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# Bona fide – the ways of Jan Jedlička

The Prague City Gallery has held the first comprehensive exhibition of works by the painter, photographer, and filmmaker Jan Jedlička. The exhibition was accompanied by screenings at Ponrepo of the author's 16mm films and video recorded works. All film works had been digitalized, with the original copies archived in the National Film Archive.

## **Were your films screened in cinemas as well as in galleries?**

Yes, every project was accompanied by an official cinema première. Most often, it was in a middle-sized Zurich cinema called Kino Studio Nord-Sud. We invited guests, patrons and friends, journalists and art historians, and others interested in film and art – it was an interesting bunch around the Neue Zürcher Zeitung. There was also a good bar nearby, and the screening was followed by a discussion.

## **Speaking of patrons, the question of the financing of your films occurs to me because you edited them and added sound to them in professional studios.**

Of course, financing was necessary. There are several Swiss foundations, mainly Pro Helvetia; and the Czech Film Fund contributed a couple times as well. As far as I know, the state subsidies in the Czech Republic are still quite significant, whereas in Switzerland, you have to organize this for yourself in some way. You have to ask. You go and ask experienced people who might give you a tip: "You have to submit an application over there and..." Moreover, you sometimes have to prove that you are able to see something through, and that's why I held the cinema premières. On that account, I was receiving subsidies almost automatically, because people knew I could get the job done. But I also met the patron Alfred Richterich, who is interested in my work and has attended each première of mine. He has a beautiful collection because

he understands the matter, shows interest and is open to discussion. One of my best paintings at this Prague exhibition was on loan from him.

**You are known for taking time to complete your projects. This is also clear from the making of your first film, *Echo Vocis Imago*. You state that it was made at the beginning of the 1990s, specifically between 1991 and 1994.**

It's because there was an addition to it involving material we hadn't used at first. After some time, we added the part after the credits that is silent and forms a transition to *Interno* in a way. Several times, we screened both these films, and the addition thus really worked as a bridge between the two.

***Echo Vocis Interno* and *Imago* were made in Maremma, Tuscany, which you first visited in the 1970s. Since then, you kept coming back to your friends' house.**

It was always short periods of two, three weeks because if you stay longer, you stop taking in your surroundings attentively enough. You lose the eye for changes, and it becomes more of a routine. It is much better to leave in time, and when you come back again, your memories will intuitively merge with new impulses.

**Before you decided to make your first film, you had been working independently with several image techniques. In what way or from whom did you learn the film work?**

I started with cinematographers because I didn't have my own camera. I picked the famous Swiss cinematographer Pio Corradi, but the results weren't what I had expected. I tried it with others as well, but it was the same. Each of us has his or her own way of seeing things that is hard to explain. Cinematographers don't even let anyone touch the camera – it might be a form of jealousy. I thought: "I can't go on like this, I will never make it this way." And I bought a 16mm camera. It was a beautiful one with internal electronic measurement. I still have it today out of sentiment. I didn't sell it because it's a beautiful, cost-saving thing. You set the exposition and you don't have to film twice because it always works out.

**So, the need prevailed to be in close touch with the image shot?**

Yes, because as I said, others have their habits and their way of seeing things and you realize that it's not ideal. I needed to see everything I was filming. We were making time-lapse shots, and no one has patience for this. You make two-minute shots all day. Moreover, the films were meant to be a part of larger cycles and had to have a uniform style.

**In *Interno*, made nearly ten years later, you decided to use videotaping due to the lighting conditions. So, you didn't have a specific relationship to film material?**

We were shooting in a closed, dilapidated house under very difficult lighting conditions. We were trying it with my 16mm camera, but you would need a vast amount of lighting. You would need artificial light everywhere, and it wouldn't have anything to do with the real thing in the end. The material simply didn't react. So, I first borrowed and then bought a Sony 1000 camera because I needed to play and check the videotapes. Even today, when I look for something, I have to use the machine.

**But you still decided to transfer the material to a 35mm film.**

Yes, because in the video material, the very same brightness problems occurred. When darkness occurred, people had a feeling that it's down, it doesn't work, and it's broken. So, we discussed it, made some tests and decided to transfer it to raw film material because during screening, you can always see the stream of light and know that the film goes on. In this way, you can still see residual pixels there, which are visually very interesting and connect the entire film. To make a copy and Dolby sound, we received funds in Prague. When we screen *Interno* in the cinema, the contrast stands out between the image and sound. Whereas the image is rather expressive with its modifications and techniques, the sound is specific and creates a link to reality.

**You then shot your next film in Prague. What made you make a film at the Prague Castle, in the desecrated St. George's Basilica, and on black-and-white material?**

The motive was my quest to find some stability because when I came back to Prague after twenty years, I felt like I had got off a spaceship coming back after "x" years. In a situation like that, you compare your memories of places with the present. Some things appear small, other ones appear big – it depends whether you were a child or

adult when you last saw them.

**So, you partly made this film to better cope with your return. But why did you pick this building?**

I have always been interested in history, and St. George's Basilica is more or less a symbol of emancipation from the imperial influence of the time. The first abbesses were mostly from princely or royal families, balancing the influence of emperors and the church representing Rome. There is evidence that it had a great political impact. At the same time, it was one of the first white stone buildings preserved until today, so I could make a space-light archaeological study of the place with my camera. St. George's Basilica interested me for its unwavering stability, as a point of new beginnings.

**In the second half of the 1990s, Czech society was back to square one to some extent as well.**

It was also a time when you could make a film like that at Prague Castle. We were negotiating with the President's Office, they were grumbling a bit, but in the end we were allowed to build all those platforms. Something like that would be completely out of the question during Václav Klaus's presidency, let alone now.

**Where was the film shown?**

In the Czech Republic, you could watch it as part of an exhibition in the Basilica, but only on a monitor.

**While working on *Interno*, which was yet to be made into a film, you shot *Le Cuoche* within one day – an artistic portrait of a restaurant and its owners, three sisters preparing meals for their guests and shaping the unique atmosphere of this place.**

On the way home from Maremma, I got to know this family restaurant one day and since then, I have always liked to go back. I always saw the picture frame there: the serving hatch. The two types of light. Fluorescent lamps inside and daylight outside. The reflections of cars passing outside. So, the dynamics were different. The kitchen behind the serving hatch had the character of an image – everything looked stable

and painted, as it were ... the fridge, the stove... and they were moving there in the greenish light like in an artificial space. I always looked at it and thought “Hmm,” but there was no way. Shooting it on 16mm film, you would waste kilometres of it. It was impossible. But it worked with video... you simply left the camera on.

**A serving hatch, or a picture frame? Are we getting close to painting imagery?**

It is like a throwback. You suddenly partly feel like back in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. You can't help but think of Vermeer.

**We can say that one of the themes of the Dutch Baroque painting was the valorization of women's rights. Did you have similar thoughts?**

Yes, I also wanted to show that this work is part of the culture. When you watch the film, you suddenly appreciate it. Before I started shooting, I had been making some tests and the figures had appeared to me somewhat bulbous. So, I lengthened them all. By changing the format, the image got a touch of a poetic license and Gothic, spiritual qualities. Similarly, the film shots I exhibited as photos together with the video had special silvery qualities.

**Another video you made, *16 Sketches of Dialogue*, is also related to the topic of work. You made the film together with another two short videos during your artistic residency at the Center for Global Dialogue in Rüschtikon, near Zurich.**

I was offered the very first residency at this centre because its architects – Marcel Meili and Markus Peter – wanted someone to document and interpret the way the audience would grasp the buildings. I could sleep and go for lunch there while taking photos and shooting. The result was a lot of material we later edited here in Prague. As they say, “bona fide”. One has to try if it works out, if you get something interesting out of it. So, there was also a lot of dead material leading to nothing. But we managed to pick moments, such as cigarette smoke and reflections, that opened a non-verbal dialogue. I had to cope with some limitations because I couldn't depict the faces of the guests in the film and the photos; however, this limitation didn't apply to the personnel.

***Dialogues* and the other two films, one called *Air*, were made during the climate conference of the same name at this centre, were included in the *Reflections***

**cycle. Have you ever screened those films again?**

These films were made for the needs of the Center for Global Dialogue. The shorter film called *Air* is actually a signature film of the conference you mentioned, and the other one is more of a film essay in which I used a sound recording of the opening talk by the Swiss aeronaut and great promoter of solar energy Bertrand Piccard. What is impressive about it is that what he said then is still valid today. However, these films were only screened at last year's Jihlava International Documentary Film Festival and also at the Municipal Library of the Prague Prague City Gallery, at curator Jitka Hlaváčková's request. We also made large-format prints of the smoke for the exhibition. I have to say that I was happy to see those *16 Dialogues* again. It brings you back to the atmosphere and you enjoy watching the protocomic situations.