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Memory is just as imperfect as the attempts to understand violence. Interview with Ondřej Novák and Jiří Havlíček about their debut film *Reconstruction*

Three years after a group of youngsters tortured a homeless man to death in Pardubice, Havlíček and Novák come with a film interpretation of the act. Their film *Reconstruction (Rekonstrukce)* combines a socially-critical topic with a visually very suggestive (perhaps even lyrical) form. We asked about the journey, which led to making the film.

Each of you has a little different artistic background. What led you to cooperate?

JH: I graduated from Brno's FFA Performance Studio, but I also tried the Studios of Painting and Video over the course of my studies. Even back then I was interested in the moving picture and animation. This is, perhaps, a nice illustration of what I find interesting about moving picture – the emphasis on performance, some hand work and the moving picture itself... I am now in a doctoral study at the Intermedia Studio III/ studio of Tomáš Vaněk at the Academy of Fine Arts. I have never thought (and now less than ever) that moving picture and art are separate disciplines. I prefer to speak about visual art in general.

ON: I studied Illustration at high school. Then I went to Prague and started working as a graphic designer. I largely lost interest in my original field of work, i.e. Illustration and Graphics. At that time, which was about five years ago, I had an idea to try and shoot a short film, and Jirka helped me with that. I found out I did not know much about it, but that it was something I would like to do more. I had already had experience with animation, but I got to film as such because of my own actions, outside any kind of film studies, school, or industry.

So, did you two already cooperate on Ondřej's first film?

JH: Ondřej approached me as an actor back then, but I did not participate in creating the concept of the film.

ON: We were already friends at that time. We were talking about film in a pub, and I got the idea to make my first short film, which was more of a funny VHS-type thing. I never finished it. There were three characters. I saw Jirka as a good match for the film because of his mop of hair and beard that he had at that time. He was interesting for the camera, and I also knew that he would be able to give me advice.

JH: When we talked about films, we learned we had quite similar tastes in what we found interesting. We were interested in a similar approach, especially from the aesthetic point of view. When I later took part in the one-day filming as an actor, I was surprised how well Ondřej was able to manage things, which I had considered unimaginable until that time. That is, to organize a small film crew and actually shoot something. That inspired me to shoot *Captives of Movie (Zajatci filmu)* and, in turn, I asked Ondřej to feature in it and to help me with the shooting.

How did having similar taste in film transfer into shooting a film together, that is, *Reconstruction*?

ON: Perhaps it was not that much about agreeing on things. I would say that our disagreements during the shooting of *Reconstruction*, which were quite definitive, played a more important role. We like lots of the same films or film approaches, but very often in a different way.

Different energy or choice of topics, which you describe in different language, is apparent also in your individual work. You say that differences or even

disagreements are fundamental to you. How were you able to benefit from them while working on *Reconstruction*?

JH: We often agreed on names and titles, but I think we value different things in those films.

ON: And we are a bit divided on that one, too. You know, the earlier decades – for example, even before the forties – while I have only a basic awareness of that period, I know about things from the nineties on.

JH: That is true: Ondřej has found a lot of my current filmmakers.

ON: I guess we complement each other in that. Yes, there are some intersections, but we also have our differences.

JH: It has always been a source of dynamics.

Does the age difference matter?

JH: It is more a question of focus. Ondřej has been interested in film only. I also find attractive its bordering forms, when the film leaves the screening room.

ON: Temperament might play a role there, too. I am a bit hot-headed while Jirka has everything much more thought-out, which is reflected also in *Reconstruction*.

You both have experience with film outside the cinema. Ondřej, you have shot several video clips. Jirka focuses on moving picture at its bordering forms – especially in the form of gallery installations. What do you find interesting in these film modes and environments?

ON: I am not so much interested in video clips anymore. I see them more as a form of exercise. If I generalize it, although it is dumb, I feel that as soon as I override everything with music, which already carries a message, making a video can be incredibly easy. Our first video was beginner's luck. But the second one was already much more conceptual. I think, though, that I am done with that. I learned much more while working on my second film, which was three years ago, even though I never named it, just like the first one, and I also did not finish it.

JH: I see no category that works with moving picture as normative. I enjoy turning the categories over. That is why I would not generalize video clips like Ondřej does. I enjoy experimenting with forms, including the gallery setting. I find normative fulfilling of standards rather boring. This inevitably leads to the fact that I am a dilettante. You gain skills, besides other things, by repeating the same thing several times. Eventually, it is possible to achieve some level of mastery in that field, but that does not happen to me. I enjoy trying things I am not good at.

So, what did you capitalize on when making *Reconstruction*?

ON: Actually, I think that we benefited from a number of things, which I only began to realize when we were preparing the screening for Paralelní Kino in Ponrepo. I see a topical connection with my video clips at the storyline level, where there are angry suburban boys who never knew deprivation and now are “disturbing the peace”. I was surprised how this was also reflected in *Reconstruction* because we did not intend to use the videos as a source of inspiration. I learned a lot from my unfinished film attempts with respect to production and equipment.

JH: From a practical point of view, my contribution to Ondřej’s first two unfinished films was fundamental for me as well. Apart from that, I had also spent several years shooting programmes and reports for Artyčok TV. Besides that, I had experience in writing a script for the film *Hi, I Am Doing Fine (Ahoj, mám se dobře)*, where I was also an assistant director. What is reflected in *Reconstruction* from my films is probably the conceptual thinking, the need to know what I am doing and how it is going to look in the end.

How did you choose the film crew – especially the other creative professions, such as the camera or sound?

ON: We do not associate with film professionals; it is not who we are. The only people I knew were the editor Šimon Hájek and the cameraman Šimon Dvořáček, so the choice was actually quite easy. What helped us was the fact that Šimon Dvořáček had known my first video clip called *Železem rty* for the band called Schwarzprior from Ostrava. The video got quite a good response in the right circles, so he was even more willing to help us although he was more experienced than we were at that time. We were also looking for a producer. We approached Agáta Hrnčířová through her sister, who I

happen to know. It was only through these people that we were getting to other professionals who were willing to help us.

Did you have faith in those professionals? That they would manage their parts even if perhaps you sometimes did not speak the same language?

JH: I had already known the cameraman Šimon Dvořáček from filming *Hi, I Am Doing Fine*, so I knew he was great to work with. I also find interesting and enjoyable how he approaches the camera work.

ON: I am quite experienced in camera work – at least from the technical aspect. So, we knew how to talk to each other. Thus, it was not a dilettantish approach on my part when I would saddle him with all the work. We discussed a lot how things would look and how we were going to do this and that.

You have already edited some video clips with Šimon Hájek...

ON: Šimon Hájek is my only connection in the Czech Film Industry. He has cut all my previous projects. He has always been of great help to me, not only from the dramaturgical aspect, but also in the process itself, which is true for *Reconstruction* as well.

You mentioned that you abandoned the original topic of your mutual film. How did you come across a real criminal case that became the base for your debut?

JH: We once met in Bio Oko and talked about what would be interesting for us to do together. We knew we did not want to go back to our original script, and I came up with this idea. I said that if I had wanted to shoot something, it would have been this. It caught Ondřej's attention.

ON: Of course, I was interested partly because it happened in Pardubice, my hometown. We both knew the aim was not to show the violence which happened there. I was sitting at home and thinking how to approach it. And if memory serves me well, I saw a poster promoting Ceylan's film *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia (Tenkrát v Anatolii)* on the Internet. I was sure it was shot as a police reconstruction, but it is not true. In the film, they are looking for a dead body in Turkey, but the idea of police reconstruction had already crossed my mind, and I used it for Jirka's topic. He got

excited, and we started pursuing the idea. It was clear that, for us, this was the way to go.

JH: The important thing for me was that I knew that if I wanted to spend my energy on something it would be this topic. I was a little confused because I had never been much interested in social topics before, moreover something that brutal. I knew, on the other hand, that Ondřej had been fascinated with similar stories from the darker side of society for a long time. I was unsure how to approach it until Ondřej came up with the idea of a police reconstruction. That brought me back to what I am interested in myself, i.e. a conceptual distance.

ON: For us, the police reconstruction meant treading a thin line between showing violence and hinting at it, between giving information and not saying everything. We started discussing formal aspects, such as how to approach it from the perspective of camera and sound. Then things got in motion.

JH: It is perhaps a coincidence, but I also used the concept of a static camera and moving picture in my films *Captives of Movie (Zajatci filmu)* and *Film Týden*. In my previous films, I used this paradox, characteristic for *Reconstruction*, for a little different reason than this time.

ON: I said I got inspired in this regard by Ruben Östlund, whom I had discovered not long before that. You often work with a still frame, when the action largely takes place out of the picture. The shots have unusual compositions, including cut-off heads, not to mention framing. If I exaggerate it, it is a peculiar theatre. We both understood that this is the approach we were comfortable with.

How does this concept work with actors' stylization, which is very modest?

ON: We knew we wanted somebody authentic, i.e. not an actor. We could not imagine casting anyone from the Academy of Performing Arts. And it turned out that it would not even work.

JH: This again shows what we both like: working with a non-actor is typical for our favourite filmmakers, such as Bresson or some contemporary directors, such as Dumont. Neorealism and post-neorealism tendencies are very close to us. For this specific idea, it was more than obvious the way to go. I see working with an actor as a

discipline, which I admire, but it has little appeal for me. I am more interested in recording the situation in front of the camera.

ON: Everything was decided during our first meeting in the prison the moment we found out we could have prisoners as our documentary extras.

JH: That was actually the place where we argued the most, if you remember. While I was over the moon that we were going to shoot in a real prison with real prisoners, you were the one looking for problems.

ON: I thought it would be much more demanding in terms of finances and production than filming elsewhere. I was quite sceptical that it could end well, especially since we had so little experience with filming, let alone in prison. It seemed unrealistic to me. I could not imagine that two guys like us (without a producer and cameraman, at the time) could manage it with respect to equipment and production.

JH: If you insisted on filming at a boarding school or a juvie, instead of prison, I was ready to let all the film hang out. For me, filming in a real prison was another necessary and logical step.

ON: I saw juvie as a good alternative. Lots of boys who commit such crimes when they are almost adults, end up in juvie.

Jirka's mother works in prison. Was this a reason why you were, as opposed to another real environment, more determined?

JH: I think it did not matter that much. My mum used to work at a school for prison guards, so she was able to get us a contact to one prison for young offenders. Then it was about luck because we met its director, Mr Vagner, who was quite forthcoming.

ON: The next time we were lucky was when we met Jára (Jaroslav Květoň), who juiced all the film up. We were thinking for a while whether to do the casting in a juvie or a similar institution. But then we would have to get permissions from ministries and other institutions, and for that our production possibilities were insufficient. At that time, a serial with a similar topic came out: *Wasteland (Pustina)*. I knew how tremendous their production was. I saw Jára and a few more faces as extras at the back. I looked at the closing credits to find out who was responsible for the casting,

and I wrote them that we were working on a similar topic and asked if they had anyone like that. They were incredibly forthcoming. They sent us about 50 lads.

JH: I remember that you did not have Jára picked back then.

ON: Quite the contrary – I exactly remember a shot from *Wasteland*, where he was sitting on a crate.

JH: Well, me too, because I watched it afterwards. But in the first go, we chose someone else from the 50 lads and met with him.

ON: However, he then did not even reply to emails... We knew we wanted somebody authentic, someone who would match our criteria just by the nature of his being.

JH: This was because, at first, we wanted somebody who would not call forth the image of a ruffian by the way he looked the moment people saw him. Jára looked like a tough guy, so we were a bit afraid of that. When we met with him, we understood that his life story much more suited what we needed.

ON: We took him to see the prison, the prisoners, and to show him to them as well. To discuss in general how we were going to do it. I remember he knew one of the prisoners there. While we were filming, they suddenly remembered they had met before during a competition in a juvie where they were exchanging sweatshirts.

JH: We knew that for most of the time in prison, we did not want to direct their dialogues. We sat them next to each other and asked them to try and talk about something.

How did the original script differ from the final film?

JH: I don't know if Ondřej would agree, but I feel that there is not that much difference, actually. There are two parts in the script we wanted to confront – the prison and the reconstruction. The dialogues from the reconstruction itself were not a matter of scriptwriting; they came into existence while we were doing our research on the case. When we met with the investigating officer of the real case, and he showed us the real reconstruction of it. We recorded the soundtrack on a mobile phone and then transcribed it into the dialogues. Then we just cut some things to make it

shorter. The dialogues are more or less one to one, both in the script and the final film. The part that takes place in prison was described very briefly in the script because we did not have a chance to prepare each shot in much detail due to the limited number of visits there. We roughly described the prison routine and everyday rituals we wanted to shoot. That's why the script only reads: "breakfast, the gym, free-time activities in the TV room", and so on. We were planning on improvising in those situations.

ON: The script was four pages long, two and a half of which were a transcript from the real reconstruction of the act. I see it as contrasts. One part of the reconstruction is performed, for me, perhaps, a bit too much; the second is observational, free and not thought through in many respects. I think, however, there is a big diversion from the original plan in the time the prison itself was given in the film because, originally, we thought of giving it two minutes or so. Moreover, we had to overcome a number of production obstacles there, such as locked doors we needed permission to open, etc. The prison has a very strict routine, but the authorities were willing to adjust it for us a bit so that we could change places in some parts of its premises, for example.

JH: They were incredibly accommodating during those two days of filming.

ON: And we managed it from the production perspective, regardless of our own doubts.

Having the film screen at the Locarno Film Festival was a big success for you. How much did you invest in production, and what were your estimated distribution costs?

ON: I have some inheritance money which I decided to invest in things I like, that is in films. It was our advantage that we did not have to raise funds elsewhere or ask the Czech Cinematography Fund. We set a budget, which we exceeded a bit, but we were able to start looking for people right away and start working on the film instead of raising funds.

JH: Ondřej decided to put his 120,000 crowns in the film; we did not even talk about distribution because it was not his first concern whether he would get back the money

he invested. We were only aware, on a subconscious level, that if that happened, it would become a film for festivals.

ON: Of course, you hope that people will be able to see it somewhere. But we did not study how films get to screen at festivals.

JH: Before the film was finished, we had sent, with the help of editor Šimon Hájek, the almost final cut to Dáša Sedláčková from Masterfilm. She liked the film, and so she took charge of it.