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Czech cinema in the normalization period (1969-1989)

A time of the servants

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“I hate this wave [...] which denies strong human relationships, which treats them with irony in advance,”¹ declared Kamil Pixa, the scriptwriter of *Klíč* [*The Key*], the first ‘normalizing’ film. And indeed, the normalizing faction in Czech cinematography sprang from hatred; it was the hatred held by those who took an active part in building the Stalinist regime of the 1950’s and who felt that the Prague Spring of 1968 shattered their world view and their careers. After the invasion of the armies of the Warsaw Pact, these people elbowed their way into leading positions in all areas of public life, including cinematography.

Negation of negation, or striking back against the New Wave

The term ‘normalization’, derived from official Communist Party documents of the period, is generally used in the Czech and Slovak context to cover the whole of the two decades 1969-1989. Its beginning is marked by the appointment of Gustáv Husák as First Secretary of the Czechoslovak Communist Party (April 1969) and the purge that followed, when an almost half a million members were expelled from the party. Such expulsions were usually accompanied by discrimination in professional life or education; they affected whole families. The reform movement of the 1960’s was declared to be “a critical development in the party and society” and its leaders were stigmatised as supporters of “right-wing opportunism and revisionism”. After a short period of liberalization the spiritual life of the country was thrown back into the tight grasp of Soviet ideology – in its stale form typical of the Brezhnev era. The open terror of the 1950’s did not occur again; however, what did return was its rhetoric, including the normative aesthetic of socialist realism.

In cinematography, the forefront of the attack was launched at the New Wave. The products of the 1960’s were denounced for their “unacceptable trends such as scepticism, nihilism, alienation, egoistic individualism, exaggerated sexuality, cynicism, aggression and violence, negativism in relation to previous socialist development, the discrediting of communists, non-class illusion.”² Ten Czech feature films made in the

years 1969 and 1970 never went into distribution, others were publicly screened only briefly, while many older pieces of work, including films that had won international awards in the 1960’s, were withdrawn from circulation. The ban also affected several dozen films from abroad. The FITES professional association was wound up and replaced with the film section of the Czech Union of Dramatic Artists. The creative teams at Barrandov were dissolved and new ones established. The post of Central Director of Czechoslovak Film was assigned to Jiří Purš. Ludvík Toman became the key dramaturgist of the Barrandov studio, while decisions about film from behind the scenes were made by Miroslav Müller, the head of the cultural department of the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party. Jan Kliment of *Rudé právo*, the daily newspaper of the Central Committee, became the arbiter of how well the ideological, party and popular line was trodden; his articles were full of resentment towards the New Wave and the critics who had supported it, notably A.J. Liehm.

The party leadership faced the question of “whether to continue with this film production, distorted as it is, or whether to stop completely for a certain period of time”.³ In the end, the tactics of a “differentiated approach” towards filmmakers was adopted. The best conditions were granted to those who subscribed to the politics of normalization. These included, of the well-known artists, for example, Karel Zeman, Otakar Vávra and Zbyněk Brynych as well as some of those who made genre films, such as Oldřich Lipský, Václav Vorlíček, and Jindřich Polák. Considerable influence was seized by those who had felt left in the shadow of the New Wave’s success: Karel Steklý, Jiří Sequens, Vladimír Čech, Josef Mach, Jaroslav Balík, and Antonín Kachlák. One by one, filmmakers linked to the ‘Czechoslovak cinematic miracle’ that had gone before were invited to pick up their work again; some had to redeem themselves with an ideologically engaged film or by making a public statement in which they declared themselves followers of socialism, repudiating their work from the 1960’s. Directors who continued almost without a break included Juraj Herz, Jaromil Jireš, Jaroslav Papoušek and Karel Kachyňa, while Jiří Menzel and Hynek Bočan returned after a five-year absence. Antonín Máša, Jan Schmidt, Zdeněk Sirový and František Vlácil kept themselves busy for some time making films for children and youth. Ewald Schorm, with the exception of a short documentary about the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra, entrenched a position for himself as a theatre director and only towards the end of his life, troubled by disease, was he to return to film *Vlastně se nic nestalo* [*Killing with Kindness*, 1988]. Miloš Forman, Ivan Passer, Vojtěch Jasný, Ján Kadár, Jan Němec, and Jiří Weiss went into exile. The most tragic fortune fell to Pavel Juráček who, until his death in 1989, was prevented from shooting a single film, at home or in exile, while Ladislav Helge and Karel Vachek were “silenced” in a similar way. Only

¹ Jaroslav Vokřál: *Kamil Pixa: Mám rád akční filmy*. *Kino*, 26th volume (1971), No. 10, p. 9.

² Jiří Purš: *Obrysy vývoje československé národní kinematografie (1945-1980)*. Prague, ČSFÚ 1985, p. 101.

³ Jiří Purš: *Současné úkoly naší kinematografie*. In: Jiří Purš: *Poslání socialistického filmu*, ČSFÚ, Prague 1981, p. 32.

Věra Chytilová managed to return to creative work in the 1970's without an apparent compromise with the regime and without any weakening of her creativity.

Production and distribution

During the normalization period, Czech film became a strong link in the chain of socialist cinema. Totalitarianism ensured that the cinema industries of all the satellite countries had an extensive market to supply and, by joining forces, they provided it with a comprehensive mix of genre repertory: cinema screens from Berlin to Vladivostok showed Apache Indians galloping across the prairie, from the Red Indian stories made in East Germany; spies and undercover agents in action fought Yugoslav partisans; mounted Rumanian *haiduks* and gun-toting cowboys hailed from Transylvania. Together, the countries brought out co-productions; of them, the most official was the epic *Vojáci svobody* [*Soldiers of Freedom*, 1971-1977], directed by Yuri Ozerov, about the role of the communists in defeating nazism, filmed as a co-operative project between the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Poland, East Germany, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Rumania. A six-hour-long, big-budget film, probably shown only to schools, military units and to students on communist party education courses, it was a peculiar monument to the general secretaries of the fraternal communist parties who were then in office. Each of these apparatchiks was portrayed in his earlier years as an important organizer of anti-fascist warfare.

In the 1970-1989 period, Czech cinematography turned out, on average, thirty feature films a year for cinemas, with the Slovak score at around ten. More than 200 titles premiered every year in the cinemas; along with 40–45 local productions they would include some 40 films from the Soviet Union and about 50 titles from other European socialist countries. Around 15 films from the USA, and about 40 films from western Europe premiered every year, the remainder being taken up by work from other continents. Cinema programming was based on a quota system: socialist productions made up 60% of the repertory (of which a third was to be covered by local production), while the non-socialist share was not permitted to go beyond 40%. In practice, the audience figures for capitalist productions exceeded 50% of the market while the foreign 'friendly countries' had only 20%. In addition, the numbers were 'improved' by including shows for schools, double reporting of the results of two-part films or by manipulating the statistical data. Approximately 40% of foreign films were dubbed into Czech, and the Czech dubbing school was generally believed to be of exceptional quality.

The most massive film-related organized event was the itinerant Workers' Film Festival. This was divided into two parts: the winter section would be reserved for art films, the summer section, held in open-air cinemas, featured more popular fare. An overview of local products was presented every April in the form of the Czech and Slovak Film Festival, organized on a rota by regional towns. However, the bureaucracy in power kept the awarding of prizes fully under their control. Films for

children were assessed, with a degree of independence, at the festival in Gottwaldov (now Zlín), and films for teenagers at the festival in Trutnov. The International Film Festival in Karlovy Vary took place every even year, serving as a forum for leftist filmmakers from all the 'three worlds': the socialist, the capitalist, and the third world.

The number of cinemas in the Czech lands fell during normalization, from 2,394 in 1970 to 2,025 in 1989. There were 664,195 shows in 1970, some 540,592 in 1989. Audience figures over the same period dropped from 84,246 in 1970 to 51,453 in 1989.⁴ The manner in which films were distributed remained unchanged from that of the 1960's. There were around fifty cinemas in the country with equipment for the projection of 70-mm films. The proportion of wide-screen format cinemas increased during the twenty years of normalization, from a third to one half, although many simple village facilities giving one or two shows a week were maintained as well. Copies would be issued for all cinema types. It would not be uncommon for a movie fan to be able to take in certain popular titles first in the 70-mm format, then in wide-screen 35-mm version, a reduced form in 35-mm academic format and finally in a village civic centre with a 16-mm projector. Promotional material issued for the premieres was the same as in the 1960's (posters, series of photos, trailers, slides). Collections of photographs for Soviet and Czech and Slovak films were later replaced by a series of disposable colour-printed images.

Stage one: consolidation

A considerable number of the feature films created in the years 1970-1989, approximately six hundred of them, function as living cultural heritage, basking in viewer popularity whenever re-run on 'public-service' or private TV channels. Other films are better left lying in the vaults for fear that showing them would verge on a criminal act – propagating a movement that leads to the curtailment of the freedom of citizens. It is therefore appropriate and just to distinguish between *normalization period films*, covering all the films made during the twenty-year period, and as a sub-classification within them, what might be known as *normalization films*, by which we understand those more or less affected by the overweening ideology, and within this set an even narrower group of *normalizing films*, taking an attacking role in the process with the aim of subjugating the minds of the viewers to the normalization perceptions of the past and the present. One may find subversive films among the normalization period films, or discover works acceptable for their rendering qualities or their ability to entertain among normalization films. None of the above pertains to the normalizing films – they were a mouthpiece of the neo-Stalinist cadre within the Czechoslovak Communist Party which, after 1968, had zero tolerance for its democratically inclined comrades.

⁴ Ladislav Pištora: *Filmová návštěvníci a kina na území České republiky, Iluminace*, 9th year (1997), No. 2, pp. 63-106.

The two decades of normalization can be sub-divided into several stages. The years 1969-1971 were marked by what became known as “consolidation” – the purges gained momentum but the mood of the 1960’s still lingered. Debutants from this period ended as a lost generation: Ivan Renč, after his first work *Hlídač* [*The Guard*], and Ivan Balad’a, after *Archa bláznů* [*The Arc of Fools*], made no more feature films; Drahomíra Vihanová, responsible for the prohibited *Zabitá neděle* [*Killing Time on Sunday*] later continued by making documentaries, but shot no feature films until the 1990’s. Vít Olmer (*Takže aboj* [*Bye – Bye*]) and Petr Tuček (*Svatej z Krejčárku* [*Saint from the Suburbs*]) returned to directing films for cinemas ten years afterwards, starting in the Gottwaldov studio. *Nabota* [*Nakedness*], Václav Matějka’s first offering was banned but its auteur established a snug position for himself in normalization production: alongside serious psychological dramas, he did not turn down ideological commissions. The first and, last chance to shoot a self-penned feature film was given in 1970 to the poet, actor and singer Jiří Suchý (*Nevěsta* [*The Bride*]) and the artist Ester Krumbachová (*Vražda ing. Čerta* [*The Murder of Mr. Devil*]). Through their works, both had had a profound influence on the cultural climate in the 1960’s. However, their film debuts only conjured up an impression of departure from the passing New Wave.

The first films to be both successful and something that the new cinematography management could be proud of were *Na kometě* [*On the Comet*, 1970], a new special-effects feature by Karel Zeman based on Jules Verne sci-fi, and *Už zase skáču přes kaluže* [*I Can Jump over Puddles Again*, 1970], a film by Karel Kachyňa, in which the film script by the then-banned Jan Procházka was purported to have been written by Ota Hofman. Juraj Herz filmed *Petrolejové lampy* [*Oil Lamps / Petroleum Lamps*, 1971], a brilliant adaptation of a novel by Jaroslav Havlíček and the stylish *Morgiana* (1972) based on a novel by Alexander Grin. Both films were a tour de force for the actress Iva Janžurová. Two mad-cap, fanciful comedies by the scriptwriter Miloš Macourek and the director Václav Vorlíček enjoyed thoroughly deserved popularity: the farce “*Pane, vy jste vdova!*” [*Sir, Are You a Widow?*, 1970] continued to mock state officialdom, in much the free spirit of the previous period, while *Dívka na koštěti* [*The Girl on the Broom*, 1971] related the adventures of a naughty student at a school of wizardry (Saxana, played by the singer Petra Černocká, may be considered Harry Potter’s older sister).

The year 1971 saw the emergence of the first normalizing films. *Klíč*, a true story based on the exploits of the communist resistance fighter Jan Zika, was directed by Vladimír Čech on the basis of a script by Kamil Pixa, whose family harboured Jan Zika during the German reprisals after the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich, nazi overlord of the Protectorate days. It was the first of a series of hagiographic films about important figures within the workers’ movement and had the air of a passionate defence of the bond between the Czech communists and the Kremlin. It was presented as a contribution to the 14th Congress of the Czechoslovak Communist Party and was awarded a Silver Medal at the Moscow festival. The office

drama *Člověk není sám* [*Man Is Not Alone*, 1971] by the director Josef Mach was a primitive replica of the enemy agent stories from the 1950’s; indeed the plot was set in that period and involved the attitude of a somewhat hard-done-by, but honest and talented engineer.

Normalization on the offensive

The years 1972-1977 may be referred to as the period of normalization on the offensive. Cinematography was to serve the working people, read: functionaries. The ideological function of art prevailed over the aesthetic function, the principles of Stalinist aesthetics from the 1950’s were re-applied, and the professional skills applied in the films produced plumbed new depths. The number of first works to be completed was insignificant, as new directors were only given a chance in short-story film projects. It was in this, and only this, period that films were made that bring up the reform year of 1968, always seen in a satirical or repulsive light: Karel Steklý’s *Hroch* [*The Hippo*, 1973], *Za volantem nepřítel* [*An Enemy Is at the Wheel*, 1974], and *Tam, kde hnízdí čápi* [*The Place Where Storks Nest*, 1975], Vojtěch Trapl’s *Tobě hrana zvonit nebude* [*The Bell Will Not Toll for You*, 1975], a shameless piece of agitprop depicting the supporters of the Prague Spring as a bunch of nitwits and drunkards under the influence of intriguing conspirators, and Václav Vorlíček’s *Bouřlivé víno* [*Wine Working*, 1976], a comedy that was the only anti-reform film to sit well with audiences. The economic reforms of the 1960’s were attacked through *Hněv* [*Wrath*, 1978], a bleak film by Zbyněk Brynych, showing miners risking their lives in a struggle against the planned closure of mines.

One of the declared tasks of normalization cinema was to illustrate the decisive role of the Communist Party in 20th-century Czechoslovak history. With the aim of rehabilitating the actions of repressive state organs in the 1950’s, the director Ivo Toman filmed the western fashioned *Česty mužů* [*Roads of Men*, 1972], featuring state security characters. Otakar Vávra pored over a trilogy set in modern history but the only solid result was the introductory part *Dny zrady* [*The Days of Betrayal*, 1973], about Munich 1939. The action war spectacular *Sokolovo* (1975) was a flop and *Osvobození Prahy* [*The Liberation of Prague*, 1976] had the air of going through the motions just to finish the trilogy. However, Vávra’s professional skills were completely lacking in the portrayal of Vojtěch Trapl, when in *Vítězný lid* [*The Victorious People*, 1977] he attempted, within the device of a simulated documentary play, to depict the seizing of power by the Communist Party in February 1948. Antonín Kachlík’s *Dvacátý devátý* [*1929*, 1974], a political film, reconstructed the events of the 5th Congress of the Czechoslovak Communist Party in 1929, at which the ‘Gottwald wing’ came to power, starting the process of adopting the Bolshevik line for the Communist party. Intended as a contribution to the actually non-existent discussion of the permanent struggle between the left and right in the workers’ movement, it was a shameless piece of sycophancy to the controversial figure of Klement Gottwald. In *Kronika*

žhavého léta [*Chronicle of a Hot Summer*, 1973], an epic almost three-hours long, Jiří Sequens adapted *Bitva* [*The Struggle*], a novel by Václav Řezáč, in which the events of the end of the 1940's are narrated in socialist realism methodology and according to the ideological prejudices of the Stalin era (*Nástup* [*Deployment*]), the previous volume of the two-volume novel, had already been filmed, by Otakar Vávra earlier in 1952). Another celebration of the 1950's, this time from an air force point of view, was Vladimír Čech's opus *Vysoká modrá zed'* [*The High Blue Wall*, 1973], the first Czech feature film shown in 70-mm format.

The normalization regime was founded on the unwritten social contract that the citizens would not rebel and the party and the state would in turn take care of "meeting the expanding needs of the working people". Films, teleplays and soaps purported to portray the everyday life of the working class, agricultural co-operatives, the military and the working intelligentsia; in thoroughly ostentatious fashion, they showed the building of power generation facilities and high-rise housing estates, and screened feasts where the tables groaned under bacon and demijohns, while the officially presented pop music tried to convince the people that "the whole earth is rising" but it was only "here at home" that paradise existed, and poetry proliferated extolling a quality that can only be termed "sound down-to-earthness". The typical hero of contemporaneous normalization films was the managing director of a company, or another hard-working comrade of mature years, an eye-witness to Victorious February. The workplace would be incomplete without a jovial chairman of the Party Organization, usually played by Miroslav Zounar or Miloš Willig. It was deemed desirable to avoid "art-for-art's sake formalism", so most of the films resembled teleplays with linear narratives and theatre-like directing. The ideological message was frequently reinforced by significant music or an explicit commentary. Filmmakers who trod the party line most devotedly (Steklý, Trapl, Kachlík) were given relative freedom to realize their own experiments. In their particular case, this meant providing room for their dilettantism.

Ideology would even filter through into films that were apparently pure entertainment. Ladislav Rychman filmed an updated version of *Strakonický dudák* [*The Strakonice Bagpiper*], a classical fairy story by the National Revival playwright Josef Kajetán Tyl, as a pop musical starring Karel Gott. Conceived as the essence of Czech indolence, it was designed to nip in the bud any thoughts the audience might have concerning emigration. Zbyněk Brynych came up with *Jakou barvu má láska* [*What Is The Colour of Love?* 1973], a conflict-free portrait of a woman, who is a politically engaged engineer and member of parliament, and then, largely through negligent directing, added the last straw to *Noc oranžových obňů* [*Night of Orange Fires*, 1974], an artistic catastrophe of a film, a drama in which a top worker finds himself in jail after a road accident, but there remains a model communist. Brynych's series of failures culminated in *Romance za korunu* [*Romance for a Crown*, 1975], musical kitsch with an extensive cast of official pop stars; the scene in which sixteen-year old apprentice

Píďa and the pop star Karel Gott eat a sausage with mustard in Wenceslas Square remains especially unforgettable.

The 1970's also saw the rise of Stanislav Strnad's star as a director. His comedy *Můj brácha má prima bráchu* [*My Brother Has a Marvellous Brother*, 1975] was based around the unexpected parenthood of a young couple, and filmed in the style of *Bakaláři* [*Bachelors*], a popular TV series of short family comedies. In similar fashion to many teleplays and TV soaps of the period, it promoted the state population policy. The young people in the film were as well-behaved and well-groomed as only the party functionaries could have wished. Strnad also received official plaudits for his *Běž, at' ti neuteče* [*Run or You Won't Catch Him!*, 1976], a contemporary drama in which he followed the principles of socialist realism while attempting to portray a model communist managing director "of ordinary flesh and blood", although not overly educated, struggling against an engineer with right-wing views. A typical trait for films of this type was a romantic subplot featuring the relationship between the hero, usually an active fifty-something, with a young woman of tender years: in films, the comrades loved to see themselves as objects of adoration by young women.

For all the prevailing dullness and mediocrity, a few films were created in the period that their authors need not be ashamed of, even today. Jaromil Jireš, who shortly before had been the target of sharp criticism for the surrealist féerie *Valérie a týden divů* [*Valerie and a Week of Wonders*, 1970], filmed ...*a pozdravuji vlaštovky* [*Greeting to the Swallows*, 1972], a poetic work long in the preparation, about the heroism of Maruška Kudeřřiková, a young woman fighting with the communist resistance. The idyllic "fragments" of the young martyr's life before she was thrown in jail and executed by the nazis, bring to mind the fates of all the women executed in the course of Czech history. Jaroslav Balík built *Milenci v roce jedna* [*Lovers in the Year One*, 1973], his best film, set just after the Second World War, around the contrasting photogenics of the colour and black-and-white image, highlighting the fragile beauty of the Marta Vančurová, the leading actress. Jiří Menzel returned to directing with *Kdo hledá zlaté dno* [*Who Looks for Gold*, 1974] about the building of the Dalešice dam. In spite of a poor film script constructed around a trivial morality, he created a relatively credible portrait of the working environment and the people in it, considering the circumstances.

Only comedies from this period have managed to enjoy permanent popularity: *Tři oříšky pro Popelku* [*Three Nuts for Cinderella*, 1973], a winter fairy-tale by the screenwriter František Pavlíček and the director Václav Vorlíček with an extremely good cast, *Šest medvědů s Cibulkou* [*Six Bears and Cibulka*, 1974], a circus comedy by Oldřich Lipský, or *Holky z porcelánu* [*Girls from a Porcelain Factory*, 1975], a refreshing comedy by Juraj Herz. The musical *30 panen a Pythagoras* [*Thirty Maidens and Pythagoras*, 1973] by Pavel Hobl featured Jiří Menzel, appearing on the screen after a lengthy period of absence, as a singing math teacher. This experiment, produced in the Gottwaldov studio, was the last lingering trace of the atmosphere of the 1960's; its inconspicuous release had been delayed by four years. The writer duo Zdeněk Svěrák

– Ladislav Smoljak, from the Divadlo Jára Cimrmana theatre, launched their impressive film career in style. Their comedy *Jáchyme, boď ho do stroje* [*Joachim, Put Him into the Machine*, 1974], directed by Oldřich Lipský with Luděk Sobota in his first and best lead, made fun of a “conditionogram” fad; in Czechoslovakia the film entertained almost three million.

Resurrection

Once the opposition manifesto Charter 77 had come into being, the cultural scene polarized. While the signatories to it were publicly ostracized and harassed by the police as ‘losers and self-styled pretenders’, the majority of artistes did not join them; some even signed the so-called “anti-charter” in order to win conditional confidence on the part of the regime and “peace for work”. There had also been some changes in cinematography in the 1976-1977 period, mainly attributable to classic figures from the 1960’s being allowed more room for their creativity. The breakthrough came with the return of Věra Chytilová. Once an exclusive intellectual author, she shot *Hra o jablko* [*Apple Game*, 1976], an experimental comedy about male egoism, under the auspices of Kamil Pixa in the Krátký film studios. Its audience figures topped the two million mark. Apart from a likeable story, several period in-jokes, a refreshing cast (Jiří Menzel and Dagmar Bláhová from the Divadlo na provázku theatre), and some shocking sequences featuring authentic childbirths, the success of the work can be partially attributed to a several-month-long delay of the premiere. Chytilová continued in a provocative vein in her subsequent works: the apocalyptic, crushing satire *Panelstory aneb Jak se rodí sídliště* [*Story from a Housing Estate / Prefab Story*, 1979] took top honours at the San Remo festival, was banned just before the premiere and then released after a delay of at least two years and not in all regions at that. It took equally as long for her parable *Kalamita* [*Calamity*, 1981], filmed at the same time, before it reached its audience. These were followed by *Faunovo velmi pozdní odpoledne* [*The Very Late Afternoon of a Faun*, 1983], a satirical comedy about male vanity and sexism, and the stirring documentary *Praha – neklidné srdce Evropy* [*The Restless Heart of Europe*, 1984], commissioned by Italian TV. At first, it was only screened in film clubs and did not go into wider distribution until the days of perestroika. By 1989, Věra Chytilová had managed to make *Vlčí bouda* [*Wolf’s Hole*, 1986], a children’s sci-fi horror picture, *Šašek a královna* [*The Jester and the Queen*, 1987], a stage play by Bolek Polívka from Divadlo na provázku and *Kopytem sem, kopytem tam* [*Tainted Horseplay*, 1988], a comedy warning about AIDS and the sexual promiscuity that leads to its spread.

A counterpoint to the moral appeals by Věra Chytilová was played by the laid-back idylls (almost) from Jiří Menzel, a generation contemporary. In the kind-hearted satire *Na samotě u lesa* [*A Cottage Near the Woods*, 1976], penned by Svěrák and Smoljak, he gently poked at the fad of the weekend cottage, in the perfectly stylish *Báječní muži s klikou* [*Those Wonderful Men with Crank*, 1978] he paid tribute to the pioneers of

Czech cinematography. It was only then that he was able to return to the work of Bohumil Hrabal and film his *Postřižiny* [*Cutting It Short*, 1980] – the novel through which the writer re-entered, in 1975, the world of officially published Czech literature. Although *Postřižiny* was in line with the contemporary wave of hedonism (the film is set in a brewery and its content mainly comprises pleasures of the flesh: drinking beer, feasting on whole pigs, bathing, admiring the charm of a woman [Magda Vašaryová]), it was primarily a nostalgic celebration of the good old days, when free enterprise had not yet been threatened by the rebelling proletariat. Less successful, partly due to a less than perfect script, was *Slavnosti sněženek* [*Snowdrop Celebrations*, 1983], Menzel’s next film, based on short stories by Bohumil Hrabal and centering around an argument between two parties on a boar hunt about the proper procedure for roasting wild boar. Menzel’s greatest commercial success was the comedy *Vesničko má středisková* [*My Sweet Little Village*, 1985], based on a script by Zdeněk Svěrák. Seen by 3,691,000 people in Czechoslovak cinemas, it was the best Czech export film commodity of the whole two decades and was even nominated for an Oscar. Again, Czechs were portrayed as people who, deep inside, are nice and kind-hearted and busy themselves with well-cooled beer, picturesque landscape and pleasures of the flesh.

František Vlácil’s comeback to full-length films was *Dým bramborové natě* [*Fires on Potato Fields / Smoke on the Potato Fields*, 1976] based on the novel *Doktor Meluzžin* [*Doctor Meluzžin*] by the regime writer Bohumil Říha, with the excellent actor Rudolf Hrušínský cast in the leading role, an actor who, with a single exception, had been banned from the screen from the end of the 1960’s. Vlácil’s *Stíny horkého léta* [*Shadows of a Hot Summer*, 1977] followed, a western drama based on a film script by Jiří Křižan about a brave highlander fighting against a bunch of quasi-military bandits (Bandera adherents) threatening his family, and was awarded the Crystal Globe at the festival in Karlovy Vary. After *Koncert na konci léta* [*Concert at the End of Summer*, 1979], a biography of the composer Antonín Dvořák, Vlácil made *Hadí jed* [*Serpent’s Poison*, 1981], a very personal black-and-white film on the subject of alcoholism, then an adaptation of *Pasáček z doliny* [*A Little Herdsman from the Valley*, 1983], a novel by Ladislav Fuks, in which the same bandits re-appear, and *Stín kapradiny* [*Shadows of Fern*, 1985], a formally exquisite adaptation of Josef Čapek’s novel. Vlácil’s filmography was concluded by *Mág* [*The Magus*, 1987], an account of the life and work of the romantic poet Karel Hynek Mácha.

Juraj Herz re-established his artistic credentials with *Den pro mou lásku* [*The Day for My Love*, 1976], a psychological drama with the tragic motif of a child’s death, after which he embarked on the surrealistically rendered horror-fairytales *Panna a netvor* [*The Maiden and the Monster*] and *Deváté srdce* [*The Ninth Heart*, both 1978]. After a few genre parodies he made *Zastihla mě noc* [*Caught in the Night*, 1986], a modern version of a hagiographic film devoted to the communist journalist Jožka Jabůrková, in which the harrowing scenes from the concentration camp (Juraj Herz had experienced it

himself as a child) rival Spielberg's *Schindler's List* of a far later period. After this he left to work in West Germany.

The ever-diligent Karel Kachyňa was still capable of finishing several films a year and, in some of his works, continued developing the theme of young loves, from his older films. In the visually experimental *Smrt mouchy* [*Death of a Fly*, 1976] he showed, in unconventional fashion, a sensitive youth reaching sexual maturity; in *Setkání v červenci* [*Meeting in July*, 1978] he depicted a love relationship between a student and his female teacher. Erotic motifs, with an excellent cast, helped gain popularity for his comedy *Sestřičky* [*The Nurses*, 1983]. Although the narrative of two nurses harked back to the 1950's, it carefully avoided reflecting the political context of that period. Kachyňa's *Dobré světlo* [*Good Light*, 1986], about a photographer specializing in naked ladies, was even banned for some time. The epic ramifications of his *Lásky mezi kapkami deště* [*Love between the Raindrops*, 1979] about the fortunes of a shoemaker and his family in the 1930's, remained sadly unappreciated, but his adaptations of two popular short stories by Ota Pavel, *Zlatí úhoři* [*Golden Eeisis*, 1979], produced for TV, and *Smrt krásných srnců* [*The Death of Beautiful Roebucks*, 1986] met with a better response.

Films with subversive implications no longer banned by the regime began to emerge sporadically, but the critics were not in a position to point out their potential; such information would have been tantamount to informing on the author to the authorities. Thus, such films were less than appreciated by most audiences. Jiří Krejčík, after a lengthy break and in collaboration with the scriptwriter Zdeněk Mahler, addressed the life of the diva Ema Destinová; their *Božská Ema* [*Divine Ema*, 1979] was presented as a story of what fate can do to an artist in a world lacking freedom. In *Prodáváč humoru* [*The Seller of Humour*, 1984] he targeted the ham acting and the moral bankruptcy of the popular entertainment business. Jaromil Jireš directed *Opera ve vinici* [*Opera in the Vineyard*, 1981], intended as a celebration of Fanoš Hřebačka-Mikulecký, the author of many folk songs in the tradition of the Podluží region that had become "folklore". Although the script was written by Vladimír Merta, perceived as an alternative, folk-scene personality, the resulting film was a box-office flop and even those Moravians who knew Fanoš Mikulecký in person could find no gratitude to bestow upon it. Unambiguous parallels with the spying on Czech intellectuals that characterised normalization could be drawn in *Romaneto* [*Novellette*, 1980] and *Záchráně strachu* [*The Seller of Humour*, 1983], two films by Jaroslav Soukup from the National Revival period. *Veronika* (1987) by Otakar Vávra was in a similar vein; the title character was a police agent sent by the Austrian police to tail the patriotic Czech writer Božena Němcová. The hero of *Signum laudis* (1980), made by Martin Hollý in Czech-Slovak co-production, was a certain Corporal Hoferik, diligent in his service in the trenches of the First World War, finally executed by cowardly officers for his loyalty. The demoralised commanders who persisted in fighting the battle to the point of the annihilation of their subordinates, while they

had lost any belief in the meaning or goals of that battle, could not help but remind audiences of their own experience of the hypocritical representatives of the regime.

Young directors and debutants were allowed to work, with a degree of caution. Karel Smyczek was the one who raised most hopes when, with his *Housata* [*Goslings*, 1979] set in a hostel for female apprentices, he declared himself at one with the heritage of style and ethics established by the Czech New Wave. He continued to tread the same line in *Jen si tak trochu písknout* [*Just to Whistle a Bit*, 1980] and *Sněžěnky a machři* [*Snowdrops and Dabs*, 1982]. In *Proč?* [*Why*, 1987], inspired by real events, he questioned the aggression of sports fans. *Sedm hladových* [*The Hungry Seven*, 1988], about the participants in a slimming course, was an easy-to-see-through metaphor of totalitarianism. Jiří Svoboda's approach as a director had deep foundations in theory, although the critics reproached him for rational coldness. His best works include *Dívka s mušlí* [*Girl with a Sea Shell*, 1980], a psychological drama about the children of an alcoholic mother, *Schůzka se stíny* [*A Meeting With Shadows*, 1982], an ambitious film centring around the nazi medical experiments carried out on people, and *Zánik samoty Berhof* [*The Doom of the Berhof Lonely Farm*, 1984], a thrilling tale from the end of the war in which the tension seldom flags. Jaroslav Soukup managed to anticipate the mood of the younger generation with *Větr v kapse* [*Wind in the Pocket*, 1982], a film notable for its honesty. In contrast, his other films for teenagers were merely calculated commercial products. Vladimír Drha, with his debut *Dneska přišel nový kluk* [*A New Boy Has Arrived*, 1981] established, for a short while, the credentials of an author who seeks critical reflection upon social wrongs. Zdeněk Troška established himself as a director of classical costume fairy-tales (*O princezně Jasněnce a létajícím ševci* [*Princess Claire and the Flying Cobbler*, 1987], and popular comedies *Slunce, seno, jahody* [*Sun, Hay, Strawberries*, 1983]. The talented documentary-maker Fero Fenič made his debut with *Džusový roman* [*A Juicy Romance*, 1984], a coming-of-age feature film about a working-class girl who is seduced and abandoned. It was released for distribution after a delay of three years. In the context of the Czech cinematography of that period, it presented an unvarnished picture of reality; nevertheless, it lagged behind films with similar subject matter produced in neighbouring countries.

Cinematography again started to respond to the success of fringe theatre. The fame of *Divadlo na provázku* [*Theatre on a String*] from Brno gave rise to the film version of *Balada pro banditu* [*A Ballad for the Bandit*, 1978], a musical scored by Miloš Štědroň, directed by Zdeněk Pospíšil and with a secret co-screenwriter, the dissident Milan Uhde. The director Vladimír Sís, who later took over responsibility for the film adaptation, also screened Boleslav Polívka's play *Poslední lež* [*The Last Trap*, 1981].

The number of works created by highly appreciated and favoured protagonists of normalization was still far from dwindling away in this period. Jaroslav Balík was the personality to emerge from among them as having the most clear-cut artistic ambitions. Some of his films reveal an attempt at a generation's, perhaps even an author's, manifesto: Balík spoke for the generation of post-war communists. The line was already palpable in *Milenci v roce jedna* [*Lovers in the Year One*]. In *Stín létajícího ptáčka*

[*Shadow of Flying Bird*, 1977] he contrasted the moral experience of two generations, while in the introspective *Zrcadlení* [Reflection, 1977] he blended the contemporary life of a debonair fifty-year-old working in foreign trade with his intimate memories of February 1948. Balík's desire to make an authorial confession reached an embarrassing climax with *Narozeniny režiséra Z. K.* [The Birthday of Film Director ZK, 1987], his final, pompous opus. In the factory drama *Atomová katedrála* [Atomic Cathedral, 1984] Balík celebrated the building of the Dukovany nuclear power station, while in *Rytmus 1934* [1934 Rhythm, 1980] and the attractive *Šílený kankán* [A Wild Cancan, 1982] he exposed the vices of 1920's and 1930's capitalism.

To hark back to the epoch of the bourgeoisie was a very common device in normalization cinema, usually in the form of images from the struggle of the working class – clashes between workers and the police and so on. However, nostalgic interpretations of the days of the “First Republic” (1918-39) became common in the wake of the Sequens' series *Hříšní lidé města pražského* [Sinful People of the City of Prague]. Within the conventions of the retro style, this drew upon the picturesque life of the Prague underworld. As well as appearing on television (1968), it was also a sequel for cinema in four parts (1970-1971), and thrived in the Czech lands. The director Václav Matějka expanded these thoroughly frivolous films with the bordello comedies *Anděl s ďáblem v těle* [An Angel with the Devil in the Body, 1983] and *Anděl svádí ďábla* [An Angel Seducing the Devil, 1988], both of which pandered to the worst of popular taste.

Antonín Kachlík sought inspiration in the Moravian countryside: in *Náš dědek Josef* [Old Man Joe, 1976] he combined the “sound down-to-earthness” with a eulogy to socialist development; in *O moravské zemi* [The Moravian Land, 1977], the chronicle of an agricultural co-operative, he took *Všichni dobří rodáci* [All Good Countrymen...] to task. The latter film, by Vojtěch Jasný, was banned at the time. Kachlík even cast Radoslav Brzobohatý in the leading role, as had Jasný. Next, Kachlík got hold of Vladimír Páral, a best-selling Czech writer in that period, and used *Radost až do rána* [Taking Pleasure Until Broad Day, 1978], one of his less creative novels, for a kitschy celebration of the socialist life-style. Páral's novel *Mladý muž a bílá velryba* [The Young Man and the White Whale], welcomed by normalization commentators as a shift on the part of the writer towards positive values, was filmed in the same year by Jaromil Jireš. He also filmed *Katapult* [Catapult, 1983] five years later, based on an earlier novel from Páral's more inspired creative period. It was of no particular success.

Otakar Vávra continued his attempts at a big-budget “super-production”. Today, he considers the sci-fi *Temné slunce* [The Dark Sun, 1980] a mistake. It was a propaganda-based, updated adaptation of *Krakatit*, a novel by Karel Čapek, the first version of which Vávra had made back in 1948. While in the first version the struggle was against the classic atom bomb, the film now opposed the neutron bomb. The shallow, biased depiction of the western world, full of decadent art, sex, drugs, anti-war demonstrations and terrorism, made the film embarrassing even at the time of its creation. Vávra's most ambitious project in the 1980's was *Putování Jana Amose* [Jan Amos' Peregrination, 1983], a biographical collection of pictures based on the life of

Komenský, the “teacher of nations”. While Vávra managed to transform the book *Labyrint světa a lusthaus srdce* into an inventive carnival form, Komenský's wandering through the world of European science and art remained subject to the didactic intention of presenting the Czech thinker as a modern fighter for world peace. The director Jaromil Jireš also turned to the biography of famous Czechs for inspiration in *Lev s bílou hřívou* [The Lion with the White Mane, 1986] in which he attempted to capture the life and genius of the composer Leoš Janáček.

The years 1974-1989 were the golden age of comedies written by the Svěrák-Smoljak duo. They provided the script for “*Marečku, podejte mi pero!*” [“*Mareček, Please Pass Me a Pen!*”, 1976], one of Oldřich Lipský's most popular comedies. Zdeněk Podskalský contributed to *Kulový blesk* [Ball-Lighting, 1978], a highly human comedy about a complicated exchange of flats and a parody of the film kitsch *Trháč* [Blockbuster, 1980]. Ladislav Smoljak himself directed *Vrchní, prchni!* [Waiter, Scarper!, 1980], a brilliant comedy starring Josef Abrhám in the role of a fake head-waiter, as well as *Jára Cimrman, ležící, spící* [Jara Cimrman, Lying, Sleeping, 1983], an amusing take on the fortunes of a fictitious Czech genius. Oldřich Lipský, together with the screenwriter Jiří Brdečka, tried to re-live the past success of their *Limonádový Joe* and created *Adéla ještě nevečeřela* [Adela Has Not Had Her Supper Yet, 1977], a decent detective parody, which nevertheless failed to achieve such huge popularity. For children, Lipský made the comedy *At' žijí duchové!* [Long Live Ghosts, 1977], and for children and adults the Jan Werich fairy-tale *Tři veteráni* [Three Veterans, 1983]. Petr Schulhof, with some good detective films from the 1960's under his belt, investigated the Czech underbelly – narrow-mindedness, skirmishes between partners and among neighbours, fussiness, and misappropriation of publicly owned property – in a series of satirical comedies. The director Dušan Klein also moved over from crime films to comedy with *Jak svět přichází o básníky* [How the World Loses Poets, 1982]. Based on a screenplay by Ladislav Pecháček, it was an outstandingly successful portrait of student-life, to be followed by four sequels in the years 1984, 1987, 1993 and 2003. The outstanding directors in the domain of children's films were Věra Plívová-Šímková (*O Sněhurce* [Snow White, 1972]; *Přijela k nám pout'* [The Funfair Has Arrived, 1973]; *Páni kluci* [Boys Will Be Boys, 1975]) and Ota Koval (*Jakub*, 1976).

In the time of perestroika

While the cinema of neighbouring socialist countries had, from the 1970's onwards, exposed the atrocities of the past and presented a bleak view of the socialist present, Czech cinema kept older films of this type hidden away in the vaults and, until the mid-1980's, steered within the limits of conformity. That the normalizing directors' strength and influence was withering was obvious as they completely discredited themselves through their later offerings. Also plain was the contribution being made by auteurs from the New Wave generation and the promise implicit in the younger

filmmakers whom the critic Pavel Melounek referred to as the “non-generation”.⁵ Nevertheless, no real new wave emerged and the absence of top-quality film works was even discussed at an official discursus. On the international scene, Czech and Slovak cinema held a marginal position, and could only count on awards at Karlovy Vary as, even in the fraternal Moscow, films of Polish, Hungarian and Bulgarian origin enjoyed greater success. The local functionaries did their utmost to put the brakes on the relaxation brought about by Gorbachev’s perestroika, with the result that Czech cinema, until 1989, picked itself up only occasionally to make an attempt at social criticism or to air the manifesto of an auteur or a generation.

The first independent Czech film was *Pavučina* [*Cobweb*], centring on a theme of drug addiction. It was filmed in 1982 by critic Zdenek Zaoral as an amateur feature film. The material was then completed four years later in the Gottwaldov studio and copied onto 35 mm format. The young director Miloš Záborský’s *Dům pro dva* [*A House for Two*, 1987] was received with enthusiasm by the critics, although its spiritual undertones led to a short delay in its distribution premiere. The criminal world of illegal foreign currency dealers was presented in attractive fashion by Vít Olmer in *Bony a klid* [*Bons and Rest / Big Money*, 1987]. *Pražská pětka* [*Prague Five*, 1988], a provocative narrative film manifesto, was the joint work of several post-modern Prague theatres of the time, directed by Tomáš Vorel. The director Irena Pavlásková made her debut with *Čas službů* [*A Time of the Servants*, 1989], a temperamental portrait of the character of a vicious woman who unscrupulously takes advantage of any compliancy in her surroundings. Jiří Svoboda’s aim, in film *Jen o rodinných záležitostech* [*About Family Affair Only*], was to show the torture that some communists had to endure in the 1950’s at the hands of their own comrades, in a similar way to Costa-Gavras in his famous *L’aveu*, but the film was not released until November 1989 and was not noticed in the new political context.

It might have appeared, after the fall of the totalitarian regime, that the Czech films from the 1960’s would be held in high esteem while the normalization products, with the exception of the outstanding works by Věra Chytilová and Jiří Menzel, would be permanently buried in the archives. As the reality of the television stations has shown, the normalization films are the ones that the public finds most pleasurable. Every week, the TV screens show the best and worst of the comedies, the crime dramas and the propaganda-tainted soaps from that period. As the other countries sharing the same recent history, the Czech Republic has been caught up in a wave of post-communist nostalgia. Let us hope that the hard-core normalizing films will not live to be rehabilitated by TV viewers. They are exceptionally bad films in terms of professional skills, but it is necessary to be reminded of them from time to time, for study purposes. After all, the propaganda was at its most effective not in the

straightforward ideological films by Vojtěch Trapl, but in run-of-the-mill comedies that brought to the screen the inconspicuous, everyday, sometimes exhausted, slightly narrow-minded, but, in the end, happy life of the socialist man.

In: Sylvestrová, Marta (ed): *Český filmový plakát 20. století*, Moravská galerie Brno & Exlibris Praha 2004, pp 106-114.

⁵ Pavel Melounek: *Témata a rukopis jedné ne-generace*, *Film a doba*, 29th year (1983), No. 3; Pavel Melounek: „Ne-generace“ *po dvou letech*, *Film a doba*, 31st year (1985), No. 6; Pavel Melounek: *Horečky vředního dne*, Prague, ČSFÚ 1987, p. 12.