavec and others
Length	90 min.
Distribution	CinemArt
Premiere	24 February 2022

Fragments of a Private Myth

What some filmmakers appreciate about the art of film is its specific work with the time and how it is experienced. It is often not just about how time is captured in film, but rather about what questions a film can pose to our (intuitive) understanding of time, or how it can resist, bend, or even deliberately deny it. The image and its internal arrangement willingly meet this predicament, and can just as easily become an imprint of the past as a sign of the future. It is indeed a mystery that we have known well since childhood and that we often associate with narrative: how little time we need to become afraid over a book or a film, and how a short stretch of text or a simple sequence of images can capture a vast stretch of time that can, moreover, be repeated ad infinitum. The mystery is often linked to the plot, and in a narrative, the plot is often seen as the cornerstone of the entire narrative structure. We have come to expect plots and to appreciate good ones. It is no coincidence that this expectation may be our

primary motivation for engaging with a work of art in the first place. In the everyday life of human beings, on the contrary, we do not miss plots, we often consider them a burden and we literally hate them in certain situations. Federico Fellini liked to point out that cinema functions as a distraction from reality because reality is boring. He certainly did not think that nothing happens in reality, that real things only happen on the movie screen. Rather, he wanted to point out that our experience of time in everyday life is quite different (especially emotionally) compared to the experience of time in cinema. And what happens if someone decides to report on the experience of time of the everyday in a film? That is, where it should be otherwise?

Strength of the Form

The third feature film by director Václav Kadrnka, *Saving One Who Was Dead* (*Zpráva o záchraně mrtvého*), one of the Czech films in the main competition of the Karlovy



Vary Film Festival last year, already offers a paradox to ponder in its title. First of all, the Czech title includes the word “report”, which is a piece of information that is supposed to be brief and clear, ideally without the evaluative stance of its author. But is it possible to convey something similar in a film? And what about saving a dead person: can a dead person be saved at all? We have (unfortunately!) more and more such reports around us, we push them aside as fragments and snippets of reality, step over them and often outright refuse to listen to them. What, then, could be the attraction of such a venture? Even human memory often works with fragments, it keeps something, while it discards something else without scruples. But, for a fragment of memory to be attractive even to someone to whom it does not primarily belong, who is not emotionally or existentially connected to it, it is imperative that it offers something specific. With this film, Václav Kadrnka essentially completes a loose film trilogy: *Eighty Letters (Osmdesát dopisů)* [2010] follows in one day the peripeties of a son (and his mother) looking for a way to his father, who has emigrated to the UK; *Little Crusader (Křížáček)* [2017] documents the search for a father who is following the trail of his missing son, while *Saving One Who Was Dead* (2021) shows a mother (Zuzana Mauréry) and her son (Vojtěch Dyk) searching for a way to their father, who has fallen into a coma. In the first case, it is a physical journey carried by memory (through images of the past); a fourteen-year-old boy Vašek (Martin Pavluš) and his mother (Zuzana Lapčíková) really want to go to their father, but the machinery of communist Czechoslovakia prevents them from doing so. The absent father is represented by words (the letters his mother writes to him) and images (the photos Vašek looks at). In the second case, the journey is a symbolic one; although the knight Bořek (Karel Roden) embarks on a real journey to find his son Jeník (Matouš John), he encounters only traces and hints of the lost son's presence in a wide world of medieval symbols and references. The missing son is reminded through the traces and memories of those who saw him. The case of the third journey can be described - with some exaggeration - as different. Through language, the mother and son are trying to find a way into the consciousness of the father lying motionless in his hospital bed. The aim is to save the father, to bring him back to consciousness, but the path leads through detours not only in the specific space of the hospital but also (perhaps more consistently) in the space of consciousness of both characters, who thus

lose or (re)discover what differentiates them from each other (and in the case of the son, also in relation to his family, especially to his son). In each case, the central motif is a loss, which does not have to be understood only in the negative sense, but also as a form of absence that becomes the motivation for a journey that has or should have a liberating function, a cathartic effect. In *Saving One Who Was Dead*, Kadrnka deliberately suppresses the expectation of a meaningful plot (literally) and, thus any genre scheme; the unifying strategy for him becomes the experience of time, which is experienced by both characters on the one hand and by the audience themselves while watching the film on the other. The film has no narrative plan (at least not primarily), it literally just documents the way since *Saving One Who Was Dead* has a truly banal plot with a simple binary resolution: either the father wakes up or he doesn't. From the perspective of narrative tradition, this is a triviality, but the life perspective conveyed by the film's images is not trivial at all. The autobiographical connection of all three of Kadrnka's films to the author's life - Václav Kadrnka's real father fell into a coma after a stroke, and Kadrnka and his mother tried to wake him up by constantly talking to him - presents rather an obstacle to accessing his works. The specific thing that Kadrnka's films (and the last one in particular) offer that transforms a private experience into an artistic experience is the form (the style, if you will) that helps the viewer achieve an extraordinary experience.

The mother and the son meet at the bedside. The report on the patient's condition is brief, the options are limited and the outcome is uncertain. The expectation that all will be well is more typical of fairy tales; medicine does not tell stories, it heals. The hospital premises are full of shadows, traversed by the footsteps of medical staff, patients and relatives or acquaintances. The refrain of the footsteps, repeated in different variations in the corridors, is lost in the fragments of conversations heard as echoes of voices that have already disappeared. The square format of the image (in the style of 4:3 or 1:1.33), the most striking aspect visible at first glance, only emphasizes the locked-in nature of the film world. The mother is sitting patiently by her husband, squeezing his hand in a close-up, while the son keeps placing a tennis ball in his other hand. Together, they are looking for a way to change what is actually happening in reality (the immobile state of the coma) by what they are telling him. The power of words certainly has Christian symbolism but



dispenses with pretentious platitudes. It is the contrast between movement and stillness that is the dynamic principle not only of the place depicted, where the steps and walks of the son through the hospital corridors are replaced by static shots of the abandoned space but also of the cinematic image: in a calm rhythm, details alternate with half-integers in the fragmentary depiction of the human body, the hospital space and the relationships between the individual characters in the second plane. French cinematographer Raphaël O'Byrne, who has often collaborated with director Eugène Green (for example, *The Son of Joseph* [Le Fils de Joseph, 2016] and *La Sapienza* [2014]), has created an almost perfect visual composition based on repetition. The son returns to the same places depicted through a different perspective, he overhears snippets of medical conversations and jokes only to hear them again a little later in a different form, he and his mother "dance" around the patient's bed placed in the centre of the vertical view from above, etc. The most impressive sequence in my opinion is the one in the dormitory area, where the son and mother temporarily sleep so that they could be close to the man. The static shot from above of the son lying down is a parallel to the depiction of the father on the bed (both in form and content), whose heartbeat is monitored by a machine because it is suspected that he suffers from the same heart condition as his father, says more about their relationship than words which are so popular in the film's micro-narrative. An intimate scene in a half-light highlights the luminous leap of the digital monitor's curve, sharing with the viewer in a unique moment the rhythm of the images in contrast to the arrhythmia of life. A silent dialogue with apparent emptiness as the central chord resounds throughout the film, accompanied by the music of Irena and Vojtěch Havel, using mostly string instruments (especially the viola da gamba).

Refrain of the Rescue

The connection among the three Kadrnka's films is certainly remarkable, but it should not be overestimated. *Saving One Who Was Dead* demonstrates both harmony and tension between the visual design by Daniel Pitín, the technical script and storyboard by Karel Osoha, the directorial concept by Václav Kadrnka and the musical arrangement by the Havel couple; all of them had, indeed, collaborated on Kadrnka's *Little Crusader*. The combination of constantly recurring images with the rhythm of human voices (in conversation with a "mute partner") and the musical rhythm of baroque

instruments and percussion - referring, among others, to the album by the Havel couple *Bow* (2010), or the experiments from the turn between the 1960s and 1970s by the British *Third Ear Band*, which composed the music for Roman Polanski's *Macbeth* (1971), for example - it makes the most of the expressive possibilities of images, words and music. The austere asceticism of visual composition does not offer much opportunity for colourful imagery, and similarly film music layers individual sounds around an ever-repeating core. The refrain of rescue is heard quite clearly through visual, linguistic and sound fragments. *Saving One Who Was Dead* avoids everything that could be misunderstood as a mere evocation of effects referring to the Kadrnka's family album or the library of genre schemes, not only in the language but also in the outline of the plot: no normalization grey of *Eighty Letters*, no attractiveness of medieval symbolism of the *Little Crusader* type. There is only one man lying comatose in a hospital bed and two characters wandering timidly through the space of illness and their own awareness of the past. There is only a hierarchically structured half-world that clings to detail and which is only a more radical extension of the director's previous two films. The affinity to the literary world of Franz Kafka and especially his novel *The Castle* may provide some clues to the understanding of what is actually going on in the film, though the director would probably gratefully decline. In any case, *Saving One Who Was Dead* is a work that Czech cinema desperately needs. For it tells not only about one case, but most importantly about a struggle that we wage with ourselves daily, carried along by the desire to *work something out*. And the worst thing would be to consider everything only as a fragment of a private myth.

× Michal Kříž



Arvéd	(Czech Republic 2022)
Director	Vojtěch Mašek
Screenplay	Jan Poláček, Vojtěch Mašek
Director of Photography	Dušan Husár
Music	Aid Kid, Jonatán Pastirčák
Cast	Michal Kern, Saša Rašilov, Jaroslav Plesl, Vojtěch Vodochodský, Petr Čtvrtníček, Ivana Uhlířová, Marian Labuda Jr. and others
Length	120 min.
Distribution	CinemArt
Premiere	25 August 2022

Summoning Forgotten Spirits

Even the most thoroughly factual biography is, to one degree or another, an authorial fiction. The film *Arvéd*, Vojtěch Mašek's directorial debut, acknowledges this and deliberately builds a fictional world. It tells the story of a Czech Hermeticist, unknown to the wider public today, in a style he calls magically realistic.

Jiří Arvéd Smíchovský (1898-1951), an occultist, scholar and confidant of two totalitarian regimes, was a prominent figure in the Prague Bohemianism of the First Republic. His wealthy half-German family made it possible for him to study law, philosophy and theology. He knew world languages as well as classical Greek and Hebrew, was interested in Hermeticism and Kabbalah, acquired an extensive collection of occult literature, and practised black magic. He joined several political parties, including the Nazi party, and from the beginning of the occupation, he collaborated with the German secret service. He would denounce but also rescue from the Gestapo. He sympathized with fascism, yet he allegedly participated in a seance to remove an astral double of Adolf Hitler. After the war, he faced the threat of the death penalty for collaboration, but Arvéd paid for his commutation to life imprisonment with a binding signature to the State Security Service. He was so obsessed with a gluttonous thirst for knowledge that he would betray friends just to lay hands on rare books from confiscated libraries. He perversely boasted that he had sent fifty people to the gallows. He lived in a comfortable part of a luxurious hotel as well as in the harshest jail, where he died under unexplained circumstances. He oscillated between highs and lows, knowing only the extremes: either glory or humiliation. His life and death are shrouded in mystery and evoke straightforwardly novel imagery. Six years ago, the writer Jan Poláček elaborated on them in his book *The Devil of the Lesser Town (Malostranský ďábel)*, which combines a factual and novel approach. Vojtěch Mašek, an experienced comic book author, playwright and co-writer of the award-winning films *Little Crusader (Křižáček)* [dir. Václav Kadrnka, 2017] and *Occupation (Okupace)* [dir. Michal Nohejl, 2021], wrote the screenplay with Poláček and assumed the director's role.

The filmmakers do not view Arvéd's story objectively but from the inside. In a space between reality and dream, they are trying to capture Arvéd's complicated soul, which he hides under various masks, and changes at will with an illusionist's skill. On camera, this shifted reality is expressed by a crooked library shelf and a cupboard serving symbolically

as a kind of transition zone to another world. The plot does not proceed linearly but alternates between time planes. The same examining room, the same characters, just a different time in which power moves from one pair of hands to the other. More or less theatrical scenes repeat on the *déjà vu* principle, varying in different contexts. The central motif of doubling is applied in multiple meanings, from double agents to astral doubles to the contradictions of Arvéd's attitudes and actions. Even his education is a double-edged sword, that can be used both for destruction and salvation. The gift of extraordinary intelligence brings with it the temptation of pride and manipulation and positioning oneself on a par with God. We see a conflict in him between his ambition and self-doubt, affability and cruel coldness, seclusion and showmanship, solitude and the need for acceptance and admiration. His crony Plaček, who, as a communist prominent and co-founder of the State Security Service, repaid him for saving him from being transported to a concentration camp, plays a power game of favours and *quid pro quos* with him. A fellow prisoner, parish priest Zemek, is Arvéd's opposite, unwaveringly standing on the side of good. He does not let himself be convinced of the Satanist's essential depravity; persistently showing him mercy and giving courage in difficult circumstances. Arvéd spasmodically resists this transparent love, which penetrates the bars of the dungeon like a ray of light, but quite possibly unsuccessfully, so that his shielding of Zemek from the guards is not a calculated move but rather an act of compassion. To this priest, the first ecclesiastical victim of the Communist perversion of the 1950s, he opens up at the end of his life - unless his confession represents just another hoax and game.

To dialogue, he would also invite transcendent partners; perhaps he needed to define his identity in interaction with them. Raised in traditional Catholicism, he wanted to become a priest, but the ostracization of homosexuals at the time, and probably his expulsion from the Roman Jesuit seminary, gave him the impression he was rejected by God, so he turned to the Devil. Narcissism and the desire to uncover the ultimate secrets have brought him to the edge, where the distinction between light and darkness is blurred. ("From a certain point of knowledge, we find ourselves outside the categories of good and evil.") As if he were being periodically punished for transgressing human boundaries, the hero, a cross between Faust and Joseph K., is dragged through the gloomy corridors to the court in a kind of endless Kafkaesque trial.

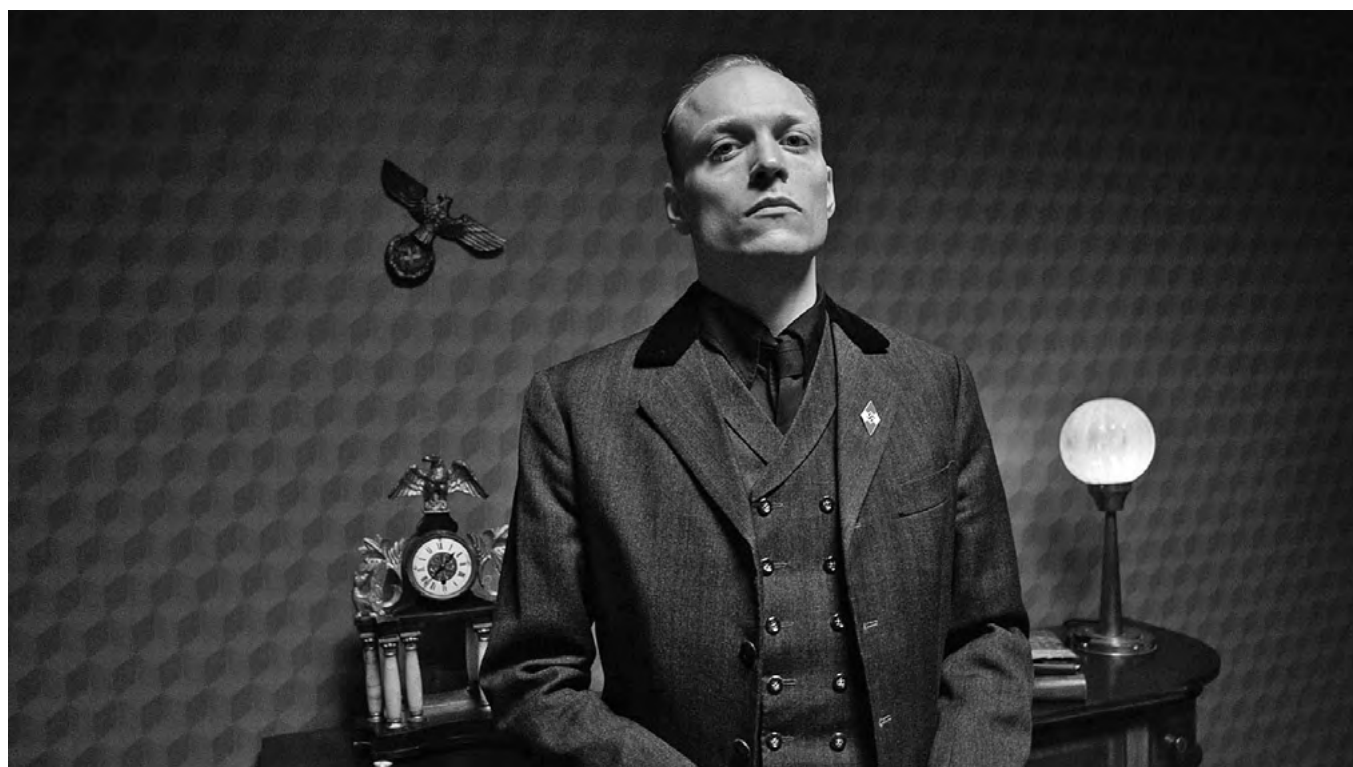
The film puts emphasis on the visual and aural aspects. The disturbing, all-contemporary minimalist music fits the period atmosphere surprisingly well, and the new arrangement of the song *Just for Today* (*Jen pro ten dnešní den*) sounds both sophisticated and ironic. Except for the final sequence, the camera focuses exclusively on the interiors: the suite at the Esplanade Hotel, the interrogation room, the prison cell and the labyrinthine corridors. The lighting in sharp contrasts emphasizes the theatrical arrangement. The editing, reminiscent of an acausal logic, connects fragments of memories with time jumps. While the experience of the social bottom is illustrated by images from the prison, we learn only vicariously about the movement of the Dandy intellectual in the decadent environment of the First Republic salons and his contacts with Hermetic circles. Action is almost entirely replaced by words. Mašek clearly follows his vision in his well-thought-out script; he offers only the basic clues of Arvéd's biography and leaves it to the viewer to piece them together. Discerning which events are real, and which are only taking place in a half-crazed mind tormented by inner terrors is left entirely up to the viewer, as is the exploration of Arvéd's motivations and the question that emerges: What is the point of departure to which he clings, what is his idea of personal happiness - that Faustian "moment, hold on!"? However, a viewer unfamiliar with the historical context is unaware, for example, that the five-times-variant magical ceremony is a reconstruction of the 1938 evocation of the Hermeticists in the place of Brdy. Without knowledge of the book's subject matter, the viewer is in danger of falling into the opium den of absurd drama. Part of the audience will enjoy the art ride even without being anchored in reality, but the other will not make sense of the enigmatic horror.

The film actors are undoubtedly its strong point. The mesmerizing Michal Kern is able to capture the unbalanced nature of Arvéd's temperament. In his looks, gestures and exalted declamations, he combines passion, unacknowledged fragility and disgusting slickness with a kind of devilish attraction. In his flamboyant seduction of a young man, he subtly mixes sycophantic humility with intellectual pride. The overacting and theatricality match Arvéd's exhibitionist and hysterical mood, while also harking back to the Christian-type film acting of the time. Saša Rašilov as Plaček - at one time as the frightened wreck under investigation, at another as the confident investigating officer -, Jaroslav Plesl as the quiet parish priest Zemek and Vojtěch Vodochodský as

the embarrassed newly minted State Security Officer are all 100% convincing.

The interweaving of a contemporary theme with a timeless one is a common theme in literature and cinema and should result in a message - let me use a term derided not only by Woody Allen - for the present. In his directorial debut, Vojtěch Mašek, through the Faustian hero, an ambiguous figure confronting long-relativised values dusted on the warped shelves of libraries, has sharply illuminated a dark part of Czechoslovak history. The surreal stylization of Arvéd's portrait attempts to dig deeper into a man who was not just an average coward and opportunist serving any regime, but a complex character, mixed of black and white. Arvéd's personality was very contradictory, and it should be no surprise that a film about him is likely to cause controversy. Such exceptional artistic projects have been appearing in our cinema in recent years; some disastrously failed, while others were remarkable, to say the least. Regardless of all my reservations and ambivalent feelings, I rank *Arvéd* with the latter.

× Zdena Mejzlíková



BOOKS

Army film in the socialist state machinery

In the history of Czech cinematography, there are still several topics that have been given little attention so far. Among them is the history and production of smaller studios producing films either for a short time, or for specific purposes or audiences. One of them was also the army film studio, generally known under the name Czech Army Film (CAF) it bore in the 1950s. Luckily, its history has been reviewed a lot in recent years, even though the researchers still have a lot of work to do in terms of looking for archival sources and films or clarifying details.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, references to or chapters on army film history have first appeared in brief contributions to magazines or anthologies; to different degrees, they have “flashed through” the memories of authors having worked in this film studio (Jasný, Kachyňa, Vláčil, Bočan, Schmidt, etc.) or monographs on their later works or in the TV documentary *When the Director Joined the Army* (Když režisér narukoval, dir. by Tibor Podhorec, 1996). In this regard, the first comprehensive work was Václav Šmidrkal's book *Army and the Silver Screen* (Armáda a stříbrné plátno, Naše vojsko, 2009), documenting the post-war history of the studio from its transformation under Minister Čepička (1951) until 1999, when the army got rid of its studio for good, and it ceased to exist after not very successful privatization. Šmidrkal not only described the genesis, operation, and structure of the studio, but also dealt with the general characteristics of the films or trends in their production. In addition to a few theses,⁰¹ his book was for a long time the only source of at least basic information about army film.

However, already at the time Šmidrkal's book was published, another study on Czechoslovak army cinematography started to materialize. Its author Alice Lovejoy published it in 2014 in the Indiana University Press Publishing House under the name *Army Film and the Avant Garde. Cinema and Ex-*

01 Martin Švoma, *Výzvy skutečnosti. Filmy a filmové projekty Karla Vachka*. Master's thesis, Praha: FF UK 2001; Milan Hrubý, *Československá armádní dokumentární filmová tvorba v letech 1951–1960 a její zastoupení ve sbírkách VHÚ Praha*. Bachelor's thesis, Hradec Králové: FF Univerzita Hradec Králové 2012.



↳ Alice Lovejoy, *Experimentální dílna. Československá armádní kinematografie 1920–1970*. Praha: Národní filmový archiv 2021, 1st edition, 316 pp.

periment in the Czechoslovak Military as part of her research project at Yale University. And seven years since it was published, we have a chance to get to know this voluminous work translated into Czech. In 2021, the National Film Archive published it under the name *Experimental Workshop. Czechoslovak Army Cinematography 1920–1970* (Experimentální dílna. Československá armádní kinematografie 1920–1970).

In her research, Alice Lovejoy focused on several levels of army film she had described in the explication to her dissertation in the *Illuminace Magazine* (2007; No. 4): on the institutional level, she wanted to examine the army's requirements on its own internal film production and organization of the film studio; on the political level, the decision making and management of the studio and how these approaches were reflected in the films as such; on the aesthetic level, the relationship between the CAF production and trends of the Czechoslovak and international films of the time. Whereas Šmidrkal's book is rather focused on history, Alice Lovejoy deals with an analysis of the studio's production and its comparison. Both works also differ in the periods they cover; whereas Šmidrkal provides a comprehensive overview of the entire post-war period, Lovejoy only picks the inter-war beginnings and the period of post-war creative ferment terminated by the normalization period.

Already from Šmidrkal's work, we know that practical study of Czechoslovak army cinematography is problematic. For historical reasons, most archive materials are stored in army institutions, the film collection being partially stored in the Military History Institute, and partially in the National Film Archive. To this must be added the fragmentary nature of the preserved written documents and the past destruction of films that were no longer necessary (from the army's point of view). That's why the study of the history of army cinematography often turns to reconstruction of the probable based on "assumed connections" (for instance, no founding document of the CAF from the early 1950s has been found, and Šmidrkal infers its organizational structure from the form and diction of internal orders and memories of living contemporaries).

All this is mainly a complication for historians; however, Alice Lovejoy's interest in the studio's history and the details of its institutional framework is rather marginal. In this respect, Šmidrkal's work is more factual and outlines the different eras more clearly, albeit only in basic terms. The focus of Alice Lovejoy's text is somewhere else: in the analysis of the films as such, their comparison with other Czechoslovak or international films, and putting them into a larger social context of the time. The results of the comparison show that army film production is an unexpected phenomenon not only reflecting all trends and innovative approaches of the time, but often co-determining them. (And since most films by the army studio cannot generally be seen, their descriptions and analyses in this work are even more valuable.)

Lovejoy sees the beginnings of this "experimental workshop" already in the inter-war period and in the founding works of Jiří Jeníček, a modernist photographer whose films made in the then army film group embodied a great deal of his aesthetic opinions and who tried to formulate the tasks and structure of army cinematography. According to her, the post-war filmmakers continued the tradition of the inter-war avant garde and its experimental orientation. The author challenges the concept of monolithic socialist cinematography and rigid purpose-made army production, demonstrating that even in the "toughest" years, CAF could accommodate many more alternative elements than one would expect – both in fiction, and non-fiction (documentary, instructional, etc.) films. Even though the army (the author sometimes intentionally uses the term "military") film greatly depended on ideology and Soviet models, it had similar formats and functions as "civilian" filmmaking. It also worked with social topics, didactic commentary, or standardized characters. Despite its primary focus on its own institutional objectives, the army also tried to address larger civilian audiences and often gave the authors unusually

large space for self-realization (which was due to several factors – not only due to the absence of direct state supervision, since the army studio was not governed by the nationalization decree, but also due to the complex system of competencies often involving conflicting requirements on army training, political and propaganda ambitions, technical possibilities of the studio, and individualities of the authors). What is also remarkable in this respect are the remarks and allusions to some Western film models whose techniques the army authors adopted, for instance in Šis's film *Blue Day* (Modrý den, 1953). Since the book was originally written for international readers, it sometimes clarifies the context of things that are a matter of course for Czechs. However, this is a detail that can be ignored. On the other hand, what is very valuable for the Czech reader are the references to international scientific resources dealing with army film of other countries or with a more general overview of the state cinematography policy of the Eastern Bloc countries.

In some respects, Lovejoy is not quite accurate. For instance František Vláčil (as a reviewer, I must admit my monothematic interest here) was not "doing his military service" (p. 21) in CAF, having done it much earlier (1945–1947) and elsewhere; the author also speculates, without really thinking about exact temporal relations, that Vláčil conceived his film *Clouds of Glass* (Skleněná oblačka, 1958) as an "obvious study" to his feature film *The White Dove* (Holubice, 1960) (p. 136), which is hardly imaginable, because when he was filming *Clouds of Glass*, he had no idea he would be offered to make *The White Dove* by the Barrandov Film Studio. Also, the List of Films Made by the Czechoslovak Ministry of National Defence might correspond to the state of knowledge at the time the book was first published in America (2014), but today, we know of many more films produced by the army (or alternatively, we have clearer information about the authors of several films). This annex could definitely have been editorially modified and new findings could have been added for the Czech edition, the absence of which limits its use.

It should be noted that the author consistently sticks to the defined thematic areas. For her analyses, she mostly picks typical "representatives" of different genres (dividing films into fiction and non-fiction ones, or based on genres into live action, documentary, reporting, etc.) and focuses on films that are exceptional in some respects or that clearly manifest certain methods and trends. For instance, in the training (instructional/methodical) film genre, the studio made many films with no significant added value that were actually just didactic aids. However, the author's attention is rather focused on those that are exceptional in some ways, for instance on Vláčil's *Blind Flying Using the OSP System* (Létání bez vidu podle systému OSP, 1953) or Hapl's *Demining of Passage III* (Odminování průchodu III, 1954) combining fiction and non-fiction elements in different ways. The studio's production largely consisted of quite "uninteresting" (in filmmaking terms) newsreels for army film periodicals (*Armádní zpravodaj*, *Armádní filmový měsíčník*, etc.), which are only touched upon though. I don't mean this as criticism. I am saying this to avoid an optical illusion (caused for instance by the text of this review) that the book analyses the production of the army film studio in its totality, or that, on the contrary, the studio's production was "pure avant garde".

Alice Lovejoy has added an important piece to the mosaic of one segment of our cinematography. Seen within the aesthetic and ideological context of the time, this segment is confronted by the author with other Czechoslovak and international examples. However, her book can also be seen as a specific picture of an era that wanted to be the advance guard of humankind, but the built-up monolithic structure of society significantly contributed to quite the opposite – it helped shaping authors' individualities and various aesthetic codes.

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