

JAN BERGL / 5. 2. 2021

New Wave Heritage: How Auteur Cinema Changed in 1990s

The “Czechoslovakian New Wave” has never been a nonsignificant name of a single era of the Czech film industry and has always aroused heated debates and polemics. Today it makes us proud by reminding us of a period when international viewers – or at least international distributors and festival organizers in the final phase – were genuinely interested in Czech and Slovak films. Less is known about how short the period actually was, what enabled it, and how its principles formed in the mid-1960s. The New Wave remains a reminder of the good old times as well as a promise that one day the times may be good again. Its immortality is also fuelled by the myth of lost potential – had the New Wave not been repressed by the regime, the talented artists (Juráček, Vihanová, Procházka, Milota...) could have continued in their work and the Czech film industry could have maintained its glory.

In harmony with that, media often present the wishful thinking that the glory will return, for example when they expected *The Painted Bird* (Nabarvené ptáče, 2019) to be a “new *Marketa Lazarová*”, or when they revived the term “New Wave” in relation to several promising film debuts in 2016.^[1] This discourse was so intense that both print and online newspapers wrote about it.^[2] Czech critics then pointed out that today’s conditions are nothing like those of the “golden 1960s”, and it is therefore de facto impossible for the New Wave to return. The phenomenon was inseparable from the model of a centrally controlled film industry and its economic interests. Moreover, the New Wave films were successful at international festivals because their authors applied the then trendy poetics and met the demands placed on art films at the time. Looking at their works made after the Velvet Revolution, at the topics and the stylistic devices they deployed, and at the reception thereof, we can see that it was

not just the industry background that changed after the two decades but also the international status of art films.

How to look at the New Wave

The “New Wave principles” as known today started to form after Jaroslav Boček’s text *Objectively about the new wave* (Nová vlna z odstupu) was published in 1966.[3]

Nine of the directors mentioned by Boček (Věra Chytilová, Jan Němec, Vojtěch Jasný, Antonín Máša, Jiří Menzel, Jan Schmidt, Jaromil Jireš, Karel Vachek, Hynek Bočan) also contributed with their talent to the Czech film industry after the Velvet Revolution.[4] Based on the book *The Czechoslovakian New Wave* (Československá nová vlna) by Peter Hames, we can add other seven directors to this list (Karel Kachyňa, Jan Švankmajer, Juraj Jakubisko, Dušan Hanák, Juraj Herz, Drahomíra Vihanová, Zdenek Sirový). Each is traditionally associated with the New Wave; Boček may have left them out only because their main “New Wave films” were only made after he published his text. In the 1990s, there were 16 active directors who managed to shoot more than twice as many films before the end of the century. Not all could be characterized in terms of the New Wave aesthetics, of course; in practice, this aesthetics was much more complicated than Boček’s bipolar division of “the theatricals” and “the intimates” (he himself considered this rather a slightly arbitrary “draft”).

What the films have in common, apart from the time and the conditions in which they were made, were the contextual frameworks within which they have been contemplated. The first framework predetermined the way the films were handled from the very first phase of planning till the distribution phase and was called “film d’auteur.” The Barrandov Studio supported films d’auteur because they were both cheap to make and successful when it came to their reception and export.[5] To some extent, the term itself replaced the genre category, and the genre films and their makers (Oldřich Lipský, Václav Vorlíček) are usually not considered part of the New Wave. Films d’auteur were supposed to be serious (cerebral) and not primarily entertaining.[6] The second framework was rooted in the category of critical political films,[7] the category that the New Wave films were (generally) classed into under the influence of the social affairs and the French critique of ideology. They could be seen as a political gesture even if they were “innocent” comedies about the private lives of

the protagonists. The twenty-year-long normalization period then made them symbolic of unattainable freedom and defined the way of their perception for everybody who lived in the era.^[8]

Back to 1950s

Many New Wave filmmakers did not abandon political topics at the end of 1960s. Some had a chance to work on daring topics either during socialism or towards the end of it; for example, Máša made two films criticising the morals and “achievements” of the normalization era – *The Silence of Larks* (Skřivánčí ticho, 1989) and *Was It Us?* (Byli jsme to my?, 1990) – after his long break from filming. They did not attract much attention, though, because they appeared too late – and too soon for a post-Velvet Revolution reflection of the normalization era. Therefore, the directors started either to return deeper into the past, or to geographically distance from the Czech borders, meaning that their films stopped being topical and daring. Many of the films that probably could have been made before now seem harmless, such as Menzel’s *The Life and Extraordinary Adventures of Private Ivan Chonkin* (Život a neobyčejná dobrodružství vojáka Ivana Čonkina, 1993), a parody portraying a remote Russian village. In this case, the director’s prominence helped get it into the film festival in Venice, but it was an exception. After the state monopoly fell, the profitability of films also became an important aspect, and the Czech audience became the target one.

It was this way that Zdenek Sirový, director of the previously banned *Funeral Ceremonies* (Smuteční slavnost, 1969), approached his adaptation of Miloslav Švandrlík’s novel *The Black Barons* (Černí baroni, 1992). The director’s name was not important for the investors; all they wanted was to repeat the enormous success of *The Tank Battalion* (Tankový prapor, 1991) and to create an audience-friendly film rather than an artistically inventive one. In line with this, the political aspects of the film were suppressed – the 1950s newsreel in the prologue of *The Black Barons*, a common tool of films criticising the politics, is not meant to arouse the passive audience but serves only conventional illustrative purposes. The film itself is then more conciliatory than critical because it depicts an almost friendly community that the soldiers assigned to the technical auxiliary battalion could create (could they?) along with their superiors, and the eyes of Major Haluška (Pavel Landovský) show more common sense (even sort of “mundane wisdom”) than dullness (which would be

more probable).

The gloomy 1950s also became a subject matter of more serious films, though. Based on the short story by Jiří Stránský, Bočan's *Boomerang* (Bumerang, 1996) was more inventive than *The Black Barons* when it came to the director's approach to colours and framing, yet it did not capture a unique view of being imprisoned in a communist labour camp after having lived in a free state for six years: "The attitude of the two main creators towards one of the cruellest periods of our modern history is completely justifiable, but appears to be an almost superficial thesis in a drama like this."^[9] *Lenin, Lord and Mother* (Vracenky, 1990) by Jan Schmidt, a former colleague of Pavel Juráček, was an exception among these films; it did neither a priori accuse nor a priori defend the 1950s but looked at the era in a non-traditional way, through the eyes of a 10-year-old boy, although revealing views of an informed adult aware of the broader context. Premiered two years after the Velvet Revolution (on November 1, 1991), *Lenin, Lord and Mother* unfortunately was not a huge success with audiences and became (semi)forgotten.

The present and allegories

The first films by Věra Chytilová and Juraj Jakubisko after the Velvet Revolution were still both critical of society and involved, but the directors started dealing with the present. The audience turnout was good, but the critics did not applaud them so much. What we see as a goal-directed attempt for reflection of the present, they only saw as an attempt to pander to the mass audience. Both *The Inheritance or Fuckoffguysgoodday* (Dědictví aneb Kurvahošigutntag, 1992), a stylized depiction of the chaos with post-revolutionary restitutions, and Jakubisko's similar vision called *It's Better to Be Wealthy and Healthy Than Poor and Ill* (Lepší je být bohatý a zdravý než chudý a nemocný, 1992) were rated among the "quality decline" trend of the restitution comedies^[10] which culminated several years later with *Even Bigger Idiot Than We Had Hoped* (Ještě větší blbec, než jsme doufali, 1994) and *Wild Beer* (Divoké pivo, 1995). This label was not of much help for the directors, who were expected to represent the tradition of the Czech art films. *The Inheritance* has received recognition over time^[11]; Jakubisko's film has remained unpopular. It was of no use that Jakubisko cut back on poetic and baroque-like allegorical scenes, tools which had already been exhausted since they had been related to the two frameworks

mentioned above: with films d'auteur as a window into the soul of eccentric and unique authors,[12] and with politics criticizing films as a way of expressing what could not be called their true names for political reasons. Both these frameworks stopped being topical in the 1990s.

Otherwise formally brilliant, *The Fortress* (Pevnost, 1994), a film taking place in the late 1980s, seems atavistic in this sense. Considered a burden by the regime, its protagonist Ewald hides himself from the world in his trailer parked outside a small village, above which a mysterious army fortress looms; Ewald later meets its keeper and learns what his job actually is. Being the second feature film by Drahomíra Vihanová, whose debut *Squandered Sunday* (Zabitá neděle, 1969) was banned from cinemas during socialism, *The Fortress* was a much-awaited film. There were several reports from the shooting broadcast in advance that prepared viewers for a work directly following the Czechoslovakian New Wave by referring to the director's name and the black-and-white film aesthetics, and for the international hallmark of it – *The Fortress* was co-financed by French CNC (Centre National de la Cinématographie) and starred György Cserhalmi, a Hungarian actor known for example from films by István Szabó. At the same time, though, the media asked whether such a film could speak to the contemporary audience.

Vihanová knew she was not shooting a film for everybody but was still afraid how it would be interpreted: "Since we have been negatively affected by Bolshevism, I expect many people to look for a certain superficiality in the film – and they will, once again, see Bolshevism in it." [13] She tried to avoid this interpretation by explaining her intents to reporters,[14] but the inner link between *The Fortress* and the New Wave along with the resulting context were stronger. The director's experience from the San Sebastian International Film Festival confirmed this was at least partially contingent on the local history: "Abroad they understood it as a common existential problem of how to survive in this absurd world. Be the protagonist a Communist or not. In Spain they even told me that I had made a film about a Christ of the twentieth century! [15] In fact, the problem may have not lain in the twenty-year-long delay of the film but rather in the above-mentioned outmoded way of allegorical expressions: "The snake allegory is another one that is too obvious and too forced: as if it is not enough to discuss snakes all the time, we must also see them in the form of car accessories, women's jewellery, and even live animals." [16]

Film d'auteur in a new coat

In Cannes in 1990, the Palme d'Or was awarded to David Lynch's *Wild at Heart* (1990), a film wildly combining romance and thriller, crime and fantasy. A year later the prize went to the mysterious black comedy *Barton Fink* (1991) by the Coen brothers, and in 1994 to the post-modern variations on pulp novels *Pulp Fiction* (1994) by Quentin Tarantino. It was clear that the situation within film d'auteur and art film had been changing; American works (along with Asian and Middle Eastern ones) had begun beating European films by miles. At least this was the impression then, and many asked how to help the unstable Europe. Antonio-Pedro Vasconcelos, a Portugal representative in The Council of Europe, wrote: "The weakness of the European film has been culminating since the end of 1970s, but does seem neither constant nor unavoidable. More probably it is the result of the approach (and the politics) which has been putting emphasis on the artistic aspects and cultural and political importance of the films since the end of 1960s, thus neglecting the popular aspects as well as the economic and social importance. While the Americans take care of the market, the Europeans only talk about culture." [17]

The European films d'auteur started to lose their audience base because the younger generations inclined towards other film trends. After all, the New Wave films that were popular across wide audiences were rather an exception. On the other hand, the new progressive films (for example, by the three directors mentioned above) connected the audience as they could be enjoyed by both intellectuals and those less informed. There were several layers of meaning in them with more than one interpretation possible, so that everyone's opinion was valid. At the same time, they washed off the already flimsy line between "highbrow" and "lowbrow" culture for good. It was their ardour for the pop culture which inspired what distinguished them from the above-mentioned *The Silence of Larks* which, quite to the contrary, presented pop culture as one of the main reasons behind our motherland's decline. Máša was not the only one; many of the New Wave filmmakers, his peers, such as Menzel or Jasný, were very sceptical towards the new post-modern trends. This was not the case of Juraj Herz, though, whose *Passage* (Pasáž, 1996) was one of the few Czech films that could be compared to works being shot abroad.

It is interesting that Herz started with a similar material as Vihanová – with a novella by Czech dissident Karel Pecka published by the Škvoreckýs in the mid-1970s through their Toronto publishing house. But he only used the main thesis and the outlines of the storyline; everything else was not only adapted in accordance with his own vision and story (for example when it came to the dialogues)[18] but also strongly modernized. Much like Lynch did with his later films, Herz abandoned the conventional linear storyline typical for the Czech modernist films[19] and bended the plotline so that a paradoxical loop emerged. One cannot say where the film starts and ends, what is real and what is just fictitious. The passage into which the main protagonist Michal strays is also a shooting location – the crew shoots what happens around and then screens it in a cinema; the self-reflection is even more enhanced with the mirrors distributed all around. Should we liken the impression aroused by *The Passage* to an older film, it would be to *Last Year at Marienbad* (L'Année dernière à Marienbad, 1960) by Resnais; still, Herz adds many genre motives of his own, such as the poker game of life and death or the hedonic intercourse at the public bathroom. Unlike *Last Year at Marienbad*, however, *The Passage* was also not a pioneering or revolutionary film; despite that, it is a remarkable and exceptional work within the context of the Czech film industry of 1990s.

Unsuccessful 1990s?

Based on all the above, it may seem that Czech post-revolutionary film was not at its best. Some directors were no longer in touch with the contemporary film industry; others turned from art films to the mainstream, offering nothing exciting. Some films were underappreciated at the time of their creation; other films, remarkable films, have remained half forgotten. While European films became attractive for the international public again at the turn of the century, contemporary Czech films were largely ignored abroad. Yet, looking back at all the Czech films from the 1990s that we deemed attention-worthy in this article, which moreover presents only a narrow selection, we can see that the number is not that low. Karel Kachyňa and his *The Cow* (Kráva, 1993) proved that even a plain drama, originally shot for Czech Television, can appeal to international audiences (it was awarded the main prize at the Strasbourg International Film Festival); Jan Němec and his *Code Name: Ruby* (Jméno kódu Rubín, 1996) proved that a film can be shot on a very tight budget. There was also the independent duo Jan Švankmajer – Karel Vachek, a specific case of

filmmakers who, strictly speaking, cannot be considered New Wave authors and who only got the chance to develop their poetics in feature films after the Velvet Revolution.

The Czechoslovakian New Wave was only a short-lived phenomenon and was altogether linked to the period in which it occurred (ca. 1963–1969). The “New Wave cult” built up and became strong only with the following normalization era, but in 1990s – when art films started to be more dynamic and less theatrical and when emphasis on the interpretation performed by the actors was replaced by emphasis on the formal aspects (visual style, editing, storyline) – it proved exhausted. Yet the New Wave remains alive within us, which can be seen not only in the tendency to revive the term itself but also in several 1990’s films by young directors such as Zdeněk Tyc and Ivo Trajkov, who intentionally worked with its heritage. The extent to which the mentality of their works remained in the 1960s and to which they followed up the contemporary conditions and conventions would make for a separate paper.

Sources:

BÍLKOVÁ Jana, Pecka podle Herze. *Kinorevue* 7, 1997, no. 3, p. 38.

BOČEK Jaroslav, Nová vlna z odstupu. *Film a doba* 12, 1966, no. 12, pp. 622–635.

BUCHAR Robert, *Sametová kocovina*. Brno: Host, 2001.

DONÁTOVÁ Uljana, Film pod postel? *Premiéra* 5, 1994, no. 12, pp. 16–17.

HALADA Andrej, *Český film devadesátých let*. Praha: Lidové noviny, 1997.

HAMES Peter, *Československá nová vlna*. Praha: Levné knihy, 2008.

HLAVÁČKOVÁ Iva, Zabitá léta. *Kinorevue* 4, 1994, no. 24 (28/ 11), p. 18.

KUBINA Zdeno & LUKEŠ Jan, Bumerang. *Filmový přehled*, 1997, no. 1, pp. 9–10.

PTÁČEK Luboš, Perličky po letech. *Cinepur* 11, 2002, no. 22, pp. 16–19.

SEDLÁČEK Jaroslav, Pevnost. *Cinema* 4, 1994, no. 12, pp. 40–41.

SKUPA Lukáš, Ten, který měl doma Iva. *Cinepur* 21, 2014, no. 91, pp. 72–75.

VASCONCELOS Antonio-Pedro, Evropský film a trh. *Film a doba* 40, 1994, no. 1, pp. 6–12.

ZABLOUDILOVÁ Táňa, Český film v roce 2016: Nová naděje? Available online at: <https://wave.rozhlas.cz/cesky-film-v-roce-2016-nova-nadeje-5218728> [published 19/ 04/ 2016; cited 14/ 09/ 2020]

Notes:

[1] For example films made in the last two years, such as *I, Olga Hepnarova* (Já, Olga Hepnarová, 2016), *Dust of the Ground* (Prach, 2015), *Family Film* (Rodinný film, 2015), *How Julius Schmitke Escaped Death Like a Clumsy Seal* (Schmitke, 2014), and other. See ZABLOUDILOVÁ Táňa, Český film v roce 2016: Nová naděje? Available online at: <https://wave.rozhlas.cz/cesky-film-v-roce-2016-nova-nadeje-5218728> [published 19/ 04/ 2016; cited 14/ 09/ 2020].

[2] The editors of the *Cinepur* magazine draw inspiration from it for its 112th issue called “The Czech Film Revival?” (České filmové obrození?).

[3] Jaroslav Boček, Nová vlna z odstupu. *Film a doba* 12, 1966, no. 12, pp. 622–635.

[4] We should mention that both Miloš Forman and Ivan Passer made films abroad. Their works are not included in this paper.

[5] Lukáš Skupa, Ten, který měl doma Iva. *Cinepur* 21, 2014, no. 91, p. 73.

[6] Ibid.

[7] For films criticising politics, see David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, *Film History*. Praha: AMU: NLN, 2011, pp. 555–600.

[8] Luboš Ptáček, Perličky po letech. *Cinepur* 11, 2002, no. 22, p. 17.

[9] Zdeno Kubina, Bumerang. *Filmový přehled*, 1997, no. 1, p. 9.

[10] Andrej Halada, *Český film devadesátých let*. Praha: Lidové noviny, 1997, p. 85.

[11] The Association of Czech Film Critics voted it the third best Czech post-revolutionary film in 2020.

[12] For example by Federic Fellini or Akira Kurosawa who were making their last films at the time.

[13] Iva Hlaváčková, *Zabitá léta*. *Kinorevue* 4, 1994, no. 24 (28/ 11), p. 18.

[14] Uljana Donátová, *Film pod postel?* *Premiéra* 5, 1994, no. 12, p. 17.

[15] Robert Buchar, *Sametová kocovina*. Brno: Host, 2001, p. 112.

[16] Jaroslav Sedláček, *Pevnost*. *Cinepur* 4, 1994, no. 12, p. 40.

[17] Antonio-Pedro Vasconcelos, *Evropský film a trh*. *Film a doba* 40, 1994, no. 1, p. 6.

[18] Jana Bílková, *Pecka podle Herze*. *Kinorevue* 7, 1997, no. 3, p. 38.

[19] Even when they show a chain of events that conflicted with our experience, such as *Case for a Rookie Hangman* (Případ pro začínajícího kata, 1969).