

Essentially Císařův pekař moved in an orderly fashion from box-office rich (cinemas with high weights) to box-office poor cinemas in a manner that was entirely in keeping with revenue maximising strategies found in the West. The likely explanation for this is that audiences wanted to see this film, and exhibitors wanted to show it. A glance at Table 9.9 suggests that this practice was common for the most popular movies, garnering the most significant proportion of their POPSTAT Index values in premiere cinemas.

There are two exceptions from this pattern among the Top 20 films, the 1951 Soviet civil war film *Nezabyvaemyy 1919 god*, featuring the character of Stalin, and the 1948 French romantic drama *La Chartreuse de Parme*. Both opened with three-day bookings in 1952 at low-weighted cinemas – respectively, the Lipa (January) and Svoboda (April 1952).

Apart from two further one-day bookings in January at the Praha and Letní Kino Sport cinemas, *Nezabyvaemyy 1919 God* was not screened again until November when it was screened at the high-weighted Družba and Jalta cinemas, respectively, for 14 and seven days. After this, it passed to the Jas, Radost and Jadran for four days apiece later in the month. However, November was the month of Czechoslovak-Soviet Friendship, in which cinemas screened Soviet films. Of the 525 screenings in Brno during that month, 341 were of Soviet cinema. Czech movies came next with 131, followed by Hungary (16) and Poland (12). Altogether, 70 Soviet films were screened during the month compared to just 19 from the home country.

Nezabyvaemyy 1919 God, celebrated as a winner at the Karlovy Vary film festival, was at the centre of the Soviet offer for the month of Czechoslovak-Soviet Friendship.¹ Of course, POPSTAT works on the implausible basis that audience size is invariant to what film is being screened. In the case of *Nezabyvaemyy 1919 God*, the audiences were likely to have been very small, given the meagre numbers who watched the film in the Czech lands according to the Havelka listings (Table 9.8). This example is a classic case of a movie being favoured for reasons other than its popular appeal. Details on its distribution provide another essential insight: the movie received massive support that included official contest between cities competing in reaching higher attendance and selling tickets to factories and offices, with the result of 10 000 viewers in the city Jihlava; massive promotion in premiere produced about

¹ Nezapomenutelný rok 1919. Filmový přehled 44, 14.11.1952, p. 2.

35 000 viewers in four cities, including Prague, within the first three days. Still, despite all this enormous effort and mediated results, the movie ranked 737 of 778 feature films we followed in our research. It implies that promotion machine might produce significant numbers of soled tickets but did not have the power to move a movie to the top-ranking positions if not supported by “better legs” and elementary acceptability for cinemagoers.² After its inauspicious opening in April, *La Chartreuse de Parme* appeared at three high-weighted cinemas (in sequence the Morava, Letní kino Zimní stadion and Jalta) during July and August 1952, before a final series of bookings at low-weighted cinemas Oko, Sibiř, and Světozor in September. The movie had already been premiered in 1949. *Filmová kartotéka*, Czechoslovak State Film’s official periodical providing cinemas with distributional and promotional information, claimed: ‘it is not possible to find out the reason why the movie was made, because the spectacle of luxurious rooms and palaces... is deeply boring for the contemporary working and thinking man’. Ironically, perhaps these characteristics were precisely the reason for its long second or possible third release in Brno in 1952, in the period of shortage of consumer goods and products of entertainment industry, not to mention luxury of any kind. Its national popularity, shown in Table 9.8, stands in vivid contrast to *Nezabyvaemyy 1919 God*, although the movies stand almost shoulder to shoulder at the top-20 Brno chart.

Other anomalies are evident in Table 9.8. The East German fairy story *Das kalte Herz* and the Hungarian drama *Különös házasság* perform much more strongly in the 1952 Brno POPSTAT Index than nationally. Behind these films is a narrative that requires development. What is clear from this discussion, based upon Tables 9.8 and 9.9, is that an extension of the 1952 collection of data in Brno, when joined by other Czech localities and supported by the rich data collected by Havelka, might provide us with a unique insight into stratification of film preferences in Czechoslovakia of late-Stalinism.

9.4 Discussion

The official thesis of the state cultural policy that films should ‘educate’ approached film distribution as an investment with a long payback period – audiences would learn to embrace Soviet movies, combining economic and ideological goals. Unfortunately for the Authorities, ideologically driven films from USSR and ‘people’s democratic republics’ following the

² Kavka, 1952: 13; Úspěšné uvedení filmu, 1952: 13.

norms of socialist realism did not fit Czech audiences' expectations and well-established preferences. Nevertheless, as the data we compiled from two sources clearly indicate, a few Soviet movies and many Czechoslovak films with apparent reference to the values promoted by the new regime became arguably popular, as Table 9.8 illustrates. Albeit these films were supported by promotional campaigns and sheltered from potential crowd-drawing competition from Hollywood and Western Europe, they drew large audiences attracted by combinations of attributes such as colour, spectacle, adventure, comedy, or famous stars.

Further insight into this phenomenon of popularity cumulated by products which were burdened with ideological loyalty to the regime can be drawn from the mass gymnastic events, known as 'Spartakiáda'.³ In his work on this festivity, Peter Roubal identified a range of attitudes towards Spartakiads: from open resistance to enthusiastic acceptance. The most common reaction recognized by Roubal was, however, tactical. The author refers to the term 'Eigen-Sinn', which might be translated as 'obstinate wilfulness' or 'stubbornness', to describe the tactic by which 'people tolerate the strategy of the ruling power to the extent that is necessary, but also pursue their objectives as far as the ruling power allows'.⁴ This kind of perspective helps explain why two Soviet colour movies, one in the Brno Top 20 listing, *Na arene tsirka* (ranked 3rd in Table 9.8) and one from the Havelka Top 20 listing *Smelye ljudi* (ranked 6th in Table 9.4), were so highly attended. Respectively these films were promoted as 'proof that it is the new order of society which allows circus art to develop fully'⁵, and '...a celebration of the heroism of the Soviet man fighting for the happy future of his socialist homeland.'⁶ Yet, while they were framed to transport audiences from the private sphere of consumption and autotelic pleasure towards the collective affirmation of socialist society, we suggest that viewers saw them in a different light.

³ These were organized every five years between 1955-1985. See Roubal Petr (2019): Spartakiads. The Politics of Physical Culture in Communist Czechoslovakia. Prague: Charles University – Karolinum Press – Institute of Contemporary History, Czech Academy of Sciences.

⁴ Roubal, p. 18. Roubal refers to the term eigensinn that was influentially coined by German historian Alf Lüdtke and applied to state-socialist societies by Thomas Lindenberger. The term in Lindenberger's use means "individuals' capacity to "make sense" of their behavior and their attitudes within relationships of authority in ways that are non "programmed" or anticipated by the ideological framework or the political function that the powers to be have invested in this relationship." See, e.g., Thomas Lindenberger, The Fragmented Society: „Societal Activism“ and Authority in GDR State System. *Zeitgeschichte* 37, 2010, 1, p. 4.

⁵ -am-, Ve světlech manéže. Filmový přehled 4, 25.1.1952, p.. 6.

⁶ -lj-, Muži v sedle. Filmový přehled 8, 23.2.1951, p. 3.

An insight into the range of attitudes held by cinemagoers towards the limited film supply in the early 1950s can be had from the collection of letters cinemagoers addressed to various official bodies and collected by the Czechoslovak State Film. These represent a fragmentary and diverse sample of citizens' reactions that range from clear opposition up to full confirmation of official cultural policy. Take the response to the premiere of the Austrian movie *Frühling auf dem Eis* in Czech cinemas. Some dislike was voiced from party organisations, local administration bodies, or "workers correspondents", arguing that such kind of 'film lemonades' should not be screened because of its popularity and the detrimental effect on people's taste. Some letters even claimed that 'new people' already rejected the movie and preferred Soviet production. Other writers defended the distribution of *Frühling auf dem Eis* against such harsh critique published in the press and demanded more of this kind of fare that would provide 'rest after work.' An oppositional attitude is represented in a letter that rejected all Czechoslovak and Soviet movies of principle. Instead of negotiating with authorities, the letter implied the presence of non-socialist film entertainment in Czechoslovak cinemas as an unconditional demand. Stridently the writer comments, 'I have seen neither *Padenie Berlina* nor *Sekretnaja missija*, *Vstanou noví bojovníci*, *Zocelení*, *Karhanova parta*, *Smelye ljudi*, *Der Rat der Götter*, or *Kis Katalin házassága*, and I do not regret it. But if I would not have seen *Frühling auf dem Eis*, I would be genuinely pissed off'.⁷

Although the letter's author paid a higher price for the *Frühling auf dem Eis*' ticket due to the distribution practices we described earlier, he still did not face the dilemma that authorities presented cinemagoers of the so-called extended programmes. One of the cinemagoers in this situation was novelist Čestmír Jeřábek who, while living in Brno, wrote on in his diary on 1 July 1953: 'After a long time, we have seen a European movie this afternoon (a French one: *Fanfan la Tulip*). However, before this movie was screened, we had to chew through an extremely boring "educational" Russian movie about Soviet Moldavia, which seems to be a Schlaraffenland full of milk and honey.'⁸ Jeřábek rather straightforwardly accepted the pragmatic deal offered by Czechoslovak State Cinema to cinemagoers, whereby Western entertainment had two prices, one literal (higher prices) and the other metaphorical (watching Soviet propaganda). This diary record provides an example of 'stubbornness'. It illustrates the value of the Eigen-Sinn concept in that it recognises agency on the part of audiences to mediate their way through the highly asymmetric contract between them and the authorities.

⁷ NFA, Filmová rada 1949-53, R9/AI/4P/9K.

⁸ Čestmír Jeřábek, *V zajetí stalinismu. Z deníků 1948-1958*. Brno 2000, p. 223.

In making his choice, Jeřábek saw the film that interested him while legitimising the regime and its cultural policy by watching a Soviet documentary.

We contend that audiences in large numbers reacted similarly to Čestmír Jeřábek in that they found a way of selecting from films aspects that interested them while tolerating the more formal propagandist element. They were pragmatic and likely more interested in, say, films made in colour, or movies made in the well-established tradition of Czech film comedy, than in promotions of the new socialist society and its values.

9.5 Conclusion

The Brno dataset provides evidence that audiences played a sanctioning role. Clear patterns in film distribution emerge. Filmgoers made choices, and they were free to make them. Of course, and this is critical, the choice set facing film consumers was heavily proscribed, ruling out the admission of recently released Hollywood and Western European films. This factor is one of the two main controls that the communist authorities imposed upon the film distribution. The second was the favouritism shown to Soviet cinema, the consequence of which is that Soviet films attracted, on average, half the audience of films from the West per screening in 1952 – 230 for films from the West, compared to 122, with Czech movies falling between with 169 (Table 9.1).

These controls played themselves out in a market in which new film supply was in chronic shortage due to centralisation, bureaucracy, and constant flow of ineffective reorganisations, which paralysed feature film production to the extent that no more than eight features were produced in 1951, instead of the 22 films that were predicted by so-called ‘thematic plan’.⁹ After almost five years (February 1948 to December 1952) communist party aims of resolving their economic and ideological goals were no nearer to being realised. Only ersatz solutions were available. Audiences were exposed to ideologically prominent movies for as long as it was economically bearable. However, filmgoers were also supplied with more attractive and less ‘valuable’ movies whose ideological acceptability for the new regime was fixed either through discursive framing or burdening them with the film supplement of a Soviet documentary. The top-ranking lists presented in Tables 9.4 and 9.8 provide a vista on audience tactics. Audiences appropriate those movies that provided satisfying production values and entertainment (famous film stars of the 1930s and occupation era, comedy plots,

⁹ Petr Szczepanik, *Továrna Barrandov*, p. 75-90.

adventure, spectacle) while often sceptically pushing the ideological wrappings of dialogue, storylines, promotion, and film criticism to the background. In identifying the films that different audiences at different places went to see in different numbers, the chance of understanding audience motives is made more apparent.