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Animated Fairy-Tales of Václav Bedřich

“Much remains unappreciated in Czech animation, in particular the work of directors such as Václav Bedřich.”

Jiří Šalamoun

Many Czech viewers know Václav Bedřich as the author of popular bedtime stories (*Maxipes Fík, Poppy-seed Girl and Butterfly Emanuel, Bob and Bobby*, etc.). Film enthusiasts praise his series of short animated horrors from the 1960s and 1970s, and modern satires made in collaboration with Vladimír Jiránek. But not many people know that Bedřich started his directorial career with adaptations of classic fairy-tales by Karel Jaromír Erben and Božena Němcová.

In the early 1950s, when these fairy-tale adaptations were made, Bedřich was already an experienced filmmaker, having worked in the Special Effects Studio during the Second World War. As an animator, he worked on the famous animated film *The Wedding in the Coral Sea* (*Svatba v korálovém moři*, 1944) which was with great success screened in Czechoslovakia and abroad after the war and thanks to its technical qualities became a milestone of Czech animation. After the war, Bedřich, along with other people from the Special Effects Studio, moved to the new Bratři v Triku Studio, where he worked on several films by Jiří Trnka among others and in 1948 himself started directing. His first films were short commercial, agitational and educational films in which he tried working with artistic shortcuts, gags and rhythm.

The shift to fairy-tales was connected to the overall dramaturgy of the studio, which started focusing on films for children towards the end of the 1940s. For Bedřich's adaptations, experienced Barrandov Studio screenwriter J. A. Novotný (*A Week in the Quiet House* [*Týden v tichém dome*, 1947], *Conscience* [*Svědění*, 1948]) was invited to

expand the original fairy-tales and adapt them according to the period ideological requirements. In the case of *Boil, little pot!* (Hrnečku, vař!, 1953) he built the plot on a class conflict between poor peasants and greedy landowners. His metaphor for possession was food: while an old woman begs for a piece of bread, landowners feast on cakes and grow fat. The magical mug isn't a disruption of the natural order of things as Erben had it, but rather a scourge of wicked exploiters. They are eventually forced to flee the village by a flood of porridge, and the poor are materially satisfied. Food is given to everyone and, just like in a socialist utopia, property is "fairly" divided among everyone.

But the technical execution of the film contrasts its schematic narration. Bedřich proved to be a skilful director with a sense for tension, gradation and a purely visual interpretation. In a fairy-tale that is largely built on words, he worked only with drawings and music by Jan F. Fischer. A fluent visual narration is supported by detailed drawings of characters' movements and precise editing with carefully chosen cuts and close-ups in crucial moments. In the culmination point of the plot when the mug starts cooking, Bedřich and his team of animators, which included for instance Zdeněk Smetana, Josef Kábrt and Jaroslav Doubrava, dynamised the images with moving shadows: "We cast moving shadows through a glass to the faces of individual characters captured in medium close-ups and close-ups. We added another dimension to the scene, and it worked really emotively."^[1]

The graphic designer of *Boil, little pot!* was Cyril Bouda, who congenially illustrated Erben's fairy-tales already in 1922. But his design was to a considerable extent conforming to the ideological brief of the early 1950s – particularly the characters of landowners were portrayed in a way that bordered on caricature. In the case of the main character, a poor girl, Bedřich directly intervened, something he later repeated while working with other graphic designers: "The girl, as Bouda drew her, was quite ugly, so I changed her a little according to my preferences. But I did that regularly, even with Maxipes Fík; everyone who compares Čechura and Šalamoun's book with my work will easily see it."^[2]

In the credits of his next film, *The Devil and Kate* (Čert a Káča, 1955), the graphic designer is Josef Lada. But Bedřich actually only used Lada's drawings from older books which he combined and animated. Just like with his previous film, he used cel

animation, which Bratři v Triku adopted from the Russian school of animation (Alexander Ptushko and Ivan Ivanov-Vano). “The interaction between characters was drawn only in rough unfinished sketches, and when everything was approved, it was finished into precise shapes, so it saved time, work and money.”^[3]

Even though Lada’s characters are basically simplistic drawings, the animation of *The Devil and Kate* is more complex than in *Boil, little pot!*. This applies in particular for both “action” scenes taking place at a ball and in Hell. In these scenes, the character movement is carefully choreographed with the camera movement and various camera plans moving along with the shadows. Furthermore, the frantic dance is animated exactly in the rhythm of music again composed by Jan F. Fischer.

Lada’s artistic style enriched the film with an important element of humour that Bedřich used also in his later work. “Lada’s drawings brought peace and relaxed laughter into the film, and their aesthetics inspired Bedřich’s creativity to lighten the movement action with humour and use the setting functionally. It was in this second plan, where the director placed a bunch of frolicsome village kids, watchful doggies, faddy goats and croaking ducks as known from Lada’s illustrations.”^[4]

The longer running time is a result of the original, which compared to *Boil, little pot!*, is richer in motifs. The adjustments Bedřich and Novotný made in their scripts contributed to the smoothness and compactness of the narration rather than to a “proper” ideological message. Only at the end can we find the mandatory punishment of the upper class that the Devil takes to Hell (unlike the original, where they learn a lesson and the society remains stratified). A brand-new element in the film is the spoken word. Dialogues on one hand help children find their bearings in the complex plot, but on the other hand carry a certain literal meaning and descriptiveness that at times slows the pace of the film down.

In his later work, Václav Bedřich moved away from classic fairy-tales. When he decided to adapt literary works, he chose other genres (comedy, parody, ballad). But the two early fairy-tales from the 1950s nevertheless remain crucial for understanding and evaluating his entire career. In these two films, he mastered narration and animation techniques that he also used later. And above all, he discovered an authorial style that he adopted. Edgar Dutka once said of him: “Bedřich

is the only director of Czech animation that without fail mastered the art of making viewers laugh out loud.”[\[5\]](#)

Boil, little pot! (*Hrnečku, vař!*, Czechoslovakia 1953), Director: Václav Bedřich, Script: J. A. Novotný, DoP: Vladislav Hofman, Music: Jan F. Fischer, Graphic Artist: Cyril Bouda. Studio Bratři v triku, 21 min.

The Devil and Kate (*Čert a Káča*, Czechoslovakia 1956), Director: Václav Bedřich, Script: J. A. Novotný, Václav Bedřich, DoP: Ivan Masník, Zdena Hajdová, Music: Jan F. Fischer, Graphic Artist: Josef Lada. Studio Bratři v triku, 42 min.

Notes:

[\[1\]](#) Ulver, Stanislav, Václav Bedřich a 28 výtvarníků. In Ulver, Stanislav. *Animace a doba*. Prague: Sdružení přátel odborného filmového tisku 2000, p. 339.

[\[2\]](#) Ibid, p. 338.

[\[3\]](#) Ibid, p. 339.

[\[4\]](#) Benešová, Marie – Boček, Jaroslav, *Kapitoly z dějin animovaného filmu*. Prague: Czechoslovak Film Institute 1979, p. 97.

[\[5\]](#) Dutka, Edgar, Nástin dějin českého animovaného filmu v paralelním pohledu. In Ulver, Stanislav, quote, p. 20.