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Czechoslovak science-fiction films

Only a handful of films which could be described as of the science fiction variety were made in Czechoslovakia prior to 1989, and since then that number has fallen further still. However, Czech filmmakers have created a number of bold celluloid endeavours which reside outside the strict confines of the genre. In such examples, sci-fi elements are used as a springboard primarily for the telling of morality or comedy tales.

The basic elements of fantastical stories are that they derive from the impossible or the non-existent. Sci-fi deals with what does not exist, but could, at least theoretically, come about in the future – with at least some foundations stemming from our contemporary understanding of science. And it was precisely during the era of technological and scientific advancement of the late 19th century that we also saw the concurrent ascent of the science-fiction genre, used from its outset as a kind of platform to deliberate and speculate on the future direction of human progress. [1]

The pioneers of the genre undoubtedly include the likes of Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, or Tarzan and John Carter author Edgar Rice Burroughs. In Czechoslovakia, sci-fi pioneers include the Brothers Čapek (Josef and Karel). In 1921, Karel Čapek's play *R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots)* premiered, for ever enriching the world with the word "robot" [2]. In the subsequent decades numerous other Czechoslovak writers and filmmakers sought to further harvest Čapek's concept of psychological science-fiction. Such artists were clearly convinced that sci-fi should serve to contrast possible futures with the present day, and thus generate social commentary on the current state of affairs in our world.

The 1937 play *Bílá nemoc* (*The White Disease*) – written as a reaction to the threat posed to democracy by the rise of fascism – also confirmed Karel Čapek's status as the father of Czech utopian stories. Only three months after its premiere at the National Theatre, the anti-war three act play, which tells the story of an epidemic of white disease (incurable leprosy), director and actor Hugo Haas (known for pushing similar humanistic ideals in his works as Čapek) began making plans for a feature-film version. The times also witnessed a popular trend of escapist melodramas and comedies, for example *Lidé na kře*, (*People on the Iceberg*, 1937) and *Batalion* (1937). In a similar vein, *Bílá nemoc* reflected a change in the mood of Czech society during the mid-1930s and a concurrent need by contemporary artists to comment on the serious issues of the day.

But the contemporary relevance of its allegorical fiction was not the sole reason why critics heaped significant praise on the film version of *Bílá nemoc*: “Haas's direction is fluid, precise and, with the exception of a few added elements, sticks closely to the play on which it is based,” wrote one reviewer. “If we separate the ideas put forth in this work from its purely theatrical roots, and instead focus on the sparkling filmic version and its individual effects, then we rate the cinematic version as representing one of the most accomplished of Czech films.” [3]

After the establishment of the Protectorate, this purposefully anti-war drama found itself on a blacklist of banned films. Despite this, film producer Ludvík Kantůrek managed to smuggle the *Bílá nemoc* negatives abroad. English and French versions of the film were made while the Second World War was still being fought. This enabled Haas's film to serve as an ideological weapon against Nazism.

Čapek's *Krakatit*, published in 1924, would wait even longer for a film adaptation. Though Otakar Vávra's film adaptation was released after the 1948 February communist putsch, work began on it back in 1947. The tale – a clear allegory warning about the dangers of the atomic bomb – revolves around a newly invented powerful explosive named after the Indonesian volcanic island of Krakatoa. However, in the new totalitarian environment, the film's content was made to conform to the official ideology of the regime, as evidenced by this press report: “This faithful recreation of the former literary version, coupled with its impressive technical realisation, means that *Krakatit* serves as an exceptional example of our nationalised film industry; the

values it espouses underscore the fight waged by progressive forces around the world against the irresponsible use of technological progress against the will and interests of all nations.” [4]

Vávra’s adaptation of *Krakatit* fitted in perfectly with the trend of post-war sceptically-oriented science-fiction. Such works were characterised by a retreat from celebrating the futuristic advances of technological progress, instead replaced with a fear that science could be misused for destruction and for world domination. Besides from a fear of Cold War nuclear annihilation, artists’ imaginations were fired by the growing accessibility of modern technologies and also space race-inspired stories set on other worlds. This era would represent something of a golden one for science-fiction worldwide. Classic examples include timeless films such as *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), *Godzilla* (1954) or *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956). In terms of domestic sci-fi output, one name shines in particular – Karel Zeman.

Dinosaurs and an apocalypse

Georges Méliès is widely considered to be the founder of the special effects film, taking audiences to inaccessible and imaginary realms. During the mid-1950s, Karel Zeman’s first feature film directly tied into the traditions established by Méliès. *Cesta do pravěku* (*Journey to the Beginning of Time*, 1955), combines optical effects with live actors. The film certainly meets the criteria of the genre, chiefly by way of the story’s reliance on a fantastical device, namely a time machine. This device enables a group of boys to observe pre-historic flora and fauna first-hand. In reality, the “device” in question is a river within which time travellers must swim against the tide. Unlike Steven Spielberg’s *Jurassic Park* (1993) – he, too, was one of the many admirers of Zeman – the characters’ encounter with dinosaurs is more fantastical than based on real science.

Ten years and four months after the Prague premiere of *Krakatit*, Zeman’s *Vynález zkázy* (*The Fabulous World of Jules Verne*, 1958) warned Czechoslovak viewers about the destructive powers of modern weapons. The script was written by František Hrubín, based on the stories of Jules Verne. *Vynález zkázy* contains complex special-effects, which are highly stylised in a manner similar to later Zeman “Verne-esque” movies based on the illustrations of Édouard Riou, Gustave Doré and Léon Benett.

Awards for the film included the Grand Prize at the EXPO 1958 in Brussels. Czechoslovak artists also bought several other ambitious projects to the Brussels World's Fair (including Alfred and Emil Radok's *Laterna magika*, or *Magic Lantern*). For the first time in many years the emerging era of cultural liberalisation enabled Czechoslovak artists to gain international media attention once more. This process, as we shall see, continued for the next decade.

During the 1950s, American cinema witnessed a boom in sci-fi B-movies, often serving as allegories expressing fears over the "Red Menace". In the Eastern Bloc, early Soviet successes in space following the launch of Sputnik 1 (1957) and the first manned spaceflight in 1961 by Yuri Alekseyevich Gagarin led to another thematic shift in sci-fi from fear to "great tomorrows". Examples of utilising the genre to portray a technologically advanced future – not to mention a socialistic and classless one – were far less common in Czechoslovakia than in the Soviet Union itself, where we find films such as *Planeta bur* (*Planet of Storms*, 1962) and *Chelovek-Amfibiya*, (*The Amphibian Man*, 1962).

Due to the lack of access to American genre output, Czechoslovak sci-fi films predominantly found inspiration from fellow Eastern Bloc countries. Paradoxically, domestic sci-fi supposedly offered viewers an alternative to the politically unacceptable entertainment productions of the West. Such limitations were also evident across other genres, giving rise to the "eastern" (as opposed to western), examples of which include *Smrt v sedle*, (*Death in the Saddle*, 1958) and also the propagandistic musical *Starci na chmelu* (*Hop Pickers*, 1964). Fears of viewers becoming "infected" by dangerous ideologies were evident in film literature right through to the end of the 1980s: "Many American producers are betting on sci-fi as a sure box office winner, and often use this as an ideological tool, chiefly to promote the militarization of space." [5]

During the 1960s, too, literary works continued to provide inspiration for sci-fi films. These included foreign works such as *Ikarie XB 1*, based on the *The Magellanic Cloud*, a novel by Stanisław Lem, as well as domestic works such as those by popular author Josef Nesvadba, for instance *Tarzanova smrt* (*Tarzan's Death*, 1958) presented jointly with *Blbec z Xeenemünde* (*The Xeenemuende Half-Wit*, 1962). Of Nesvadba's short story collection *Einsteinův mozek* (*Einstein's Brain*, 1960) director Pavel Hobl,

notable for some of the most playful Czechoslovak films – for example *Máte doma Ivo?* (*Is Ivo at Home?*, 1963) – selected the 20-page story *Ztracená tvář* (*Lost Face*, film version 1965) in which, thanks to plastic surgery, a scientist acquires both the face and personality of a gangster.

The original story contains a significant moral subtext, pondering on what determines the nature of a person. This was altered by Hobl into a dynamic parody of so-called “paraliterature” (or pulp) detective stories. Only during its second half does the film return to Čapek-style morality: “It appears that Josef Nesvadba was not merely concerned with creating an engrossing story. He also sought to demonstrate that the character of a person cannot merely be determined by their external appearance. Such a notion, both socially conscious and politically ambitious, is certainly worthy of a film treatment. But it does require the author to carry it through to a conclusion.” [6]

Filmový přehled describes *Muž z prvního století* (*Man in Outer Space*, 1961) as a “utopian comedy”. The film is the first joint acting collaboration between writer-director Oldřich Lipský and screenwriter Miloš Macourek. Though today this film is simply described as a “sci-fi”, at the time of release, other genre labels included, for example “fantastic story” and “fantastic vision”. [7] In addition to their deeper meanings and well-crafted socially-critical subtexts, domestic sci-fi films also serve as a testament to Czech cinema’s unwillingness to conform to a model long dominated by Western commercial “trash” entertainment. But the confusion over categorising sci-fi films by contemporary-era critics may also have been further assisted by the overall lack of conforming by many films to clearly defined genres. A similar situation, for example, existed with Czech horrors, which often combined elements of various genres.

The first ever pioneering Czech science-fiction film – and to date the only one in the strict sense of the category – is *Ikarie XB 1* (1963), based on a script by screenwriter Pavel Juráček. The slow-paced, minimalist film takes place on board a spaceship. Unlike back on Earth, the socialist system works on the *Ikarie*, something which critics of the time pointed out: “The film does not make explicit references to being a celebration of communist ideals. But even the names of the heroes of the story, who live on our small piece of the planet, make it clear that national differences have long

been set aside, and that all people are thoroughly imbued with the norms of the communist mindset.” [8]

Today, the widescreen Czechoslovak black-and-white film *Ikarie XB-1* (*Icarus XB 1*, 1963), directed by Jindřich Polák, is gaining new adherents as one of many examples of films which chart the human space race. Such viewers often note the similarities between the spacecraft *Ikarie* and the Starship *Enterprise* from *Star Trek*, or compare the realistic depiction of spaceflight in this film with the later *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and *Solaris* (1972).

Of the auteur New Wave-era films, the sci-fi label – in this case post-apocalyptic – is most successfully applied to another film based on a script by Pavel Juráček. *Konec srpna v hotelu Ozon* (*Late August at the Hotel Ozone*, 1967) is a dark film, which ponders the breakdown of civilised values. The story revolves around eight young females, who, led by an elderly women, roam around a landscape devoid of other people. Eventually, the group stumbles upon the Hotel Ozon, in which a lone old man survives. The movie was originally planned to go into production a number of years earlier:

“‘I first received Juráček’s story *Konec srpna v hotelu Ozon* seven years ago,’ says Jan Schmidt. “It was supposed to become my graduation film at the Prague film faculty. But then the original story kept changing in various ways, but we always ended up returning to its initial form, which was the cleanest. And then when everyone else had completely forgotten about it only Pavel Juráčka and I retained an appetite for it. Then when the Československý armádní film (Czech Army Film) was looking for some new and interesting story to produce, I dug up the former original work for them’.” [9]

The film’s eco-feminism-turned upside-down would hardly appeal to fans of *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015). Not only did it come about under the patronage of Československý armádní film (which, given the story’s overt pacifism, is rather ironic), but the filming itself also took place under military-style conditions. In order to bring a sense of realism to the female non-actors involved, and to “wash off” any residues of urban elegance, they were made to rise each morning before 6 a.m. After an early morning cold water shower, the actresses were also put through a routine of tough physical

exercise.

A key factor in the creative success *Konec srpna* is its simplistic and relatively low-budget naturalism (filming took place in military training grounds inaccessible to the public). The film has aged far better than other highly stylised sci-fi efforts which leave far less to the viewer's imagination. *Konec srpna* represented the apex of a pessimistic view of human nature. During the normalisation era, such introspection was mercilessly attacked as incessant optimism and faith in the progress of society became the official order of the day.

Comedies, both deliberate and unintentional

In stark contrast to the soulfulness of *Ikarie XB 1* and the scepticism of *Konec srpna* we find *Kdo chce zabít Jessii* (*Who Wants to Kill Jessie?*, 1966) a comic-like stylised comedy, albeit one whose ultimate impression is just as gloomy as the aforementioned two non-comical films. Central character, lecturer Beránek (Jiří Sovák), is liberated from the blandness of everyday life by the embodiment of the American dream, the beautiful title character Jessie. A large part of the subsequent story is taken up by a somewhat chaotic hunting and liquidating of beings dreamt up by the female member of the secret police (StB) and lecturer Beránková (Dana Medřická).

The disillusionment portrayed in the film by writer-director Václav Vorlíček and writer Miloš Macourek is based around the discovery that socialist Czechoslovakia has very little tolerance for dreams and dreaming. Naturally, neither the invention that enables the visualisation and corporeal manifestation of dreams, nor the film's anti-gravity gloves, could ever work in the real world, but even so they represent key items that bring about the self-realisation of the film's characters. For the chance to attain success in the real world, is, ironically, only afforded to those able to skilfully utilise the opportunities offered by the world of the unreal.

Kdo chce zabít Jessii unveiled the dark side of superheroes through its violent "Superman" character far before this became a trend in the comic book world. The film also represents a purely Czechoslovak sub-genre of zany sci-fi comedies. Unlike the utopian sci-fi based on the Soviet model, films such as *Zabil jsem Einsteina, pánové...* (*I Killed Einstein, Gentlemen*, 1969), „*Pane, vy jste vdova!*“ (*You Are a Widow, Sir*, 1970), *Což takhle dát si špenát* (*What Would You Say to Some Spinach?*,

1977) and *Zítřka vstanu a opařím se čajem* (*Tomorrow I'll Wake Up and Scald Myself with Tea*, 1977) did not seek to push the officially sanctioned rosy view of the future, thus rejecting the norms and rules of communist societies even in the presentation of fictional worlds. The films represent an eclectic mix of fantasy and sci-fi motifs and lack straightforward narratives; but they also manage to present a multitude of ideas that defy logic. The lack of discipline displayed across all levels of these films might in some regards be viewed as a politically subversive act, but far more often this was actually the result of half-baked efforts to fuse a number of variegated genre approaches without a detailed knowledge of how such genres actually work.

During the 1970s, the Czechoslovak public demonstrated a clear appetite for science-fiction, as demonstrated by the large number of published genre book titles, both from domestic and foreign authors. However, besides from a few “crazy comedies”, very few domestic sci-fi films emerged. One curiosity of the time for sci-fi buffs is *Akce Bororo* (*Operation Bororo*, 1972) from director Otakar Fuka. The film tells the story of two aliens from the planet Tonatiu who are sent to Earth to obtain a magical medicine from the Amazonian Bororo people in order to save their own civilisation.

The plot is inspired both from the diaries of early 20th century Czech explorer Albert Vojtěch Frič, and from the psychological sci-fi novel *Expedice Élauné* (*Expedition Élauné*) by Miroslav Hanuš (the book was banned in 1968 ahead of publication and was only issued in 1985). The film is based on a realistic foundation, which is then decorated with elements of adventure, espionage and a love story. Fuka viewed basing a futuristic story on contemporary inspirations as his responsibility, thus returning to Čapek's interpretation of the sci-fi genre: “We weren't interested in presenting a fantasy to viewers; we wanted to source our story from a present-day projection of a possible future and to root each idea in realism.” [10]

Similarly as with other cases, *Akce Bororo*'s contamination by other genres is in part a result of a lack of appropriate production resources, a lack of filmic traditions in this field, and also the need to fulfil official ideological dictates from the authorities. Otakar Fuka's *Kam zmizel kurýr* (*Where Did the Courier Go?*, 1981) represents another film which demonstrates the bizarre consequences of seeking to make a sci-fi film with very limited resources. The very low-budget compilation utilises excerpts from other Czechoslovak sci-fi films, thus serving as a kind of catalogue for this genre.

The story, which facilitates the use of clips from films such as *Baron Prášil* (*The Outrageous Baron Munchausen*, 1961), *Ikarie XB 1* or the aforementioned *Akce Bororo*, revolves around a certain Mister Jones, who has come to Prague to ostensibly discover more about the roots of his ancestors. He hones in on the year 1611, when a meteorite is said to have landed near the Czech town of Dobruška – but he also has an interest in Czech sci-fi films.

While Fuka himself defended *Kurýr* as an attempt to promote the earlier success stories of Czechoslovak science-fiction films, the existence of other clips added within a very broad definition to this more or less tolerated “Western” genre was at least defended after the fact by film journalists. Meanwhile, children’s sci-fi film *Odysseus a hvězdy* (*Ulysses and the Stars*, 1976) was supposedly convincing young viewers about the advantages of modern technology as well as portraying friendly encounters with alien beings. *Slečna Golem* (*Miss Golem*, 1972), a rather absurd comedy in which Jana Brejchová portrays both an obedient loving wife and her evil clone, allegedly came about to provide food for thought “on how much technology and innovation are required to bring about human contentment, and whether people should allow themselves to fall under the control of such technologies, and the degree to which we permit ourselves to be subjugated without losing our humanity.” [11]

A less-than-convincing depiction of the threat of nuclear Armageddon is also the subject of a second, even more dynamically updated version of Vávra’s original *Krakatit*, namely the normalisation-era *Temné slunce* (*Dark Sun*, 1980). This Vávra film, with its explicitly anti-imperialist message, was produced on the occasion of the 35th anniversary of the liberation of Czechoslovakia from the Nazis. But *Temné slunce* failed to relay the provocative subtext of the 1948 film, which was stylised as a feverish dream. Instead the 1980 version prioritises the expression of a politically pre-determined agenda rather than offering an independent examination of the social mood.

A cinema preview from the time of release publicised *Temné slunce* thus: “A person without anchor in an alienated society longs for love, freedom and truth, because they know no other values. But such ‘old’ values no longer exist; they have lost their meaning, instead replaced by the god of war, in whose name the natural human

mindset has been warped and devalued. In such an alienated society, love, freedom, and truth represent values which are entirely alien even to those who seek to invoke them.” [12]

Today, Vávra’s well-intentioned warning against a nuclear apocalypse tends to evoke amusement from modern audiences rather than concern. The same can also be said for the Czechoslovak-Yugoslav production of *Monstrum z galaxie Arkana* (*Visitors from The Arkana Galaxy*, 1981), which in its day attracted audiences with its large number of special effects. Similarly, the sci-fi comedy *Talíře nad Velkým Malíkovem* (*Plates Over Velky Malikov*, 1977) tends to be viewed as one of the worst entries in the filmography of director Jaromil Jireš. Conversely, fantastical television series such as *Návštěvníci* (*The Visitors*, 1983) or *Křeček v noční košili* (*Hamster in a Nightshirt*, 1987) still hold up very well for modern viewers. The ambitious 15-part series *Návštěvníci* was directed by Jindřich Polák and written by Polák and screenwriter Ota Hofman. Made between 1981 and 1983, *Návštěvníci* was a Czechoslovak co-production with West Germany, France and Switzerland. Among the series’ legacies is that it foretold of the “amarouny” food capsules long before scientists and gastronomes developed the concept of molecular gastronomy.

The post Velvet Revolution environment saw a rekindling of stylistic and formalistic experimentation. Perhaps the most successful example of this is found in the comedic sci-fi parody *Akumulátor 1* (*Accumulator 1*, 1994). Within a relatively short timeframe, this climate of experimentation calcified into betting on (tragi)comedies as the only domestic genre capable of consistent box office success. Naturally, comedies set in the present day are far less costly than science-fiction films; screenwriters need not worry about creating new worlds; directors need not worry about solutions for problems, which, given the lack of traditions for this kind of drama in the Czech Republic, often appear insurmountable. Furthermore, an appreciation of the high technical standards of big-budget sci-fi films made abroad can easily lead to the conclusion that Czech productions would struggle to mount something of a similar standard.

Those seeking quality Czech sci-fi today are far more likely to find it in the pages of a novel or comic book, or via a computer game such as *Space Engineers*, which has sold more than a million units. The only Czech film of recent years which could be

described as sci-fi is *Nenasytná Tiffany* (*The Greedy Tiffany*, 2015), which, alas, only sold less than 3,000 tickets at the box office.

Notes:

[1] The term “science fiction” is widely regarded to have originated in 1851 from English author William Wilson via the tenth chapter of his book *A Little Earnest Book upon a Great Old Subject: With the Story of the Poet-Lover*. The shortened form of the phrase, namely “sci-fi” first emerged in 1954, and is credited to Forest J. Ackerman, who went on to become editor of the legendary US magazine *Famous Monsters of Filmland*.

[2]

Though the play, which is an abbreviation of “Rozumoví univerzální roboti”, was written by Karel Čapek, credit for the term derived from “roboty” (or forced workers) was given by the author to his brother Josef.

[3] *Český filmový zpravodaj* 1938, pgs. 1-2 (15. 1.), pg. 4.

[4] “New Czech Film *Krakatit*”. *Kino* 1948, yr. 3, no. 17 (23. 4.), pgs. 328–329.

[5] The “Science Fiction” slogan in books, Bernard, Jan; Frýdlová, Pavla; *Malý labyrint filmu*. Praha: Albatros, 1988, pg. 405.

[6] Kliment, Jan, “Undiscovered Face”. *Kulturní tvorba* 1966, yr. 4, no. 1 (6. 1.), pg. 14.

[7] More on the usage of the term “sci-fi” and also other terms in the Czechoslovak press via Batistová, Anna, “Fantastical-Adventurous or Utopian?” *Iluminace* 2011, yr. 23, no. 3, pgs. 53–70.

[8] From a review in the newspaper *Uralskij rabočij*. *Československá kinematografie ve světle zahraničního tisku*, no. 5-6, 1965, pgs. 41–42.

[9] Bystrov, Vladimír, “Jan Schmidt’s Calling Card – *Konec srpna v hotelu Ozon*.” *Kino* 1965, yr. 20, no. 23 (30.12.), pg. 4.

[10] Zaoralová, Eva, "Interview with Otakar Fuka About Unusual Tales". *Film a doba* 1978, yr. 24, no. 4, pg. 211.

[11] Frühauf, Jiří, "Film is Life... On the Anniversary of Screenwriter, Director and National Artist Jaroslav Balík". *Film a doba* 1984, yr. 30, no. 6, pg. 324.

[12] Brechtoldová, Alena, *Temné slunce a svět krakatitu*. Kino 1980, yr. 35, no. 5 (11. 3.), pg. 9.