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Murder: the Czech Way. Czechoslovak detective films (I)

"A psychoanalyst would say that we are strongly attracted to crime stories because it is the only option we have to be involved in secret crime. He might call it objectivization of latent criminal tendencies or a similar sophisticated name. I can only agree with this; however, I believe that reading crime stories not only objectivizes our latent tendencies to crime, but also our latent and intense tendencies to justice; besides the hidden criminal, it also wakes up the hidden Holy Vehme in us." (Karel Čapek: *Holmesiana, čili o detektivkách* /Holmesiana, or About Detective Stories/)

A key feature of crime fiction is a crime in one of its stages and the presence of characters it concerns, one way or another. What we expect from a detective story is that the mystery around the crime and the offender will be solved using more or less scientific methods (the application of which is based on the belief of the Enlightenment in the power of reason). [1] The main story line of a detective story is the investigation pursued by the detective and his or her colleagues (often asking the protagonist the same questions the audience would ask). The detective's search for the offender and his or her motive, or for more victims or more loot, usually consists in collecting clues and information, and creating and verifying hypotheses.

A detective story usually involves two closely related stories: the story of a crime and of its investigation. As the investigation progresses, the second story helps fill the missing links in the first one. The mystery should end with providing a satisfactory solution, which thanks to the presented evidence, the viewer/reader ideally finds together with the detective (or even earlier). In open detective stories, we know the

crime and the offender from the beginning and more than to the detective's investigation, we pay attention to the offender's behaviour and the circumstances that made him break the law.

While literary historians date the origins of detective fiction as an independent literary genre to the first half of the 19th century, the stories about crime and investigation have much older roots.[2] Sophocles's Oedipus is looking for the murderer of his father only to find out that he killed him himself (breaking one of the rules of a common detective story). Also in Macbeth and Hamlet, there is an investigation of a murder, where in the latter the protagonist uses similar experimental methods of testing the suspects like Inspector Columbo. Anyway, contemporary type detective stories are only a bit older than cinematography.

The modern detective stories have mainly been inspired by picaresque, gothic, robber and social novels. Favourable conditions for the formation of a genre emphasizing logical thinking and empirical research were created by positivism. Theoreticians of the genre assume that the main prerequisites for the creation of crime fiction were the scientific approach to crime, formation of big cities (and the related development of the organized fight against crime) and the suppression of the religious interpretation of morality (making it impossible for a murder to be seen as a aesthetic phenomenon of a sort).

Murder on the paper

With his *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1841), the American writer Edgar Allan Poe became the father of the genre. He was the first one to introduce a very individualized character of a detective with brilliant deductive skills. Poe's investigator focuses on observation, discovering connections and looking for causal links. As such, Poe's detective story revolves around collecting and analysing data using a logical approach arising out of the Victorian belief in materialism.

Deduction plays an even more central role in Arthur Conan Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), the first book in the series on the gifted morphine addict Sherlock Holmes. On the border between a detective and social novel, there is *The Moonstone* (1868) by Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens's unfinished novel *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870) even though the latter is a very unsatisfactory detective story considering it

stops in the middle of the plot coming to no conclusion. The authors drew inspiration from trials, authentic notes of police investigators (such as for instance the pioneer of modern criminalistics Eugène Vidocq), and criminal cases described in detail on the pages of the booming mass newspapers.

Czech readers encountered detective stories already at the beginning of the 20th century thanks to the translations of books by Anglo-Saxon writers (The Hound of the Baskervilles was published here only a year after the original, coming out in serial between December 1902 and November 1903 in the *Svět zvířat* (World of Animals) magazine. Local authors wrote detective stories anonymously or, using English pen names such as Edgar Collins (aka Z. V. Paukert), they wrote rubbish imitations of foreign novels commonly taking place in foreign countries. For instance a local analogy of the Nick Carter series, a series of several volumes featuring the detective León Clifton, was situated in the USA (only after several years it was found out that its author was the teacher Alfons B. Šťastný).

The foundations of a specifically Czech detective story were laid in the late 1920s by Emil Vachek and his Inspector Klubíčko (first published in 1928) and Karel Čapek's *Povídky z jedné kapsy a Povídky z druhé kapsy*, 1929) (Tales from Two Pockets).[3] It was Čapek's type of detective stories, modifying some aspects of the traditional „whodunits“, that would significantly influence other authors of Czech detective stories, both in literature and film. In Čapek's stories, it's not the investigation of a crime or explanation of a mystery that matters most. What is more important than establishing the reality is its interpretation.

As a great humanist, Karel Čapek was also famous for his trying to humanize the detective and bring him closer to the reader. His heroes are realistically portrayed characters following the principles of human psyche and morality; in relation to the overusing of Čapek's character model in creating film detectives in the 1960s, Pavel Juráček sarcastically added that in Czechoslovakia, „characters were created who were supposed to be brought to life by having sciatica or breeding bees.“[4] Talking about the founders of the Czech detective school, we should not forget another very productive author, the former mechanical engineer Eudard Fiker (publishing his first detective novel in 1933), whose Major Kalaš is well known to film audiences as well.

Detective stories reached maturity during the Golden Age between the World Wars, a period also seeing the formation of the hard-boiled school around the American Black Mask magazine. In that time however, the genre's fans no longer had to rely on the printed word only. They could follow offenders and investigators in films with increasingly sophisticated stories.

Mysterious crimes of insane doctors

At the beginnings of the film industry in our country, several directors attempted to make detective films with rather limited success. It was because only few of them respected the rules of the genre and saw the viewers as equal partners. The first two Czech crime films were made as early as in 1912. In the short story *Pro peníze* (For Money, 1912) made by Antonín Pech for the Kinofa company, a farmer is convicted of a crime he didn't commit. Restoration of the film from negative rolls was attempted in 1953. In contrast, the drama *Záhadný zločin* (A Mysterious Crime, 1912) by Rudolf Kafka also playing the leading role has not been preserved. In this case we don't even have any information on the plot, and we can thus only infer the genre from the name. Both films were made according to original stories, a feature common to most local silent crime films.

Still before the creation of Czechoslovakia, Václav Binovec made a short film for the Weteb Film Company *A vášně vítězí* (And Passion Wins, 1918), a drama taking place in a pub where criminals meet. The film was banned for its „shocking content potentially jeopardising the moral development of the youth“.

In 1917, five partners founded the Praga-film association. It was one of the founders, Antonín Fencel, who a year later presented what was probably the first Czech detective film. In *Čaroděj* (The Sorcerer), the protagonist, detective Torp, is asked by the factory owner Klas to investigate the theft of jewellery from his villa. Crimes against property were a frequent topic in the entire silent film era, often being accompanied by a melodramatic intrigue.

On the border between a detective story, romance and slapstick, the medium-length film *Dáma s malou nožkou* (The Lady with the Small Foot, 1919) was produced by Gustav Machatý (playing the detective) and shot by beginning filmmakers around Přemysl Pražský a Jan Stanislav Kolár. Besides the detective story, playing with the

conventions of its American sources of inspiration, the film is mainly remarkable for the acting debut of Anna Ondráková.

Criminal motifs were also present in *Dobrodružství Joe Focka* (Adventures of Joe Fock, 1918), an unpreserved film originally meant as a 10-part series, in *Borga* (1919), an espionage drama with a romantic plot, and in Binovec's German-Czech *Ulička hříchu a lásky* (The Lane of Sin and Love, 1923). The genres „drama“, „detective story“, „horror“ and „adventure“ characterize the first and only film made by the theatre actor Drahoš Želenský. In *Šílený lékař* (The Insane Doctor, 1920), based on one of the „Clifton“ stories, the director's father Karel played the mass murderer John Smith trying to establish the cause of death of his wife by carrying out experiments on live humans, whose corpses he then puts on the railway track to be run over by a train.

Želenský's amusingly histrionic film is a mixture of criminal and fantastic elements similarly to *Otrávené světlo* (The Poisoned Light, 1921) made by Jan Stanislav Kolár and Karel Lamač with Otto Heller as the cinematographer. The plot of the narratively and stylistically unique detective story with Emil Artur Longen playing the brilliant criminal-illusionist revolves around an invention turning night into day. For Kolár and Lamač, *Otrávené světlo* was the second film they made together under the artists' association K.L.I.M. (initials of Kolár, Lamač, Svatopluk Innemann and Gustav Machatý). For the first time, they joined their forces to make the detective melodrama *Akord smrti* (The Death Accord, 1919), which has not been preserved.

Crimes with sound and humour

By introducing quotas on imported films in 1932, the government tried to support local production. American companies refused to accept the conditions of import and stopped exporting their films to Czechoslovakia. That's why local producers were trying to meet the demands of the audience by making more adventurous and crime films. However, there was no renaissance of Czech detective films as in 1934 the quota system was replaced by a registration system, to which Hollywood filmmakers agreed. As a result, the Czechoslovak market was again swamped with American films. Moreover, during the financial crisis it was safer to make comedies with popular film stars. In spite of the advent of sound allowing for more complex stories, the 1930s

brought no significant revival of crime fiction.

The first Czech sound detective film, *Záhada modrého pokoje* (The Mystery of the Blue Room, 1933), was made at the Nový Stránov Castle close to Mladá Boleslav and in the Vinohrady AB Film Studios by the debuting Miroslav Cikán. A group of friends stays overnight in a castle with a blue room, in which several people mysteriously found their death in the past. It was the Czech version of the German film *Geheimnis des blauen Zimmers* (1932) directed by Erich Engel and shot in Prague. The dialogues were translated into Czech by Karel Hašler, and by using light and shadow, Jan Stallich as the cinematographer tried to accent the mysteriousness of the castle and create a dramatic atmosphere.

In the same year as *Záhada modrého pokoje*, *Vražda v Ostrovní ulici* (Murder in Island Street) was released, being the first film made in the new Barrandov Studios. It was made according to the detective novel *Muž a stín* (The Man and Shadow) by Emil Vachek. Vachek was inspired by news about an unsolved murder of an elderly woman. The realistic study into a murder investigation is remarkable mainly thanks to an atmospheric camera and the convincing acting of Jindřich Plachta as Inspector Klubíčko (originally, he was to be played by Hugo Haas).

Based on the story by Eduard Fikar and drawing inspiration from American detective comedies, such as *The Thin Man* (1934), Martin Frič made the detective comedy *Krok do tmy* (A Step into the Darkness, 1938). Another book by Fikar inspired *Paklíč* (The Skeleton Key, 1944), a crime comedy made under the Protectorate, in which no one is who they seem (for a long time). However, the German occupation was not a good period for detective stories in general. Czech literature was only published to a limited extent and under strict censorship, which also applied to films that were to offer an escape from reality, and not its reflection. That's why (and maybe also due to a lack of experience with pure crime stories), all the other detective films made under the Protectorate are marked as „comedy“.

Before *Paklíč*, Miroslav Cikán made a detective comedy *Pelikán má alibi* (Pelikán Has an Alibi, 1940), in which a similar appearance of two men (both played by Miroslav Homola) with diametrically opposed qualities leads to a chain of misunderstandings. The series of detective comedies was complemented by the actor Oldřich Nový's only

initiative as a director. He made *Čtrnáctý u stolu* (The Fourteenth at the Table, 1943) together with Antonín Zelenka and the cinematographer Ferdinand Pečenka according to a novel by the German author Ossi Oswald. He cast Karel Höger as the lead in a comedy full of mistaken identities with a robbery investigation in the second plan.

Still under the Protectorate, the director J. A. Holman started adapting another detective novel by Eduard Fiker, *Zinková cesta* (The Zinc Path), casting Lída Baarová in one of the roles. However, before the end of the war, Holman was identified as a member of an illegal resistance group and escaped to Slovakia. Martin Frič took over the direction then. Moreover, after the liberation Lída Baarová's role had to be recast as she was accused of collaboration. As a result, the film noir *13. revír* (Guard 13) – which was how the adaptation of a book taking place on the outskirts of Prague was named in the end – only had its première in March 1946.

Marvan's Inspector Čadek in *13. revír* outlined the characteristics of Czech detectives in the coming years. The Czech detective is not an infallible investigator, but a diligent police officer laboriously collecting the individual pieces of evidence.[5] Similarly, also detective stories per se lose their romantic touch after World War II. After the war experience, the war audience probably wouldn't believe that one person could restore order and instil the former values through their intellect. Anyway, *13. revír* is the only Czechoslovak detective film reflecting this social insecurity more prominently (similarly to many American films noir). However, there were no more films like that as with the 1948 coup d'état, the Czechoslovak detective film genre basically ceased to exist. Film became an ideological tool and the cinemas were swamped with instructive socialism-building and espionage dramas.

To be continued...

Notes:

[1] „Detective story“ is derived from the Latin word *detegere* meaning reveal/discover, which is related to the aim of detective fiction, i.e. to detect an offender.

[2] Detective fiction is a part of crime fiction, which also includes police stories, gangster stories, thrillers (where the time before the crime itself is more important),

court and lawyer dramas, espionage films or films noir. Action and adventure films also commonly use the patterns of crime stories. For more details on genre classification, see e.g. Korda, Jakub. *České televizní krimi série a jejich žánrové souvislosti* (1989–2009). Disertační práce (Ph.D.). Olomouc: Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci, Filozofická fakulta, 2011.

[3] Five stories were turned into a film in Martin Frič's *Čapkovy povídky* (1947) (Capek's Tales).

[4] Juráček, Pavel. Detektivka není rekreace. *Host do domu* 1961, no. 7, p. 327.

[5] Martin Frič returns to crime stories in 1960 with *Bílá spona* (A White Slide). Also the two comedies he made in the autumn of his life, *Přísně tajné premiéry* (Strictly Secret Premieres, 1967) and *Nejlepší ženská mého života* (The Best Woman in My Life, 1968), contain a crime plot.