

MARTIN ŠRAJER / 13. 9. 2017

Černý Petr abroad

In 1964, three films by Miloš Forman appeared in cinemas: *Konkurs* (Talent Competition), *Kdyby ty muziky nebyly* (If Only They Ain't Had Them Bands) and *Černý Petr* (Black Peter). It was the third one that gained the greatest popularity with the audience and critical acclaim, telling a story of a maturing boy and his first loves with delicate humour. Forman's debut feature film and the first acting opportunity for the 18-year-old Ladislav Jakim at the same time, it was successful not only in Czechoslovakia, but also abroad. It will be its travelling beyond the borders of Czechoslovakia we would like to look into in greater detail.

The adaptation of a novella of the same name by Jaroslav Papoušek (only published after the film was made though) tells a story of a 16-year-old young man for whom women of the same age are just as unfathomable as the world of adults. Taking place in 1947 both in the book and the first versions of the screenplay, it was only transferred to the time of the shooting in the technical screenplay. In addition to the limited budget, the decision was motivated by the fact that during rehearsals, the young actors weren't able to embody the atmosphere before the 1948 Czechoslovak coup d'état. A move to the present lead to the removal of political innuendos (even though the „nark“ motif of Petr following the customers of a self-service shop has been preserved), which dulled the satirical edges of the story, but might have made *Černý Petr* more understandable for foreign audiences at the same time.

The film representing a series of situations to which the protagonist passively submits rather than actively influencing them, it wouldn't be quite correct to characterize it as a generalizing portrait of a generation. Petr is not a typical representative of his generation. He is not trying to excel. He looks helpless and indecisive. Instead of rebelling against his authoritative father and other adults, he calmly submits. He lacks the energy to engage in a revolt against ageing patriarchs whose weakened position was a frequent topic of Western films in the 1960s as well.

His slow life rhythm reflects the lazy summer holiday atmosphere of a small town in which the film is set (it was shot in Kolín). In contrast to other young protagonists of Czechoslovak films of the time, he is not an „enhanced“ representative hero young people would like to become.

In spite of the true depiction of banal everydayness, in which Forman could put to use his talent for observation and directing non-actors, the film was mainly perceived by the viewers as a pleasant genre entertainment depicting the life of contemporary youth with a bit of irony. What also increased the popularity of *Černý Petr* mainly with younger audiences was the slightly erotic tone which the Italian distributor decided to underline. For the Italian film distribution, a few extra scenes of young couples making love were made with details of women's nipples, which were then included in the swimming pool scene. Eroticism is not meant to be primarily a source of embarrassing situations; it is supposed to give the film a touch of forbidden fruit, which inevitably moved the film from discreetness towards vulgarity we tend to associate with much more recent teenager comedies.

Before it was introduced in the Italian film distribution, the film was seen by domestic viewers and critics (who awarded it the Czechoslovak Film Critics' Award) in the spring of 1964. In July of the same year, our film delegation presented the film at the Locarno Festival where the program management was very interested in Czechoslovak films, especially after the success of Brynych's *Transport z ráje* (Transport from Paradise, 1962). Personally introduced by Miloš Forman, *Černý Petr* got the top award – the Golden Sail (Karel Kachyňa's *Vysoká zeď* /The High Wall/ was awarded the Silver Sail), and the predictions of many foreign journalists writing about the strongest film in the competition thus turned out to be correct. Moreover, Forman received the Young Critics Award. The rising star of European filmmaking was addressed in Locarno by the director of the Motion Picture Association Frederck Gronich who invited Forman with the film to the New York Film Festival (Gronich's interest in the film was allegedly awoken by a positive review in The New York Times).

Before New York, the film visited Venice. Several times, its screening in September 1964 was accompanied by applause getting very loud at the end. After the première, there was a press conference in the Congress Hall of the Palace of Festivals. At its core there were about 25 young, mostly Italian journalists. Both young unofficial

juries took part in the press conference who then awarded the film their prizes. In the Great Hall of the Des Bains Hotel, the meeting continued with a cocktail for the foreign journalists. The organisers expected 80–100 people to come. However, more than 150 guests arrived. The situation caused worries to the leader of the Czechoslovak delegation, A. M. Brousil, who described the complications and their solution in detail in the festival report.

„There were not enough refreshments. To be specific: there were enough sausages and ham. Just enough beer. But there was a disastrous lack of slivovice. I asked the hotel director to add aperitifs. He was willing to provide some, but for an unacceptable price. He was forced to do so because the son of the owner unexpectedly turned up. That's why the director at least gave me discreet advice how to solve the problem. I told the hotel's managers I had bought my own cocktails for a second press conference, so they would allow me to serve them. When they agreed, I had to bring the cocktails, i.e. immediately purchase them in Lido and transport them. I did it myself with my own car, and thanks to a push from the Excelsior Hotel, I got a discount in the Lido central warehouse, and brought them within 25 minutes! The situation was saved.“

Brousil finished his report for the management of the Czechoslovak film industry by a remark that responsible persons shouldn't forget Czechoslovakia had become a film superpower, and adjust the amount of slivovice at similar events accordingly. It was probably not just thanks to the exemplary care for journalists that shortly after the festivals, first positive reviews of *Černý Petr* started to emerge in foreign newspapers. In *Gazette de Lausanne*, François Rochet called it a „very significant work representing a milestone in the world history of film immediately drawing on the experiments and success of Alain Resnais and Michelangelo Antonioni.“ Other Swiss critics appreciated the fact that the film was not an advertisement for „socialist morality“ and thanks to being firmly anchored in reality, it could be both comical and critical, for which it was compared for example to Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936) or *Il Posto* (1961) by Ermanno Olmi.

According to Ugo Casiraghi from the Italian *L'Unitá*, *Černý Petr* was „full of little scenes and vivid dialogue, unprejudiced and healthy“. The review continued on the same positive note: „There is nothing literary about it, even though it's based on a

short story by Jaroslav Papoušek. Its style could be seen as „under the Western influence“, if it wasn't so fresh and spontaneous.“ In the British *The Guardian*, Richard Roud reflected in his review the unexpected change of position of Czechoslovak films abroad: „Less than a year ago, every news on a Czechoslovak film would be immediately followed by a sceptical shrug in the best case scenario. Then *Černý Petr* was introduced at the London Festival and one had to admit that in Miloš Forman, film got a new important director.“

In his more critical review for the Swiss local daily *Das Neue Winterthurer Tagblatt*, the journalist considered the film a crucial work not only for the Czechoslovak, but also for the whole East European filmmaking: „One can undoubtedly have objections to the first prize awarded to this work: from a formal perspective, the film is very heterogeneous, somewhat muddled; it oscillates between longer burlesque scenes only based on situational comic and between subtle, very reserved drafts of the characters; it mixes different rendering possibilities without reaching a true unity. However, the unconventional topic, the determination of a the place of a young man who is without a strong conviction and desire trying to rebel against the influence of his white-bread father, without being actually able to escape from it, the almost playful simplicity in depicting the many traits of the characters make the film an important clue for the potential direction of the development of young film in the East.“

In Venice, *Černý Petr* received the Award of the Italian Film Clubs and Cinema 60 Award, which was not the end of its victorious festival streak though. At the Short Film Festival in Oberhausen, it won one of the three young critics prizes, and in 1967, it was awarded the best foreign film prize by the academy deciding about the Finnish national Jussi Awards with a tradition dating back to the mid-1940s.

At the same time, the key figures of Czechoslovak film production realized that this was a great tool for the promotion of Czechoslovak art abroad, usable for commercial purposes as well. As *Černý Petr* was one of the first internationally successful films with its festival success opening doors for further commercial use, the employees of the Barrandov Film Studio and Czechoslovak Film were only gradually thinking about how to approach the marketing for different countries and festivals. Besides their limited experience with promotion at festivals, they also struggled with insufficient

financial means of the delegations and few contacts who would help them – like to Brousil – solve troubles.

Still in 1964, the film was introduced at festivals in Copenhagen, Munich and London. Everywhere, it received mostly excited feedback for its freshness, delicate humour and unsentimentality, often with a sigh that the film probably wouldn't be bought for distribution in the given country and there wouldn't be more viewers who could see it. More extensive reflections were written by Richard Roud for the British *The Guardian* where he appreciated *Černý Petr* even more than Olmi's *Il Posto* saying that „Forman depicts Petr without the least trace of snobbery and slightly patronizing approach to „common people“, which is, albeit slightly, present in *Il Posto*.“ In comparing the both works, Roud goes on by saying that „in a way, *Černý Petr* is much funnier than Olmi's film because we laugh with Petr and we laugh about ourselves, whereas in *Il Posto*, we laugh about the boy and with Olmi.“

At the beginning of the year after, there was a festival of Czechoslovak films organized by France Tchecoslovaquie and Fédération des Ciné Clubs de Neunes. *Černý Petr* couldn't be missing. The introduction at a festival often served as a test of „compatibility“ of the audience with the film. Only when the results were positive, the film was bought for distribution. After the festival screening on 1st December 1965, *Černý Petr* was shown in Paris in three smaller arthouse cinemas (Studio 43, Studio Acacias and Logos). Accompanied by positive reviews in prominent French newspapers, the film was seen by more than 10,000 viewers during the first week. The winner of the Venice Festival *Vaghe stelle dell'Orsa* (*Vague Stars of Ursa*, 1965) by Luchino Visconti screened during the same week was only seen by about half the number of viewers. At the end of 1965, *Černý Petr* (and *Lásky jedné plavovlásky* /*The Loves of a Blonde*/) was screened by selected cinemas in London as well. On this occasion, Forman personally visited the British capital and met with a few journalists, among others with Peter John Dyer from *Sight & Sound* who then made the following reflection:

„I think that the secret of Forman's success lies in his self-awareness, his ability to respect and at the same time develop the hesitation, temperament and confusion of people he works with. What I mean can be seen from the following story: when I pitied Forman on the way home that he had to do his military service and tried to find out

whether the service didn't disturb a bit his life of an artist, Forman disagreed. How could military service be boring to him considering he spent most of his free time there relieving the boredom of his colleagues-reservists by telling them stories about his made-up meetings with many famous film stars?"

Thanks to *Černý Petr*, the fame of Czechoslovak film also reached India (Czechoslovak Film Week in Mumbai in November 1965), Belgium (Czechoslovak Film Festival in Brussels, January 1966), Finland (Czechoslovak Film Week in Helsinki, February 1966), Algeria (Czechoslovak Film Week in Algeria, September 1966) or Sweden (Minifestival of Czechoslovak Films, January 1967). However, in internal communication in Barrandov Studio, doubts increasingly appeared whether the foreign success of films such as *Černý Petr* were not offset by making concessions to international fashion (veristic filmmaking), by ideological compromises or striving for exclusivity as an end in itself. The events of the next months show though that the opposing opinion prevailed, i.e. the belief that films are not only cultural objects, but also tradable products.

The businessman of Greek origin Moris Ergas started cooperating with Czechoslovak filmmakers through the American CBK Film Enterprises, Inc. interested in importing feature films for American television and buying films for distribution. Based on this, a „package deal“ was made with Ergas who then passed it to CBK in New York. Thanks to his contacts, Ergas also seemed to be a suitable middleman for introducing selected Czechoslovak films in Italian distribution. The contract on adapting certain films for Italian audiences was made in September 1965. In *Černý Petr*, the adaptations included Italian dubbing and the above mentioned „erotic“ scenes. The film's adaptation was topped off with replacing *Černý Petr* in the name of the film by another popular card game. The film was released in Italy (but also in France or Portugal) under the name *L'asso di Picche – Ace of Spades* (there being no connection with the name of the main hero any more).

Based on Ergas's order, scenes were later added also to *Lásky jedné plavovlásky* and he also wished that the fireman comedy *Hoří, má panenko* (The Firemen's Ball) be made in two versions, but these are already different stories being a testament however that the interest of foreign distributors in the work of Miloš Forman, awoken by the successful festival streak of *Černý Petr*, continued in the following years as

well. We will conclude the brief glimpse back to the foreign travels of Forman's debut by an apt memory of Jiří Weiss who just like Forman participated with the Czechoslovak delegation in 1965–1966 in the screening of several domestic films in Great Britain: „When I was in the Academy Cinema, they were announcing the première of another Forman's film *Lásky jedné plavovlásky* as a great sensation, and what was even nicer, all my acquaintances greeted me with a beautifully pronounced „Ahoj“ which the Englishmen learnt from Čenda of *Černý Petr*.“

All materials quoted here are stored in the collections of the National Film Archive or contained in the *Československá kinematografie ve světle zahraničního tisku* journal.