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The brightest place is under the candlestick. Interview with Mark Ther

Mark Ther's film work cannot be simply labelled as taboo breaking or, on the contrary, perverse. His fluctuation between the two extremes makes the marginal come to the very centre of our attention, however stripped of usual interpretations and judgment.

You started working with videos already in the 1990s. At that time, AVU (Academy of Fine Arts in Prague) offered favourable conditions and especially so in the studios of Vladimír Skrepl and Michael Bielický, your tutors.

I was first introduced to video in Vladimír Skrepl's Painting Studio 2. I made my first video with Jirka Skála in 1998, called *Marodi (Patients)*. Vladimír Skrepl was very straightforward, and if you were willing to talk to him, he would support you: bring you books and discuss them with you. But when you refused to have discussions and consult with him, then it got more difficult. A Virgo, you know what I mean... But I think he wanted to feel a connection, especially with me. I, on the other hand, never needed someone to guide me. Thank God, I had plenty of ideas of my own and was keen to experiment. First, I made my own objects, but that wasn't good enough, so I started to draw "stories" while having a vision of a film in my head. These weren't stories strictly speaking; they were intentionally unfinished. I made those videos for myself, using exploratory techniques, as I lacked previous experience and equipment. I didn't even know how to edit it. There was no filmmaking equipment in the Painting Studio. Michal Bielický had, I think, two cameras and two computers, so the technical background was poor there as well, although it was the School of New Media.

How did you and Jirka Skála make your first videos then?

We used some small camera that they had ordered for Vladimír Skrepl's studio. Everybody wanted to work with it, so we had to share it. In 1990, I made a video of 4 minutes 5 seconds, where Rosa Ponselle and I sing an aria; the only thing on display is a blue screen while time passes by. With Mario Chromý, we made *Merlot*, *Sacrifice* and *Elton John*. Some things that I worked on with Adéla Svobodová are now lost. I also lost *Co mi dala Amerika*, (*What America gave and took*) where I lie on a bed with striped sheets and Maria Callas sings. When I moved to Bielický three years later, Ondřej Brody and Eva Jiřička came there with me – quite a powerful team. We brought sort of a different wave with us. We were interested in storytelling rather than technologies. I felt that Bielický was quite happy about it. Two years after our graduation, he returned to Germany, to Karlsruhe.

What contributed to the fact that some of your works got lost?

We took them on miniDV. Those were quite expensive tapes, which meant that sometimes they got overwritten without the previous work being backed up.

Was it school material?

We bought them by ourselves, and this was how we tried to save money.

Do you still have some of those original tapes, or did you only archive the digital copies?

As for *Co mi dala Amerika*, I lent it to *Umělec* magazine, and they lost the tape and never gave it back. I gave them the original so that they could make a copy, but it just got lost. Sadly, the quality was still quite low up to about 2005. We used the 4:3 format. Even if we might have done it in HD, the image was still low quality and it degraded with every additional transfer. Since we didn't quite understand that, we did a lot of stupid things. For example, we burnt the disc wrong. But we still managed to back up some of the work, and it makes up for some really beautiful old stuff. It's been a few years now.

You have mentioned several classmates – most of them are now renowned artists, and you were able to work with them. Were there others to help you with different parts of your filmmaking, such as editing, camera or sound?

At first, my films were edited by Jirka Brouček, who was excellent and made some good stuff of his own. When he graduated, however, he stopped doing art and returned to his hometown, Aš.

In the 1990s, a certain level of dilettantism was characteristic for moving pictures artworks. How did you put up with that back then?

Back then, we were glad to manage. We weren't used to worrying about things like a clacking camera or poor sound. When I worked with Silva Mátlová, with whom we made *My pleasure*, we walked in FAMU (*Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague*) and she was dexterous enough to negotiate a cooperation. It was in 2001 or 2002, and people at FAMU didn't have a clue what we, people from AVU, wanted from a film school: we were supposed to be painting or drawing, so what did we need cameras and lights for? Later, we were able to get cinematographer Darko Štulič from FAMU. From that moment on, it was our day-to-day routine to make films with FAMU people. There certainly was some dilettantism. But maybe it was more interesting than producing a perfectly done project that only makes you yawn.

Although your films are strongly characterized by your persona, they are often the work of a team of other distinctive personalities, such as Skála, Brody, Jiříčka, among others.

Jirka Skála was my classmate at Hollarka (Václav Hollar Art School); he was in the same year, but he was older and a sort of a leader. They did not teach us contemporary art at school, and Jirka showed us a lot. He used to bring in catalogues, and he picked films. He introduced us to many subjects, and we were very grateful to him. I think that even people around us were astonished at how much we knew. Jirka was a great teacher, and someone very close to me, too. With Jirka, we got working on our first videos, which were rather performances than stories, but I guess we had fun making them. I met Eva Jiříčka later at AVU. I think we didn't make anything together directly, but she was a good partner. She always said what she meant. Another Virgo. To put it casually, she would lay it on the line and say, "Look, this really isn't worth a shit". So, I always went to her to ask for her opinion. That was how we backed each other.

Eva Jiříčka is also a performer herself and some of your work also fits that category.

We made some performances in cooperation with Ondřej Brody. We used to attack some taboos. Once we were on a bus and put some of the stinkiest stuff we could find on our bread. We were sitting there peacefully: some people reacted while others tried to ignore us.

Is it the video *MHD (Public Transport)* that you are talking about? Does it still exist?

Yes, exactly, *MHD*. Ondřej told me he had accidentally deleted some stuff, and I suppose he no longer has many of those things. But I backed up many of our works together. As for *MHD*, I believe I could find it. We made it prior to 2005. Opportunities like these attracted me back then, but I suppose Ondřej enjoyed it more than I did. Later, we went in for stories and that led to *Miss Krimi*, judged as antisocial by Bielický. We made two episodes. Ondřej preferred the harsher one, of course; I tended to like the romantic one more. But we had other things in common, such as our fondness for the 1980s.

An inspiration from the past is the red line of many different co-created projects. What is it that interests you about going back to past decades and their respective aesthetics?

I obviously didn't live through all of it, but as for the 1970s, it's Maria Callas and the end of her life. I studied her from her photographs from that time, to see what she'd looked like and what people would wear back then. The 1980s are a reminiscence of the communist era for me. The beginning of the 1990s brings to mind acid washed jeans, high waist pants with high heels, white socks and horses. Those were the images that tempted me and Ondřej.

And could you say why?

I don't know. In the 1980s, Ondřej lived in Ecuador, a Spanish-speaking country, and I spent my childhood partly in West Germany and partly in Czechoslovakia. He was a part of high society and very isolated at the same time. I was tortured by the clash between the West and the East. Once a year, our whole family would go to Bavaria to

visit my grandparents. It was always awful to come back to Czechoslovakia. It was traumatising, and I think its effects last even today.

Was it the family history that raised your interest in the Sudetenland, something that is apparent through your work until 2008?

I actually never really knew the Sudetenland. All I know about the era comes from stories, documents and historic annals. What interests me most is the dialect of Broumov, because that is where my family came from. We spoke both Czech and German at home, yet it is hard for me to read in that dialect, because I wasn't raised speaking it. I always get someone to help me translate it. The interesting thing is that when I have the German dialect from Broumov translated, it can't be done by a German person from Ústí nad Labem or Karlovy Vary. Everyone thinks that German used to be homogenous. In fact, it was the opposite. Bundesdeutsch, the language of Germany, was never spoken here. The diversity of the German language was marvellous: Germans from Silesia spoke a different language from that of Germans in East Prussia, Russia, Romania or the Carpathians. That same diversity also pertains to Sudetenland, a place that interests me and has become one of my themes.

Who do you go to when you need to consult those linguistic matters?

The only ones to go to are those who actually speak the dialect. There are still those who will write to you, "You know, Czech is not quite my language", even though they spent all their childhoods here. And those are exactly the people I seek out to record reading my previously prepared texts in their dialects, in order to use it in my films later.

In your film works related to the Sudetenland, you deal with more than the issues of cultural or linguistic minorities. Marginality and exclusion are also felt in more general matters, such as sexual orientation or perception of an older age. In your latest film, *Mitsu*, the theme of isolation is amplified by your choice of the main protagonist, modelled around a real Japanese-Austrian countess.

What led you to make this choice?

We need to go back to 1996 or 1997, when, for some reason, I was interested in Japan. My aunt might have been the reason. She used to travel a lot as a chorus

singer with the National Theatre. Before that, she was a soloist in Teplice and later moved to Prague to be part of a chorus. The chorus used to travel to Japan once every two years. She first visited Japan in 1985 and then again in 1995 and 1997. She was excited about it and later, with her subsequent visits, she became infatuated with Japan. She brought back all kinds of things, and I was seduced by her stories. Later, there was an overlap between my interest in Japan and Maria Callas, who did one of her last concerts in Tokyo. When I was awarded the Jindřich Chalupecký Award, I was offered to choose one of the 32 Czech Centres in the world. And I went to Tokyo. There, I first learnt about countess Mitsuko Aoyama, the wife of an Austrian aristocrat, who lived on their land near Domažlice up until the birth of Czechoslovakia. The dialect of the region helped me to emphasise isolation, a theme that came to me through a series of different forms of uprootedness. I heard that she grew to become a very annoying lady. In the area, they used to call her “the mean hag”.