

LEA MOHYLOVÁ / 21. 11. 2019

Antonín Máša in the context of the Czechoslovak New Wave

In addition to Pavel Juráček, Antonín Máša is another Czechoslovak New Wave artist having studied^[1] film and television dramaturgy at the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (FAMU). His role in shaping the Czechoslovak cinematography of the 1960s stretches across three creative sectors of filmmaking: dramaturgy^[2], directing and screenwriting. It is therefore quite rightly that Vladimír Körner and Pavel Juráček list him among those who „made the entire New Wave while still managing to write screenplays and direct themselves.“^[3] Already during his studies at the FAMU, Antonín Máša co-wrote the screenplay for the student film *The Tourist* (*Turista*, dir. by Evald Schorm, 1961) placing greater emphasis on the existential level of the story as opposed to the plot and on words/thoughts as opposed to the image, drawing on the thematic and expressive tendencies of modernist films mainly by Michelangelo Antonioni and Federico Fellini. Furthermore, he wrote two screenplays for planned film projects – the first one was the practical part of Máša’s thesis, a „lyrical film comedy portraying the lives of the village youth“^[4] called *A Wedding without a Sacristan* (*Svatba bez kostelníka*, 1962/1963). The other one was a screenplay merging several short stories by Eduard Bass from his short story collection *Lidé z maringotek* (*Trailer Folk*, 1942). However, Máša’s final text turned out to be too difficult to execute.^[5]

After graduation, Máša’s steps led him to the Barrandov Film Studio where he worked as a dramaturgist and screenwriter in the production team Kubala–Novotný since 1963. The same year, he wrote the screenplay for *Place in the Crowd* (*Místo v houfu*, 1964)^[6], capturing the fruitless efforts of young people to integrate into society and establishing one of the key topics of Máša’s later films: the conflict between an individual and society. It was when working on this film that Antonín Máša realized

how his own material was being deformed and shaped in the hands of the filmmakers and its future shape no longer depended on its author – the screenwriter. He wrote an article on this topic for the *Kino* magazine^[7] after *Place in the Crowd* had been screened and while working on the text of the screenplay for *Courage for Every Day* (Každý den odvahy, dir. by Evald Schorm, 1964) where he hoped for a greater creative freedom considering the filmmakers grouped around this film. Not even here could he experience full creative freedom though as his specific point of view could only be assumed by another director with difficulties (even though here it was Evald Schorm who was close to Máša both in style and personality).^[8] Even though in a 1963 interview for the *Filmové informace* magazine^[9] (when working on *Place in the Crowd*) Máša denied intending to become a director in the future, he decided to execute his future subject matters himself in the end for the abovementioned reasons: „Nobody cares about a screenwriter. The director takes what he wants from his work, crossing out some parts while emphasizing other ones. He might only use the raw story of the screenplay and focus on the expression of his own topic. That’s why a screenwriter can never experience full satisfaction from his work. He then has two options: he can either become a writer at the same time (like Ládíček Körner), or to take charge of the direction himself. Yes, it was the disappointment from the screenplay interpretation, whether better or worse, that led me to directing.“^[10]

In the second half of the 1960s Máša starts writing screenplays for his own films with only three being executed: *Searching* (Bloudění, 1965), *Hotel for Strangers* (Hotel pro cizince, 1966) and *Looking Back* (Ohlédnutí, 1968). Repeatedly rejected was his screenplay for the „social allegory“ *Women our Fate* (Ženy náš osud, 1966) subtitled *From the Memoires of a Self-murderer* (Ze zápisků sebevrahových) whose style (methods of silent comedies, such as gags or static images turning into photos), some motifs (locating the story in an inn) and the overall theme (the importance of love and death in human lives) drew on the dream-like poetry of *Hotel for Strangers*. Two more screenplays which couldn’t be transformed to a film, this time from 1969, are *Killing is Easy* (Zabíjet je snadné) and *A Dream about Peace* (Sen o míru). Both are similar to *Looking Back* in their political engagement, certain efforts to come to terms with the past and anchorage in a specific historical period (the end of World War II and pseudo-heroism for the former, the beginning of World War I for the latter) demonstrating the clash between a human/individual and the „great“ history. The

same applies to the non-executed TV film *A Good Cause is Won* (*Dobrá věc se podařila*, 1969) re-evaluating the period of Stalin's cult. By portraying existential issues of an individual and his conflict with the (hypocritical) society, all these screenplays form an organic part of Máša's work in the 1960s only interrupted by the emerging „normalization“ period.[11]

Among the young filmmakers of the 1960s, Máša was a „New Wave politician“, [12] an author who was „tormentingly sensitive to the disillusionments of his generation, to their embarrassing experience causing them to lose their ideals“, [13] the one who „was standing there like a believer over the ruins of a cathedral he had helped to build, feeling nothing but scepticism from which it was only a small step to disgust“ [14] as there was no one in the entire New Wave who would be more „deliberately engaged than he was“. [15] Máša's belief that there must be a non-artistic (non-aesthetic) mission to art in the context of morality and political engagement [16] was formed in the times when his thoughts were still aligned with the ideas of Marxism which had shaped the two fundamental aspects of Máša's approach to art as well.

The first aspect is the aspect of truth which is the essence of creation of an engaged work and as such, this aspect should be applied in art. Art should truthfully portray the lived reality, past, and mainly society and the position of an individual in its centre. In Máša's view, film (and art in general) should be a „distinctive tool of searching for truth“, [17] mediating the recipients an objective, i.e. truthful and generalized, understanding of the world: „As far as engagement goes, I don't see it in the choice of subject matter, topic or story, but in the personal approach of the author. An engaged approach is mainly about honesty and personal interest in a true statement. Examples of engaged films include *8½* just like *The Firemen's Ball* (*Hoří, má panenko*) as in both cases, the authors expressed themselves honestly and with the deepest freedom possible.“ [18]

This is closely related to the other aspect of Máša's approach to art – the already mentioned non-artistic mission meaning that through the artistically expressed truth, the author tries to transform the recipient in a way and influence his thoughts and behaviour. [19] Based on the use of these principles in art, Máša's films and screenplays are often associated with the attributes of political [20] or engaged, [21] as they involve an individual who becomes („politically“) engaged under the pressure

of the times and society, be it passively (*The Tourist*, *Hotel for Strangers*), or actively (*Searching*, *Courage for Every Day*, *Looking Back*) which ultimately leads to disillusion as he finds out that his efforts, or those of the group of people he has shared his ideas with, are fruitless as you cannot transform the facts of history, since it's these facts that transform the lives of individuals and masses. Máša himself admits the deliberate „political/engaged“ nature of his films, attributing it mainly to his journalist experience – before studying at the FAMU, he worked as an editor in the district (of Poděbrady) *Vesnické noviny* newspaper: „I have always wanted to express my political beliefs through cinematographic means; the motivation for my work has been more civic than artistic. Even the seemingly „dream-like“ *Hotel for Strangers* is a political metaphor on how the regime is killing a poet.“^[22]

This civic engagement / explicit political nature of Máša's films will be one of the reasons why some film publicists and historians also link him with the older generation (such as the tandem of directors Elmar Klos and Ján Kadár, Karel Kachyňa and Jan Procházka or Ladislav Helge), and mainly with the poetics of their films. For instance Stanislava Přádná ^[23] mentions certain similarities, mainly in the fact that all Máša's characters (both in films and screenplays) are politically engaged and losing their social-political ideals, they deal with scepticism and uncertainty made even worse by their non-heroic experience, which makes them very different from the apolitical characters in films by other New Wave authors.^[24]

A somewhat more radical view is held for instance by Jaroslav Boček who puts Máša as a director and screenwriter completely on the outside of the New Wave and its poetics: „The aesthetics of Máša's work, both of his screenplays (*Place in the Crowd*, *Courage for Every Day*), and his directorial debuts (*Searching*) – is much closer to the aesthetics of the works by Kachlík, Helge, Kachyňa or Oldřich Daněk than to those by Schorm, Uher, Chytilová or Forman. As such, he seems to me a belated member of the 1957 generation.“^[25] In spite of Boček's statement, it's Schorm's films that are close to Máša's work in some aspects. Both authors have the need to address the same topic, albeit in different ways (as suggested by Galina Kopaněvová above): the impact of present/past historical facts on an individual, leading to his uncertain position in society and to his perceived uncertainty in relation to searching for the essence and meaning of his life. These are the basic topics not only of their joint films *The Tourist* and *Courage for Every Day*, but also of all the films they made

independently in this period: Schorm's *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (Návrat ztraceného syna, 1966), *Five Girls Around the Neck* (Pět holek na krku, 1967), *The End of a Priest* (Farářův konec, 1968) or *The Seventh Day, the Eighth Night* (Den sedmý – osmá noc, 1969) where this topic grows more general, and Máša's *Place in the Crowd* (screenplay), *Searching*, *Hotel for Strangers* and *Looking Back*.

Yet another counterargument against Boček's attribution of Máša to the older generation can be the fact that all films by the New Wave authors can be seen as engaged to a certain extent, mainly in their sharp opposition to the official filmmaking of the 1950s (i.e. to the „official“ members of the previous generation as well)[26] or to the popular films of the 1960s, i.e. to certain artistic and political tendencies as well, even though the extent of their engagement is less explicit than in Máša's case: „I think there was a political aspect to the New Wave as it was certain opposition against the official filmmaking. Be it Vojtěch Jasný or František Vlácil, as a member of the previous generation, there was always an element of opposition to the then cultural and political trends. And in my view, there was also opposition to what was taught at the FAMU then: to what a „proper“ film should look like.“[27]

Notes:

[1] Pavel Juráček didn't complete his studies having been offered a full-time dramaturgist position in the Barrandov Film Studio.

[2] In relation to this era of Czechoslovak film, Antonín Máša himself mentions mainly his long-term work (1963–1969) as a dramaturgist since in this role he put forward many artistic suggestions often significantly shaping the final form of the film. Antonín Máša was the dramaturgist of *Every Young Man* (Každý mladý muž, dir. by Pavel Juráček, 1965), *Hot Air* (Horký vzduch, dir. by Václav Gajer, 1965), *Valley of the Bees* (Údolí včel, dir. by František Vlácil, 1967), *Adelheid* (dir. by František Vlácil, 1969) or *The Seventh Day, the Eighth Night* (Den sedmý – osmá noc, dir. by Evald Schorm, 1969).

[3] FRYŠ, Josef. *Antonín Máša: film, divadlo atd.* Praha: Havran, 2010. p. 36.

[4] HOFMANOVÁ, Libuše. Bloudění a jistoty. *Divadelní a filmové noviny* 8, 1964, No. 4, pp. 7–8.

[5] Martin Frič, the director of *Trailer Folk* (Lidé z maringotek, 1966), attested to this: „... I wrote the first version of the screenplay in cooperation with Antonín Máša (...) However, the execution of the film was then postponed for four years due to financial reasons. (...) For four years, I lived in a sweet illusion that once the film is approved, I can immediately start with the execution. However, when it was approved, I was surprised to find out that the original screenplay didn't meet today's film standards at all. Since Máša was busy making his own film (*Searching* – L. M.'s note), I ended up rewriting the screenplay myself.“ (Režisér Martin Frič o filmu „Lidé z maringotek“. *Filmové informace* 17, 1966, No. 13, p. 3.)

[6] A triptych based on short stories: *How the Steel Was Tempered* (Jak se kalila ocel, dir. by Václav Gajer), *A Place* (Místo, dir. by Zbyněk Brynych) and *The Optimist* (Optimista, dir. by Václav Krška).

[7] MÁŠA, Antonín. Pan XY a jeho Místo v houfu. *Kino* 19, 1964, No. 11, p. 6.

[8] „It was very hard to tell where Máša ends and Schorm starts – their creative expression seemed very similar. In spite of these equivalent personal approaches, their creative temperaments and natures are very different. Schorm seems to embody Gercen's definition of an artist's role: ‚We are not doctors – we are the pain.‘ Schorm is a director who feels reasonably humble towards the subject matter, towards the characters. Máša is one of those constantly groaning heretics and hopeless romantics.“ (KOPANĚVOVÁ, Galina. Předlednové ohlédnutí. *Film a doba* 15, 1969, No. 1, p. 38.)

[9] „The film writer is always kind of the one in the back because be the film good or bad, it's always the director who's considered responsible. – And you are not planning to become one? – I am not thinking about it.“ (Na otázky FI odpovídá scenárista Antonín Máša. *Filmové informace* 14, 1963, No. 50, p. 14.)

[10] FIKEJZ, Miloš. Pokus o inventuru minulosti s Antonínem Mášou. *Kino* 45, 1990, No. 9, p. 5.

[11] In 1970, Máša was banned from participating in any film projects, which was sealed by his dismissal from the Barrandov Film Studio in 1971. In his diary, Pavel Juráček summarized the situation in the Studio from the beginning of 1970: „They have cancelled the arts councils, stopped inviting us to the board meetings, and created a list of names that cannot appear in the credits or even in any contracts. They are about to cancel production teams, they have cut off all contact with important festivals and institutions, immediately cut down the salaries of all young directors, and divided directors into three groups based on their reliability and character: those who can continue to work, those who must show that they have wised up (...) and some will be dismissed since they are incorrigible (one speaks of Němec, Schorm, Chytilová, Máša, Kachyňa and Helge...)“ (JURÁČEK, Pavel. *Deník (1959–1974)*. Praha: Národní filmový archiv, 2003, p. 659.)

[12] ŠKVORECKÝ, Josef. *Všichni Ti bystří mladí muži a ženy: osobní historie českého filmu*. Praha: Horizont, 1991. p. 205.

[13] ŽALMAN, Jan. *Umlčený film*. Praha: KMa, 2008. p. 200.

[14] Ibid, p. 200.

[15] LIEHM, Antonín Jaroslav. *Ostře sledované filmy: československá zkušenost*. Praha: Národní filmový archiv, 2001. p. 362.; this is how Pavel Juráček described Máša in an interview with Antonín Liehm.

[16] Máša's way of engagement shouldn't be confused with agitation or propaganda but should be interpreted along the lines of for instance Elmar Klos's definition: „Engagement is often confused with partiality, and partiality in turn is often mistaken for propaganda agitation. Even though there are indeed certain overlaps between these three terms, they don't have the same meaning and don't always have the same purpose either. Engagement means enthusiasm about the cause which makes the author express himself publicly, fight for his cause and win people for it. In short, it's a mission of lived words and acts.“ (KLOS, Elmar. *Dramaturgie je když...: filmový průvodce pro začátečníky i pokročilé*. Praha: Československý filmový ústav, 1988. pp. 157–158.)

[17] FOLL, Jan. O různých vivisekcích s Antonínem Mášou. *Scéna* 14, 1989, No. 3., p. 7.

[18] KOPANĚVOVÁ, Galina. Zářijový rozhovor s Antonínem Mášou. *Film a doba* 14, 1968, No. 12, p. 648.

[19] It was the extent to which a work of art, no matter if of film or literature, should influence the recipient that was one of the subjects of dispute between Juráček and Máša, as Juráček noted in his diary: „Should a book have a collective, well thought out and deliberate mission? I am against it. One has to write the way one feels, and can't just cold-bloodedly weight arguments made to attack the reader's beliefs. Such literature is deceitful, can't stick to the rules of life, stops being true and becomes a speculation. It is dishonest to the reader and to one's conscience. Tonda denies conscience though (in the public interest) and considers the reader a semi-finished product which must be shaped.“ (JURÁČEK, Pavel. *Prostřednictvím kočky. Texty z let 1951–1958*. ed. P. Hájek, Praha: Knihovna Václava Havla, 2014, pp. 135–136.)

[20] „In his book on film he wrote in Amerika, Josef Škvorecký called the film *Looking Back* a ‚political thriller‘. “ (OVSÍKOVÁ, Jana. Zpráva o stavu společnosti. Hovoříme s Antonínem Mášou. *Svobodné slovo* 46, 1990, No. 35, p. 3.)

[21] Ludvík Pacovský uses the attribute „engaged film“ in connection with *Courage for Every Day* and *Looking Back*. (PACOVSKÝ, Ludvík. Svobodný film – Angažovaný film. *Kino* 24, 1969, No. 14, p. 12.)

[22] It must be noted that in his interview with Galina Kopaněvová (KOPANĚVOVÁ, Galina. S Antonínem Mášou o poetice Hotelu pro cizince. *Film a doba* 13, 1967, No. 6, p. 313.) Máša said something else, denying the presence of any allegories and hidden meanings in *Hotel for Strangers* which would refer to the then political situation.

[23] PŘÁDNÁ, Stanislava. Poetika postav, typů, (ne)herců. In CIESLAR, Jiří, PŘÁDNÁ, Stanislava a ŠKAPOVÁ, Zdena. *Démanty všednosti: český a slovenský film 60. let: kapitoly o nové vlně*. 1st edition. Praha: Pražská scéna, 2002, pp. 151–152.

[24] Příkladná argues that a slightly different form of political engagement of characters only starts appearing in films made after the Soviet invasion of August 1968, such as *Larks on a String* (Skřivánci na niti, dir. by Jiří Menzel, 1969), *Funeral*

Ceremonies (Smuteční slavnost, dir. by Zdenek Sirovy, 1969), *The Ear* (Ucho, dir. by Karel Kachyna, 1970), *All My Good Countrymen* (Vsichni dobr rodci, dir. by Vojtch Jasny, 1968), *The Joke* (ert, dir. by Jaromil Jire, 1968).

[25] BOEK, Jaroslav. *Kapitoly o filmu*. Praha: Orbis, 1968. p. 234. Considering the fact that the text had probably been written before the screening of *Hotel for Strangers* (and Boek only made his opinion based on Ma's debut *Searching*), it is possible that Boek's opinion would have changed taking into account Ma's other two films from the 1960s.

[26] This doesn't mean the works by Vojtch Jasny, Elmar Klos and Jan Kadr, Karel Kachyna, Frantiek Vlcil or Ladislav Helge and others, as can be seen from an interview for *Film a doba* (Hovorme v prtomnm ase. Mluv Jan Kadr, Elmar Klos, Evald Schorm, Antonn Ma a redaktori Filmu a doby. *Film a doba* 12, 1966, No. 2, pp. 93–99.)

[27] BUCHAR, Robert. *Sametov kocovina*. Brno: Host, 2001, p. 13.