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Vladimír Drha

Vladimír Drha (7th May 1944 – 21st June 2017), a boy from Vysočany and a big fan of films, was one of the most talented students of his generation at Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (FAMU). During the normalization period he was prevented from joining the film industry, so he started making feature films only 10 years later, and in a limited volume. His films of 80s commented on everyday life in the socialist society as well as on intergenerational relations. He directed number of films and serials while working intensively for TV after the revolution. As an author, he preferred rather civil and intimate approach to work, putting the emphasis on a realistic process of creation and avoiding grand gestures and dramatic mise-en-scène. With certain nostalgia he was getting back to his youth and adolescence, pictured notably in his last two feature films *Početí mého mladšího bratra* (The Conception of My Younger Brother) and *Anglické jahody* (English Strawberries).

Vladimír Drha grew up in Vysočany, living with his parents and grandmother in a large gallery-access house. Among its residents, there was also its former owner who became after the war the director of the local cinema named Olympia. Drha's father would work in a foundry operation or as a tram driver, in 1949 he took a training to become a clerk, later working in a foreign trade position. Drha captured that era in his film *Početí mého mladšího bratra* where the focus is not on true stories and their reconstruction but rather on individual characters and their real models.

Being a big fan, Drha's father used to take his son Vladimír to cinema since he was three years old.^[1] Those were the first years after the war when American films were gradually substituted with Soviet and Czech socially constructive production. As a little boy unable to read, he tended to pay attention to advertising posters to orientate himself in a program. He would go to see any film, favouring for example Chinese adventure films. For him, it was fascinating to watch a soviet film with only two other people in the auditorium, experiencing nearly private screening. ^[2] He

considered Odboj and Olympia his 'native' cinemas, from time to time he visited Humanita or Dukla as well. When studying at a secondary school, he would go to cinema every day, choosing from many sites all over Prague, and would read anything on film, from journals to *Histoire Générale du Cinéma* by Georges Sadoul. Although he was in love with film, at the age of 14 he headed to the school of economics in Resslova street to study foreign trade. Soon he realized he should better follow his heart and study what he liked. After graduating from the secondary school, he wondered about studying at FAMU, but the school required a year of experience. In the end, Drha got his experience at Atria, a foreign trade establishment.

At the end of 1962 he applied to study direction and in September 1963 entered the class of Elmar Klos, with Jiří Hanibal as his assistant. The class was multinational, apart from Czech students there were also a Bulgarian woman and a Syrian man. It was the Syrian student, director-to-be Moris Issa, who became one of the closest friends of Vladimír Drha. In his third year, he was offered to join Krátký film, an institute of short-film making, working among others with Jan Špáta who filmed Drha's short author documentary essay *O malém světě* (About the Small World). It is a portrait of a gallery-access house in Prague's suburbs, an autobiographical reminiscence about where the author spent his childhood and who were the residents of the house. In 2000, the film used to be projected as a fore-film to *Početí mého mladšího bratra*. As the original house had been taken down, a similar location in the city of Kroměříž needed to be used. During his studies, Drha was shooting course-work films, as well as taking part in work of his friends. He presented a studio scene of the third year, *Ceremoniál* (The Ceremony), as his author work. Together with Moris Issa, they worked on the theme of *Bitva na červeném poli* (The Battle at the Red Field) by Rudolf Růžička. The life stories of Drha and Issa were pretty similar in the normalization period. Also, all three students could start making feature films only a long time after their graduation, with their careers profoundly affected, if not prevented altogether, by the changes in the then politics.^[3]

In 1968, Drha was assisting Jaromil Jireš with his second feature film, *Žert* (The Joke). Another interesting piece emerged as a short film on Karel Gott, a young star of the music industry. Gott's family lived next door to Drha's when they moved to Kobylisy, enabling the beginning director Drha to make the film *On* (He). After his graduation in autumn 1968, Drha started his compulsory military service by joining the

Army film. During 1968 and 1969, he produced a series of five loosely associated short films documenting various aspects of the army life. Drha meant to authentically catch its atmosphere while applying minimal stylization. All five films were improvised, shot without a screenplay. The introductory film is titled *Lekce* (Lesson); followed by *34 ženy* (34 Women), a film on wives of the army officers who are moving to Humenné city for the military site in Milovice has been occupied by the Soviet army. *Ves* (Village) deals with Milovice, at that time already taken by the foreign army. Originally, the director wanted to name it *Cizinci* (Foreigners), but he was not allowed to do so. *Farbotlač* (Colour print) was the only film in colour, portraying a Czech soldier from Milovice at his wedding in Zemplínské Hamry. The last film of the series, *Snové scény* (Dreamlike Scenes), observes three soldiers during their leave of absence in Český Krumlov. The series did not fulfil the expectations of the authorities for it presented the Czechoslovak army in a rather negative light. Moreover, it addressed the influence of the Soviet army after the occupation, which was considered controversial.

In 1969, the director was offered to cooperate on a narrative film *Návštěvy* (Visits), based on *Návštěva povolena* (Visiting Allowed) by Zdena Salivarová. Salivarová approved the screenplay and the film started to be shot under the title *Jak rodí chlap*, using a 16mm film and employing the Šebor-Bor duo. An old woman sets out to visit her son in prison after a long time, but when she arrives she finds out that due to an administrative error somebody else is awaiting her. Without any explanation, the film remained unfinished and the material got lost. Vladimír Drha remembers the situation: “We arrived at the Barrandov studio at night, and there, at night and in a complete darkness, they informed us the film had been stopped. I don’t know who said that, it was dark. Seriously. Things were done that way. In dark. And it was over.”^[4] In 1971, Zdena Salivarová published the screenplay in the exile magazine *Svědectví*.^[5]

The years that followed were hard for Vladimír Drha to live through. He was made to discontinue the preparation of his first feature film and in fact forced to take a break in the field of feature film. Drha spent most of 70s working only in TV. The first work offer came in 1972 from the managing editor Marie Kocíková. *Pohled z pohledu* (Looking at Pictures) showed a man who projects hand-coloured slides at schools. In the following years, the director shot several other “portrait” films – *Pozadí* (Behind) is devoted to an usher working in the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra, *Kabinet krásné knihy* (Beautiful Book Cabinet) to husband and wife working as book-binders, whereas

Zpověď umělce svého věku (Confession of a Young Artist) introduces the painter Josef Liesler. Drha was also active in the culture revue *Kroky*, or took part in *Rodinná pošta*, a portrait programme for women.

As Drha's first feature film was discontinued, another project could be started—a three-part narrative film *Jak rodí chlap*, produced in 1979 and based on David Jan Novotný's subject matter. Additionally, the film included short stories by young directors Jan Ekl and Zdeněk Troška who also made their debut. All screenplays share the theme of becoming a new father, making a moral comment on parental responsibility. The story directed by Drha, *Věrné milování* (Devoted Love), portrays a father who scrambles out of drunken idleness after becoming a parent.

Drha's first feature film was shot in 1981, in cooperation with the Gottwaldov Film Studio. The film *Dneska přišel nový kluk* provided a considerable insight into a life of younger generation, setting off a wave of films on adolescents. Moreover, the film proved successful at the San Remo film festival and won three awards at the International Film Festival Karlovy Vary – Award for Debut, Award of the Catholic Committee and FIPRESCI Award, given to Drha by the head of critics committee off-stage as it allegedly wasn't appropriate that Drha appeared on the main stage so many times. The main character is a rebel, a bit against his will. Being a straight man of principles, he is considered by the socialist society suspicious and undesirably different – for his long hair or his sincerely hard-working spirit. Played by the debuting Marek Brodský, the character became believable and well mannered.

In 1985, the director made two more films on adolescents, that time cooperating with the Barrandov studio. *Do zubů a do srdíčka* (Friendship is Worth Fighting For) tells a story of two students at a primary school who become bitter enemies, addressing both common problems of teenage years and the state of the socialist education system. *Mezek* (The Mulish Victor) is rather critical, observing a teacher with a characteristic surname; being stubborn and work-oriented, he tries his best to advise and support his pupils. His effort is not appreciated neither by his pupils, nor by his frustrated colleagues. There are two other feature films produced in 80s, with Jiří Pomeje playing the main role. *Dotyky* (Touches) is a story on a young novice in film-making; *Muka obraznosti* (The Torment of Imagerz) is a film based on Vladimír Páral's work, depicting, likewise *Dneska přišel nový kluk*, a young graduate clashing with

reality.

In his work, Vladimír Drha met the whole Brodský family, a family of actors-when preparing the feature comedy *Tisíc gólů proti fotbalu* (A Thousand Goals Against Football) in 1981, he contacted Vlastimil Brodský to take part, but the film was never started. In 1987, Jana Brejchová asked Katarína Slobodová to write a screenplay for her, at the same time asking Drha to do directing. Thus, the psychological drama *Citlivá místa* (Sensitive Spots) was made, telling a story of a mother (Jana Brejchová) and her daughter (Tereza Brodská), both experiencing difficulties in their lives while handling a complicated mutual relationship.

In 80s, Drha was also working a lot for TV. In 1983, he made several films in Brno that represent the best of television drama production of the decade. The films share a bitter-sweet touch, referring to the day-to-day nature of that time, and prove humorous and ironic when authentically depicting banal situations and provincial life. *Chladná zrána* (Cold Morning) shows a young soldier who leaves for the weekend, the whole time trying to get into an intimate contact with his wife, but for a permanent rush unable to find the way. *Radostné události* (Happy Day) depicts a pre-wedding day as experienced by a young couple. The groom's flat is getting full of his relatives and friends who start to interact with each other, creating ridiculous and awkward situations. A more intimate film, *Restaurace* (Restaurant), is a late romance on two lonely people.

The film-makers who graduated from FAMU in the first years of the normalization period weren't too much excited about the Velvet revolution as far as their work was concerned. In the second half of 80s, there eventually came interesting work offers, but with the fall of the regime, the Barrandov studio was shut and restructured. The directors meanwhile became middle-aged and found it difficult to come to terms with the new conditions. In this period, Vladimír Drha contributed to film by making two fairy tales: in 1990 presenting *Jestřábí moudrost* (Hawk's Wisdom), and seven years later producing *O perlové panně* (The Pearl Maiden). His last feature films have already been mentioned – *Početí mladšího bratra*, and *Anglické jahody*, featuring for the first time Tomáš Klus, a singer and a beginning actor. Both films take the director and the script author back to his youth, in particular to the occupation in August 1968 that brought a profound change into life of his generation. In 90s and after

2000, Drha was working not only in feature film, but also in various TV stations. Six years ago he developed a palate cancer, living in seclusion since then. Barely going out, he spent most of the time at home, with his cat and hundreds of films and books. He was last seen in public in the Ponrepo cinema on 11th May 2017 when opening a retrospective exhibition dedicated to the Normalization Generation, screening his films made at the Army Film. To support the newly published book of the same title, The National Film Archive held an exhibition, screening the film *Dneska přišel nový kluk*.

Notes:

[1] Interview with Vladimír Drha by Marie Barešová on 8th August 2016 in Prague. NFA, Collection of audio records, GN 3106.

[2] Interview with Vladimír Drha by Marcela Pittermannová on 17th January 2000. NFA, Collection of audio records, OS 317.

[3] Students graduating from direction, screenwriting and script editing within 1968–1973 are portrayed in a book published this year; the book also includes the edited interview with Vladimír Drha. See Barešová, Marie – Dvořáková, Tereza Cz, *Generace normalizace. Ztracená naděje českého filmu?* Praha: Národní filmový archiv, 2017

[4] Interview with Vladimír Drha by Marie Barešová on 8th August 2016 in Prague. NFA, Collection of audio records, GN 3106.

[5] See Salivarová, Zdena, Anně K. je zima. In: *Svědectví, čtvrtletník pro politiku a kulturu*, 1971, No. 42, p. 277–300.