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So Near to Heaven

Vladimír Brebera's feature debut *So Near to Heaven* from 1936 was among the first live-action feature films made at the Gottwaldov Film Studio.^[1] Already in the 1930s, this studio's production was aimed primarily at children. But the work of screenwriter Jiří Blažek, the head Gottwaldov dramaturge,^[2] deviated significantly from the established dramaturgical direction. Instead of a spectacle for children, *So Near to Heaven* is a 'contemporary story from the life of two young people,'^[3] a thematically and formally ambitious work drawing inspiration from contemporary new wave trends and approaches. *So Near to Heaven* is a kind of experiment, an attempt to incorporate specific poetics into a production environment with no previous experience with it. It's also the first feature film set in Gottwaldov itself. It takes place over a single day and tells the story of a young waitress named Marika working in the Gottwaldov Hotel Moscow. She runs into her old love Jarda, and they decide to go out and eventually spend the night together, leading to Marika's disillusion and misery. While promoting the film, the period press raised expectations using the name of director Brebera, described as a promising and talented filmmaker who already in his internationally acclaimed student film *A Date at Half Past Three* (*Schůzka o půl čtvrté*, 1957) allegedly demonstrated a 'sense for lyrical film expression.'^[4] Important promotional elements included the attractive 'fresh faces' of unknown amateur actors. In addition to the inhabitants of Gottwaldov, the filmmakers also cast Czech and Slovak students. For instance, the 17-year-old Mária Gálová, who portrayed the leading role, took her school leaving exams at a Bratislava grammar school not long after the filming.^[5]

But creating the impression of authenticity wasn't limited only to casting.

Documentary immediateness and veristic aesthetic typical for European 'young cinemas' play a fundamental part in the entire film.^[6] It's apparent in scenes taking place inside Hotel Moscow (where the majority of the film takes place), filmed directly on location during a normal business day with only minimal additional lighting using a

jerky handheld camera or a camera placed on a borrowed wheelchair.^[7] Right at the beginning, we walk through an opulent lobby swarming with guests and continue to a crowded restaurant where the central musical motif smoothly transforms into diegetic contact hustle and bustle. We then move to the restaurant's hectic kitchen, the hotel's dance hall and finally to the tenth floor 'so near to heaven' where the hotel workers live. In addition to the hotel's robust interior, the film flaunts the city of Gottwaldov, and the strolls taken by the film's protagonists provide a pretence to showcase the city's Square of Work, a dormitory for girls, and the city centre with its modern shopwindows and bright neon signs.^[8]

Several times during the film, *So Near to Heaven* explicitly highlights that the city can provide for its inhabitants. Marika's friends from her native village envy her for working in a big cosmopolitan hotel; Jana, an acquaintance of Marika, works as a hairdresser and makes enough money to lead a comfortable life, shopwindows in the city display fashionable clothes, accessories and (naturally) shoes. Blažek's script, however, openly points out that even a modern prosperous city full of consumerist abundance may not be enough for a young person. Marika is huddled in a shared room without any privacy, must fend off advances by older unpleasant celadons and her stereotypical work makes leading an eventful and satisfying life almost impossible. Jana longs for self-development and wants to study at a university in Prague: 'Money isn't everything.' But rather than a subversive criticism of the otherwise fondly depicted 'Baťa city,' it's an effort to plastically portray the experiences of young people, which shifts *So Near to Heaven* closer to a generalising generational testimony.

But inclination towards the techniques of cinema vérité and socially critical observations are not the only methods used by Brebera and Blažek to explore the new wave aesthetics. *So Near to Heaven* abandons objective narration in order – just like other films labelled 'impressional' in their time – to explore the characters' emotions, trace their thoughts and 'see the world through their eyes.'^[9] Even the press described the film as a 'drama from the emotional lives of young people,'^[10] aiming to thematise 'emotional turmoil'^[11] and reflect the 'complexity of emotions.'^[12] The interest of the authors is focused on the main characters of Marika and Jarda, whose rich inner worlds are transferred to the screen using different techniques.

Marika struggles with an uncertainty typical of young, emotionally aggravated people. She addresses herself and the viewers in long, contemplative and anguished inner monologues with existential undertones in which she explicitly formulates her tumultuous life and emotions. Saddened soliloquies with sorrowful pauses act as a counterpoint to montages depicting busy hotel life. While we observe the preparation of food in the restaurant or the evening dance, we hear a melancholic musical motif accompanying Marika's thoughts about the past, her job in the hotel and her colleagues with different values. While Eva is fine with some entertainment in the company of men, Marika is looking for a fulfilling relationship based on emotions. She feels misunderstood and even alienated and sees Jarda as the solution to her situation and becomes fixated on him. She even steals money from her roommate Anička to buy a new hat for her anxiously anticipated date with Jarda.

Thy psychological world of Jarda, a young man on a leave from military duty, is visually depicted in flashbacks in which he thinks about his girlfriend. The camera films Jarda deep in his thought, slowly closes in on him and we hear a conspicuously out-of-tune musical motif reminiscent of disharmonic jazz tones. His mental retreats to the past always take just a few seconds and are presented as incoherent fragments whose spacetime placement in the film's story is merely suggested. We see the face of a girl gazing in the distance, we see her together with Jarda, hugging and laying in the grass. At one moment, the girl is running behind a train with Jarda on it. These memories form a striking visual contrast to the plot with their overexposed style, melancholic tone and overall inclination to abstraction. Jarda thinks about his girl quite often, especially when he has a few drinks at the bar and subsequently persuades Marika to spend the night with him in a hotel room.

Two different approaches to portraying subjectivity intersect during Marika and Jarda's lovemaking and form a relatively long five-minute-montage depicting the thoughts of the two protagonists, accompanied by the words from a love letter by Jarda's girlfriend. Marika imagines the originally planned date in a theatre and idealises a hypothetical relationship with Jarda: they ride a motorbike together, hold hands and walk on railroad tracks, have a drink, kiss in the grass, dance and laugh. Jarda remembers the moments of parting with his girlfriend at a train station before he was conscripted. He also remembers the moment when he discovered that she had found someone else. That sheds some light on the motivations for flashbacks

throughout the film and the seduction of Marika, which isn't just a distraction and entertainment but a means to cope with infidelity. Their night spent together, however, disenchanting the fragile girl, who feels abused and roams the hotel corridors contemplating jumping off the roof terrace – something depicted by an impressionistically subjective camera falling on the pavement in front of the hotel.^[13] Inspiration from international trends didn't bring the film favourable reviews: whether the critics judged it separately or in the context of other Czech or foreign films, it was always perceived as an artistic failure and creative fiasco by Vladimír Brebera and Jiří Blažek. Gustav Franc points out that the film's story and script 'banalizes' the central romantic motive and 'turns lyricism into idle sentiment.'^[14] Its 'shallow' story and script is criticised also by Ladislav Ženíšek, who thinks that one of the reasons the film was a failure was its 'inexperienced' director, who, as a debutant, is, however, 'entitled to a loss'.^[15] Dagmar Šafaříková mentions *So Near to Heaven* in her report from the fourth year of the Gottwaldov Film Festival where the film was screened alongside *The High Wall* (*Vysoká zeď*, dir. Karel Kachyňa, 1963) and *Black Peter* (*Černý Petr*, dir. Miloš Forman, 1963) in the non-competition section of films about children and youth for adults, which motivates the author to draw a comparison. She says that Brebera's film falls short of Forman's film because '[*So Near to Heaven*] is so far from the artistic chastity and frugality of *Black Peter*.'^[16]

As Lukáš Skupa emphasizes, alongside *This Year in September* (*Letos v září*, dir. František Daniel, 1963), *Prague Blues* (*Pražské blues*, dir. Georgis Skalenakis 1963) and *The Cucumber Hero* (*Okurkový hrdina*, dir. Čestmír Mlíkovský, 1963), *So Near to Heaven* was in its time put into the pejorative critical category of 'fashionable films' whose proclaimed innovativeness was seen as 'manneristic' and as a 'mechanical' imitation of foreign examples without a specific authorial input of its own.^[17] For instance, Jaroslav Boček criticises Jarda's flashbacks and in reference to Alain Resnais says that 'the director 'Marienbades' a lot, overuses flashbacks and the magic of overexposed material,' while 'his modernity is artificial just as a lemonade using colouring has nothing to do with fruit.'^[18]

Skupa also remarks that due to critical reception, directors of 'fashionable' films abandoned their tendencies to experiment or even film in Czechoslovakia.^[19] Specifically, Brebera had several scripts in development in collaboration with Vladimír Blažek and Antonín Novák (Jan Žalman) before *So Near to Heaven* premiered, but they

were all shelved.[20] Brebera subsequently moved as a 'travelling filmmaker' to DEFA Studio in Potsdam-Babelsberg, where he directed a co-produced comedy titled *In Strange Beds – Without a Passport* (*Ohne Paß in fremden Betten*, 1965).[21] Two years later, back in Czechoslovakia, he directed six 10-minute-episodes of *Referee Stokroč* (Soudce Stokroč, 1967) for Czechoslovak Television. But the reviews were devastating, so the show was cancelled.[22] For Vladimír Brebera, this meant not only another failure to impress Czech film critics, but eventually, that show proved to be his last project as a director.

After more than half a century, we are at liberty to disregard the exclusively period-bound coordinates and examine *So Near to Heaven* from a broader perspective. On one hand, Brebera and Blažek's film was among the first of thematically serious feature films appearing throughout the history of Film Studio Gottwaldov and acting as a counterweight to otherwise prevailing careless genre films; on the other hand, it can be seen as a precursor of a very distinct Gottwaldov dramaturgical trend from the 1980s – psychological dramas from the lives of adolescent girls. The young heroines of films such as *Sonata for a Red-Haired Girl* (*Sonáta pro zrzku*, dir. Vít Olmer, 1980), *Raspberry Cocktail* (*Malinový koktejl*, dir. Ladislava Sieberová, 1982), *The Last Binge* (*Poslední mejdan*, dir. Miloš Zábranský, 1982) and *The Fine Art of Defence* (*Jemné umění obrany*, dir. Jana Semschová, 1987) experience emotional maturation and first loves, face inner chaos and uncertainties. Just like the waitress Marika from *Hotel Moscow*.

So Near to Heaven (*Tak blízko u nebe*, Czechoslovakia, 1963), director: Vladimír Brebera, screenplay: Jiří Blažek, director of photography: Jiří Šámal, music: Zdeněk Liška, cast: Marika Gálová, Gejza Vavreczky, Marie Lukešová, Aleš Košnar, Ludmila Bellušová, Marcela Dürrová et al. Filmové studio Gottwaldov, 81 min.

Notes:

[1] The film entered the cinemas on 1st May 1964 rated 'Adults only' and was distributed together with a short sociological document *Why* (*Proč*, 1964) by Evald Schorm and Jan Špáta. *Tak blízko u nebe*. *Filmové informace* 15, 1964, no. 17, p. 3.

[2] Jiří Blažek worked at Gottwaldov since the beginning of 1960s when the studio started producing live action films for children and young adults. As a dramaturge and screenwriter, he collaborated on early Gottwaldov medium-length film such as *Who Gets the Cup* (Komu patří pohár, dir. Josef Pinkava, 1960) and *The Boy and the Deer* (Chlapec a srna, dir. Zdeněk Sirový, 1962). His first feature film project was the feature debut of Josef Pinkava *Holiday with Minka* (Prázdniny s Minkou, 1962). Comp. *Filmové informace* 14, 1963, no. 34, pp. 8–9.

[3] Martin Brož, 3 poslední záběry. *Kino* 19, 1964, no. 1, p. 4.

[4] About 'So Near to Heaven'. *Filmové informace* 14, 1963, no. 34, p. 10; Tak blízko u nebe. *Filmové novinky*, 1964, no. 5, p. 4.

[5] Vendula Procházková, Nejen botami živ je Gottwaldov. *Vlasta*, 1963, no. 29, p. 9; So Near to Heaven! *Czechoslovak Film. Československý film illustrated monthly* 17, 1964, no. 1, p. 9.

[6] For instance. Jan Křipač includes *So Near to Heaven* into "Czech cinema vérité". Jan Křipač, Letos v září. Online at: <<https://www.filmovyprehled.cz/cs/revue/detail/letos-v-zari>> [quote 31 March 2021].

[7] *O filmu „Tak blízko u nebe“*, p. 10.

[8] Neon signs as a symbol of modern Gottwaldov can be seen in Josef Pinkava's medium-length film *OK 12 Departs* (OK 12 startuje, 1961). Just like in Brebera's film, we can see the sign of the Hotel Moscow slowly lighting up.

[9] Other 'impressionist films' of that time were for instance *The Sun in a Net* (Slnko v sieti, dir. Štefan Uher, 1962) and *The Cry* (Křik, dir. Jaromil Jireš, 1963). Lukáš Skupa, Moderní, nebo jen módní? Reflexe počátků „nové vlny“ v Československu. *Cinepur* 91, 2014, p. 59.

[10] Tak blízko u nebe. *Filmové novinky*, 1964, no. 5, p. 4.

[11] V. Procházková, *Nejen botami živ je Gottwaldov*, p. 9.

[12] M. Brož, *3 poslední záběry*, p. 4.

[13] The scene of the fall was a rather significant element in the film's promotion in the press. The articles explain that the camera was attached to a rope and lifted up to the terrace. The resulting footage was accelerated and shown backwards. See *O filmu „Tak blízko u nebe“*, pp. 10–11; *Tak blízko u nebe*, p. 4; M. Brož, *3 poslední záběry*, p. 4.

[14] Gustav Franci, Nové filmy do našich kin. *Lidová demokracie* 20, 1964, no. 111, p. 3.

[15] Ladislav Ženíšek, Novinky na plátnech kin. *Pravda* 45, 1964, no. 105, p. 3.

[16] Dagmar Šafaříková, Po čtvrtém filmovém Gottwaldovu. *Práce* 20, 1964, no. 102, p. 5.

[17] L. Skupa, *Moderní, nebo jen módní? Reflexe počátků „nové vlny“ v Československu*, pp. 59–60.

[18] Jaroslav Boček, Tak blízko k limonádě. *Kulturní tvorba* 2, 1964, no. 22, p. 14.

[19] L. Skupa, *Moderní, nebo jen módní? Reflexe počátků „nové vlny“ v Československu*, p. 60.

[20] Brebera and Blažek 'prepared a feature story about spa patients in Luhačovice.' With Novák (Žalman), they wrote a script 'about the experiences of a small boy during the May Uprising of 1945. Comp. *Tak blízko u nebe*, p. 3

[21] Pavel Skopal, *Filmová kultura severního trojúhelníku. Filmy, kina a diváci Československa, NDR a Polska 1945–1968*. Brno: Host 2014, pp. 68–71.

[22] The forgotten show stars a football referee named Stokroč played by Lubomír Lipský who presents his opinions on professional football in a hotel room. In *Mladý svět* weekly, Michal Novotný described the show as 'an incredible blunder' and 'the worst TV series in at least five years,' according to Jiří Pittermann from *Rudé Právo*, the series is 'an expression of considerable authorial and in particular dramaturgical irresponsibility.' Comp. Michal Novotný, *Televizní sloupek. Mladý svět* 9, 1967, no. 38, p. 2; Jiří Pittermann, *Týden u obrazovky. Rudé právo* 47, 1967, no. 253, p. 5.