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Zbyněk Brynych

Nazi crimes and the relationship people have with their living environment. Those were the two leading and regularly recurrent themes, among a number of others, examined by Zdeněk Brynych in his work. (1927–1995). This year, we celebrate the 90th birth anniversary of the film director unafraid of complicated subjects or formal experiments.

„Where there is nothing to fight for, cinema can be crossed out. Because film is the art of putting up resistance. “[\[1\]](#)

Mravenci nesou smrt (Ants Bring Death, 1985), a film from the Czechoslovak political normalization era under the Communist regime, depicts the city of Karlovy Vary as a den of depravity and a hub of international drug trade; and as such, it doesn't look like a film made by a native who always liked to come back home. It was however the very same spa city, number 8 in Fügnerova street, to be absolutely exact, where Zbyněk Brynych spent the first years of his life in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Later, he and his family moved to the Lesser Town district of Prague where he attended high school.

After his graduation, Brynych's futile character manifested itself for the first time, his need to be always exploring and trying something new. He had changed jobs several times before he found out that film was what he wanted to do. Among other things, he had been a professional musician for a while. In 1946, his script on the life and work of Antonín Dvořák won the 4th prize in a screenwriting competition. That helped him to get a job at the Documentary Film Studio in Prague and Gottwaldov for the next three years. He then left for Barrandov, where he worked as an assistant director on Jiří Weiss's productions *Poslední výstřel* (The Last Shot) a *Vstanou noví bojovníci* (New Fighters Shall Arise, both 1950). His experience with all possible film employers of the time was complete when he started working for Czechoslovakia's

Army Film, where in two years' time he made a series of short instructive films teaching soldiers for instance about how to treat confidential information, for instance (*Slyší tě nepřítel* /The Enemy Hear You, 1951/) or how to defend their homeland against foreign agents (*Neprojdou* /They Shall Not Pass, 1952/).

In the following years, Brynych worked as an assistant director under Miroslav Cikán (*Na konci města* /A House in the Suburbs, 1954/), Vladimír Čech (*Nezlob, Kristino!* /Don't be Nasty, Krstina!, 1956/) and Miroslav Hubáček (*Roztržka* /A Quarrel, 1956/). He was ready for his own debut as a director in 1958. *Žižkovská romance* (A Local romance), capturing the day-to-day troubles of young people living in a working-class district of Prague, was written by Brynych's contemporary, Vladimír Kalina, for whom this was his first important film experience. [2] Built up around the relationship of Mirek and Helena, who tries to hide an illegitimate child from her young working-class lover, the central story line was an anticipation of the New Wave's onset, similarly to Helge's *Škola otců* (School for Fathers, 1957) or Jasný's *Zářijové noci* (September Nights, 1957), .

Brynych and Kalina were able to follow up with the tradition of writers like Neruda, Poláček or Čapek in capturing the atmosphere of a place and the „poetry of the ordinary day“, and at the same time to take snatches of real life and make them into a consistent film story with credible characters. Brynych used the same technique as in *Žižkovská romance*, chosen to represent Czechoslovak cinema in Cannes, to make *Pět z milionu* (Five Out of a Million, 1959), a collage of short stories, this time not limited by the district of Žižkov, but covering all of Prague.

Vladimír Kalina was again the author of the script of all he five chapters: *Mistr a dvacátý učedník* (The Master and the Twentieth Disciple), *Každý den je neděle* (Everyday is Sunday), *To zavinil Bonifác* (It Was Boniface's Fault), *Otrhaná písnička* (A Worn Out Song) and *Pavučina* (Spider Web). In 1959, the film was awarded with the Golden Medal at the seventh World Festival of Youth and Students in Vienna. Each of the five segments focuses on the common life of the two heroes. The closing episode *Pavučina*, telling the story of a teenage girl having a love affair with her neighbor, drew special attention and even won a special award and the second prize for short film at the International Film Festival in Venice. Despite the success of his two first films, Brynych decided to drop the sociological approach to youths living in cities and

next he made a psychological spy drama, *Smyk* (Skid, 1960) with the literary contribution of Pavel Kohout.

Before doing so, as a conscientious Barrandov employee, he had participated in a working trip to China. In his report on the visit in the Middle Kingdom, he did not hide his emotion: „Everything starts with a smile, the same smile you see everywhere around, just as the cleanness, the honesty, the work. We had the possibility to visit immense cultural monuments of this nation with the longest and continuously developing line of culture, we have met both communists and independents, we have been impressed with the enormous diligence, modesty and ambition of all Chinese, their hatred of every unjust war, we were literally surrounded by all the great things that are being built in that country, we were happy knowing that the country belongs to the same peace camp with our country.“ In the most impressive part of his text, Brynych comments on the level of Chinese film production and the Chinese audience: „Before the visit in China, we thought that the pace, the rhythm of Chinese films was slow. Here, however, we were explained that the pace corresponds to that of the contemporary average Chinese viewer’ thinking. It will grow substantially faster.“^[3]

While the first two Brynych’s film were series of loosely connected micro-dramas, *Smyk* told a firmly built up story with a strong political accent. The aloof realistic style was replaced by an attack to the audience’s senses, where cameraman’s Jan Kališ compositions of footage anticipated the director’s subsequent inclination towards more expressive means of expression. The film’s central hero is František Král, exiled from Czechoslovakia after the 1948 communist coup, who, in conformity to the era’s ideology, has become an agent working for Western imperialists. Survivor of a car accident, Král undergoes a plastic surgery and returns to Czechoslovakia as a circus clown in order to make contact with a local group of spies.

Critics reproached to the film that it had been made mainly to appeal to the audience with its excessive use of visual effects at the expense of content; yet in 1960, *Smyk* was chosen to represent the Czechoslovak cinema at the International Film Festival in Mexico City, where its „exciting use of film language means“ was an object of appraisal. At the 12th International Film Festival in Karlovy Vary, Brynych won the best director’s award. A mention of *Smyk* in the *Sight & Sound* magazine is a proof of its distribution abroad. Critic Cynthia Grenier wrote it was a technically mastered work

with signs of expressionism, enchanted by western design, trying to rebel at any cost against the tradition of social realism, but suffering from a confused and hard-to-believe story. She concludes her reflection with an original comparison stating that the production „looked rather like Wajda gone completely wild in CinemaScope.“[4]

Brynych's two following films, crazy comedy *Každá koruna dobrá* (Every Penny Counts, 1961) and rural drama *Neschovávejte se, když prší* (Don't Take Shelter from the Rain, 1962) were met with not just embarrassment, but with downright refusal. *Každá koruna dobrá*, a sequence of a gag after gag, was seen as a failed attempt to revive the genre of crazy slapstick comedies. The film, where Karel Höger was quite unusually cast in a comedy role, has paid a high price for the lack of a unifying dramaturgical concept and a stylistic key that would have linked the disparate ideas and put them into some order. When the Christmas issue of the *Kultura* magazine asked popular personalities the question: „Which Czech or Slovak work of art year you think was really bad this year, and why?“, many of the respondents mentioned Brynych's latest film. Some didn't pull their punches („irresponsible jumble of nonsense“), others, like actor Miloš Kopecký, tried to be more diplomatic: „Everything there is just wrong. The direction, the cast, especially in the leading roles.“[5]

Neschovávejte se, když prší, a story both realistic and poetic, about a teacher from a distant village, was written by Jindřiška Smetanová. Brynych decided to animate the simple storyline with unusual form and stylized film language. According to reviewers, the self-serving effects were pushed at the expense of the story and took the audience's attention away from the drama. The criticism was also directed at the unnatural acting, discontinuous rhythm of action and replacing real conflicts with fabricated drama. According to Jaroslav Boček, the film „is a crystallization of many dramaturgical mistakes from recent period.“ In the same text, Boček concludes that Brynych was led astray into „a deep inner crisis, a crisis of his whole talent“ and adds a key finding about the 1960s and their symbiosis between filmmakers and film journalists: „It's not just his fault. It is also the fault of film critics who weren't able to recognize the danger already in *Smyk* „[6]

Brynych remained faithful to his original artistic methods, undenyng of his fascination with foreign film productions, in his following and probably most acclaimed film *Transport z ráje* (Transport from Paradise, 1962), this time, however,

he was able to find „a measure that would attenuate the rather exclusive, but not as much important, features with less prominent means of expression.“^[7] *Transport ráje* is an adaptation of Arnošt Lustig's short story book *Noc a naděje* (Night and Hope) that take us to the Theresienstadt concentration camp only days before the transport for the extermination camp in Birkenau was despatched. This time, Brynych opted for a more moderate, quasi-documentary approach, compared to his previous works (and also to Radok's film on the same subject, *Daleká cesta* /Distant Journey, 1949/), and he returned to the form of collective drama, observing everyday human hustle. Despite this reservedness, he was able to inspire, put in Jan Žalman's words, „a feeling of Kafkaesque atmosphere“ somewhere between „reality and spectre“. ^[8]

From the many awards won by *Transport z ráje*, we should at least mention the Golden Leopard from the 1963 16th International Film Festival in Locarno and the plaque for the winner from the International Festival of Resistance Film 1964 in Cuneo, Italy. Juraj Herz was Brynych's assistant director for *Transport from Paradise* and he later commented his way of directing actors for the *Záběr* magazine: „Brynych and Kadár both have a very fine sense for guiding actors towards a significant and distinctive expression supporting their concept.“^[9]

Brynych's next internationally acclaimed film was *Místo* (Place), one of the three shorts in collage *Místo v houfu* (Place in the Crowd, 1964, along with *Jak se kalí ocel* /Quenching of Steel/ by Václav Gajer and Václav Krška's *Optimista* /Optimist /). All three stories about young characters trying to integrate into some kind of a group were written by Antonín Máša. Brynych's contribution, set during hops harvest, won the Silver Medal in Venice and the prize for the best short at the international festivals of Cannes and Oberhausen.

Brynych returned to the subject of Jews and their life under the Protectorate in his forceful drama *...a pátý jezdec je Strach* (...and the Fifth Horseman is Fear, 1964). Jewish doctor Armín Braun (played by Miroslav Macháček) hides a member of a resistance organization in his Prague apartment during German occupation, thus launching a struggle with his own conscience and fear. The image concept, cooperated on by artist Ester Krumbachová, was on purpose defined by expressionism and the atmosphere of the film, filled with metaphors and generally valid symbols, was suggestive of a feverish dream or a hallucination. The adaptation of Hana

Bělohradská's psychological novel *Bez krásy, bez límce* is one of the highlights of Brynych's work, also because he was able to find appropriate means to express the unbearable institutionalized evil and for once reach the rare balance between the form and the content. Nonetheless, in an interview with A. J. Liehm, he admitted that the concept of his earlier films was closer to his heart.

„Every person has two poles inside and I must admit that one of mine is definitely just that of *Žižkovská romance*, *Pavučina* in *Pět z miliónu* and *Místo*. I am more the sort of a person of *Místo* than that of *Pátý jezdec*, more a man of *Žižkovská romance* than one of *Spravedlnost*. „^[10]

Spravedlnost stands for *Já, spravedlnost* (I, Justice, 1967), a psychological thriller with elements of sci-fi, closing Brynych's trilogy about crimes committed during WW II. During the Nuremberg trials in 1946, Dr. Heřman (Karel Höger) is kidnapped by a group of former Nazis and taken to an isolated German sanatorium to look after Adolf Hitler, who had not actually been killed in his Berlin bunker. In the meantime, the members of the organizations are trying to come up with an adequate punishment for crimes committed by the former leader of Nazi Germany. The script, based on Miroslav Hanuš's book published as early as in 1946, asks whether justice for inhumane crimes must be executed in a just as inhumane way.

Although the film was awarded the special prize of the jury at the International Science Fiction Film Festival in Trieste, it did not win over the critique. Jan Žalman, for instance, didn't find a deeper meaning in it: „(...) even though fantasy fiction has many rights, if it is supposed to impress the viewer with a morally deep artistic generalization, it has to inspire more than the hitchcockian „pleasant chills“, that only make one think „nothing happened“ and go to sleep quietly when it's over.“^[11]

Before *Já, spravedlnost*, Brynych had made a trio of less renowned films proving his desire to try new genres again and again and to analyze new subjects. He commented on his *Souhvězdí panny* (Sign of the Virgin, 1965) based on a story by Milan Uhde, as follows: „I would like to make – to put it simply – a melodic film about people who love each other.“^[12] A love romance with then unknown Jaroslava Obermaierová was shot in co-operation with the Ministry of National Defense at a modern military airport, which was the film's main attraction, along with erotic scenes slightly more open than

usual. In his *Tempo první lásky* (Rhythm of First Love, 1965), a mid-length complement to adventurous crime film *Transit Carlsbad* (Transit Carlsbad, 1966), a similar part of added value was played by Grandhotel Moskva (today's Pupp) in Karlovy Vary, serving as a background for a short episode from the life of an elevator boy. The director made a half-serious comment about the choice of the hero's profession: I'm a fan of liftboys, because I think dreaming gets the most beautiful inside of the four walls of an elevator." [13]

Transit Carlsbad, created with the script by Jan Procházka in the creative group of Šebor-Bor, was a socialist response to the adventures of James Bond, a fact its creators were not trying to conceal. Quite the contrary, they even based the promotion of the film on that fact. For the *Film a doba* magazine, Brynych made the following statement about Bond: „He boldly proceeds to rape all our female spies, he is energetically racy. I would like to get inside this world and pay Bond back in his own coin.“[14] Brynych was enchanted with the story around a hijack of a prominent Austrian scientist especially because it took place in his home city, Karlovy Vary.[15] He didn't win critical acclaim, though, but acidity. Gustav Franci: „(...) we have to stare often and with length in the eyes of secret agents with devilish things going on in their heads. Maybe they are there, but all those agents keep it for themselves, probably saving it for the next film.“[16]

Before he was officially allowed by the leadership of the Czechoslovak Film to leave for Western Germany, where he made three features and six TV productions in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Brynych had had time to take part in another collage project. *Dialóg 20-40-60* (Dialogue, 1968) was co-authored by Brynych along with Peter Solan and Jerzy Skolimowski. Each of the three segments lets us hear the same Tibor Vichta's dialogues about love and marriage, said by three couples in their 20s, 40s and 60s. Brynych directed the last segment with Jozef Kroner as the lead. Just like this film didn't lure more personalities of international cinema to Slovakia (also due to the 1968 Soviet invasion), neither did Brynych make a breakthrough in the West.

Brynych's German projects were generally received in a similar manner as his *Engel, die ihre Flügel verbrennen* (Angels Who Burnt Their Wings, 1970), a criminal thriller with not very subtle Oedipal overtones, described by a reviewer of the English

Monthly Film Bulletin as a cheap exploitation, seemingly revealing the degeneration of the middle class, but failing in terms of camera, editing and rhythm.

On his return to Czechoslovakia, Brynych made *Oáza* (Oasis, 1972), an adventurous drama, followed by a love story of a young engineer, *Jakou barvu má láska* (What Color is Love, 1973) or a distinctively propagandist drama with a hero of strong political convictions, *Noc oranžových ohňů* (Night of Orange Fires, 1974). The circumstances of the creation of *Oáza* are also noteworthy. The film follows the fate of a group of runaways from a foreign legion, meeting the crew of a German aircraft shot down in African desert. The color widescreen film taking place in the middle of the sand plains was shot on the coast of Caspian Sea thanks to a cooperation with the productions of Soviet films from the Sovinfilm Studios.

Throughout his filmmaking career, Brynych worked on subjects both romantic and adventurous, both conforming to the ruling ideology or rather independent, and that is why in his remaining filmography, you can find *Romance za korunu* (Romance for a Crown, 1975), a musical about first love, next to spy drama *Akce v Istanbulu* (Operation in Istanbul, 1975) or a story set among miners, *Hněv* (Anger, 1977). The latter caused indignation mainly among the users of the Czech and Slovak on-line film database ČSFD, one of them calling the film an „absolute rubbish“.

Brynych's varied and rich filmography was complete when he had finished his three final criminal dramas, (*Stíhán a podezřelý* /Prosecuted and Suspicious, 1978/, *Kdo přichází před půlnocí* /Who Comes Before Midnight, 1979/, *Mravenci nesou smrt* /Ants Bring Death, 1985/) and the drama *Poločas štěstí* (Half-life of Happiness, 1984), symbolically bringing the audience back to the Žižkov district of Prague, where he had started his career as a film director quarter a century earlier. The director, deceased on 24 October 1995 in Prague, once said that for him, film was a „matter of the author's subjective way of expression,“ [\[17\]](#) but the diversity of his work rather confirms the words of Miloš Fiala, written in 1970 in Brynych's profile for the *Film a doba* magazine:

„Brynych loves new starts too much, he isn't „stabilized“ around one basic personal subject nor a clearly defined artistic vision. His choice of literary bases is characterized with certain volatility, he switches between authors of different, and

even contradictory poetic types (...). His choices as a director and dramaturg are far too often quite unlucky: first, in terms of subjects in relation to his specific talent, second, in terms of his directing concept and rendering of the subject. Hence the great imbalance in his filmography, juxtaposing works of outstanding or very good quality with works full of mistakes.“ [18]

Notes:

[1] Liehm, Antonín J., *Ostře sledované filmy. Československá zkušenost*. Praha: Národní filmový archiv, 2001, p. 160.

[2] *Žižkovská romance* was also the start of Brynych's collaboration with musical composer Jiří Sternwald, lasting until 1974, when they made together *Noc oranžových nožů* (1974).

[3] Brynych, Zbyněk, Malá procházka velikou zemí. *Záběr* 1959, vol. 11, no. 9, p. 8.

[4] Grenier, Cynthia, East-West Meeting Ground. *Sight and Sound*, Fall 1960, no. 29, p. 182.

[5] Vánoční anketa, *Kultura* 1961, vol. 5, no. 51-52 (21. 12.), p. 13.

[6] Boček, Jaroslav, Ne pouze prohra. *Kultura* 1962, vol. 6, no. 32 (9 August), p. 4.

[7] Zvoníček, Stanislav, Dva rozdílné filmy o tomtéž. *Film a doba* 1962, vol. 8, no. 9-10, p. 517.

[8] Žalman, Jan, *Umlčený film*. Praha: KMa, 2008, p. 219.

[9] Rubín, Jindřich, Slibný nástup mladého režiséra. *Záběr* 1965, vol. 16, no. 10 (31 May), p. 2.

[10] Liehm, Antonín J., *Ostře sledované filmy. Československá zkušenost*. Praha: Národní filmový archiv, 2001, p. 163.

[11] Žalman, Jan, *Umlčený film*. Praha: KMa, 2008, p. 341.

[12] Bystrov, Vladimír, Brynychův osm a půl, *Kino* 1965, vol. 20, no. 20 (7 October), p. 9.

[13] V.B., Tempo první lásky & Transit Carlsbad. *Film a doba* 1966, vol. 12, no. 4, p. 178.

[14] Ibid.; the creators described their relation to Bond films in more detail in the epilogue of the script: „James Bond brings millions of visitors to cinemas. Here and there, the curtain of some insignificant secret is pulled, for the big propaganda is well worth it. Here and there, it is even possible to make a joke about the real secret services. One way or another, Bond has won more sympathy than the real service itself... If we try, to put it briefly, to create a hero of the sort most in demand these days, it is because we want the audience in Czechoslovak cinemas to be enchanted not only by imported heroes from behind the Atlantic ocean, but to provide equal treatment also to our countrymen...” Franci, Gustav, Romantika se slevou. *Filmové a televizní noviny* 1966, vol. 12, no. 2, p. 2.

[15] Soeldner, Ivan, Proč nechce Zbyněk Brynych točit Maryšu. *Divadelní a filmové noviny* 1966, vol. 9, no. 18, p. 10.

[16] Franci, Gustav, Romantika se slevou. *Filmové a televizní noviny* 1966, vol. 12, no. 2, p. 2.

[17] Soeldner, Ivan, Proč nechce Zbyněk Brynych točit Maryšu. *Divadelní a filmové noviny* 1966, vol. 9, no. 18, p. 10.

[18] Fiala, Miloš, Ráje a smyky Zbyňka Brynychy. *Film a doba* 1970, vol. 16, no. 1, p. 24.