

MARTIN ŠRAJER / 22. 10. 2021

Cooperation between Karel Kachyňa and Jan Procházka

To look for co-creations of Karel Kachyňa and Jan Procházka means exploring more than two decades of Czechoslovak filmmaking history. Both started their careers at the beginning of the 1950s, with their still independent projects being governed by the official culture and politics. The weaker the position of the Communist Party conservative wing, the sharper their criticism of the official culture. In the 1960s, they came close to the poetics and open-mindedness of the Czechoslovak New Wave films. What we can consider their peak period is the latter half of the 1960s, when they made films together that were both sharply critical and formally original.

Karel Kachyňa was among the first to graduate from the newly founded Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts (FAMU). In 1947, he started studying cinematography, along with classmates such as Zdeněk Podskalský, Štefan Uher and Vojtěch Jasný. With the latter, he made his graduate film *Not always cloudy* (*Není stále zamračeno*, 1949). He graduated in 1951, continuing his cooperation with Jasný throughout the 1950s. As convinced Communists, they were making documentaries celebrating the collectivization of agriculture or the friendship between Czechoslovakia and China. They were sent to China by the Czechoslovak Army Film studio. But travelling through the Soviet Union, they got to know what Stalinism really meant. After this experience, Jasný left the Army Film studio, while Kachyňa served there until 1959. However, already in 1958, he made his début as an independent director with *At That Time, at Christmas...* (*Tenkrát o Vánocích*).

Just like Kachyňa, the writer, screenwriter, dramaturgist and politician Jan Procházka was a convinced Communist. Starting in the early 1950s, he worked in the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Union of Youth in Prague. He wrote short stories already during his military service, with his first short story collection being published

in 1956. In his first book, *A year of life* (Rok života), he still followed the ideological schemes of the time. His faith in Communism was shaken by the criticism of Stalin's personality cult in 1956. Procházka realized that the ideals he had believed in – just like many of his peers – had been betrayed. A turning point came with his book *Green Horizons* (Zelené obzory), where Procházka appeared less as an enthusiastic builder of a shining Communist future and more as a critic of the regime. In 1957, the medium-length film *What a Night!* (To byla noc) was made based on his story.

Jan Procházka first started working at the Barrandov Film Studio in 1959 as a screenwriter and later became the head of a production team. He first replaced František Pavlíček in a team specializing in films for children and young people. He was assigned “children's” films even after the Barrandov reorganization. Beginning in 1962, there were five production teams at the Barrandov Film Studio, each comprised of a head dramaturgist and production manager. As a dramaturgist, Procházka worked together with Erich Švabík. Even though their production team also primarily focused on films for children and young people, they pushed through some films for adults as well. At the same time, two to three films made based on Procházka's screenplays were released every year in the first half of the 1960s.

In 1962, Procházka became a candidate member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. Between 1963 and 1966, he was also a member of the Ideological Commission of the Central Committee. In that time, for instance, he recommended to take back and distribute the films condemned at the infamous Banská Bystrica conference (e.g., *Three Wishes* (Tři přání, 1958) by Kadár and Klos). It was mainly thanks to Procházka's intercession with President Novotný that Jan Němec and Věra Chytilová could realize their artistically specific projects. At the same time, more and more voices arose saying that Procházka, as a member of the Communist Party reformist wing, was undermining socialism with his opinions. The State Security started following him and he was under increasing pressure. Procházka also politically engaged during the 1968 Prague Spring, becoming the head of the Union of Czechoslovak Writers, among other things.

The creative paths of both artists crossed in the early 1960s. Out of the two films made in parallel, *Fetters* (Pouta, 1961), based on Procházka's short story *Regret* (Lítost), was released first. Due to certain dramaturgic concessions, the writer wasn't

very happy with the result. Better and more successful from the points of view of both him and the audience was *The Stress of Youth* (Trápení, 1961), about a lonely young girl caring for an injured horse. *The Stress of Youth* was the first film made using the realization model that the authors would stick to throughout the entire 1960s: Procházka wrote the story. Together with Kachyňa, they prepared the literary screenplay. Kachyňa wrote the technical screenplay. Whereas Procházka wrote screenplays for several other directors as well (e.g., for Štěpán Skalský, Zdeněk Brynych, Karel Steklý, Karel Zeman, Věra Plívová-Šimková), up until 1970, Kachyňa based all of his films on Procházka's stories.

One of the lines of their work comprised emotional and psychological dramas involving young outsiders, i.e., films mainly focusing on childhood and coming of age. In addition to *The Stress of Youth*, these included *Vertigo* (Závrať, 1962), *The High Wall* (Vysoká zeď, 1964) and *Jumping over Puddles Again* (Už zase skáču přes kaluže, 1970). In *Christmas with Elisabeth* (Vánoce s Alžbětou, 1968), we also follow the emotional maturation of a young heroine. The comedy *Our Crazy Family* (Naše bláznivá rodina, 1968) was taken over by Kachyňa after the premature death of the original director, Jan Valášek. Kachyňa would continue to explore the inner world of youth during the normalization period, after Procházka's death. Earlier films for children tended to idealize the young heroes, viewing them from an adult perspective. Kachyňa and Procházka, on the contrary, were trying to get closer to children's perception of the world, to understand how they think and feel. Rather than films for children, they were making films about children.

In addition to the private microcosm, the two authors gradually started exploring dramas of individuals in the context of a societal crisis. They defied the norms of socialist realism by turning from large historical events to intimate stories, showing how dramatically "great historical events" often affect the lives of ordinary people, who are moreover far from the ideal 1950s heroes (in *The Hope* (Naděje, 1963), it is for instance an alcoholic and a prostitute). They emphasized feelings, reflecting the effect of the external world on one's privacy. Moreover, some of these films revisited the past, soberly explored the dark sides of Czechoslovak post-war history, and questioned the concept of heroism.

In addition to the contemporary *Fetters* and *The Hope*, the socially critical line also included the intimate thriller *A Carriage Going to Vienna* (Kočár do Vídně, 1966) taking place at the end of the Second World War, and three films going back to the 1950s. Depicting the collectivization of agriculture in the raw, the drama *The Nun's Night* (Noc nevěsty, 1967) was based on Procházka's novel *Holy Night* (Svatá noc). *A Ridiculous Gentleman* (Směšný pán, 1969) also takes place in the 1950s, reflecting the judicial murders of the time. The last official joint film by Kachyňa and Procházka was the psychological thriller *The Ear* (Ucho, 1970), which was banned for depicting methods used by the State Security and their effect on people's psyche and relationships.

The sixth joint project by Kachyňa and Procházka, *Long Live the Republic* (Ať žije republika! 1965) lies in between the "adult" and "children" categories, filtrating the April 1945 events in a Moravian village through the perspective of a 12-year-old boy. Procházka's book was published in 1965 by the Státní nakladatelství dětské knihy publishing house. Just like with other projects, the book was written in parallel with its film version (when writing, Procházka often imagined what a scene could look like in a film and modified his style accordingly). Made to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the liberation of Czechoslovakia, the two-part widescreen drama was one of the most expensive Czechoslovak films. It was made in co-production between the Czechoslovak State Film and Czechoslovak Army Film studios, and even involved two production teams.

A Carriage Going to Vienna depicts the developing relationship between the widowed Krista, whose husband was executed by the Nazis, and a young German soldier, who makes her transport him and his injured friend over the border. Like in *Long Live the Republic*, the state of affairs in a specific period is presented through an individual story and a very subjective perspective. Equally uncompromising towards enemy soldiers, partisans and the Red Army, the screenplay was not approved by the Central Press Supervision Office, which considered the conclusion politically harmful. The film could only be finished and realized after President Novotný's intercession. However, he didn't approve of the finished film, which led to a split with Procházka. In the end, the film was distributed, but a few scenes had to be modified or removed.

Production plans were set up well in advance. Due to an imminent collapse of domestic film production, even films contradicting the new political situation could be finished after the 1968 Soviet-led invasion. Openly critical to the State Security practices and based on Procházka's own experience with wiretapping and surveillance, *The Ear* was finished, but it could not be released. It only premièred in January 1990. Procházka was gradually removed or withdrew himself from all public functions. The State Security continued to follow him, and Czechoslovak Television broadcast an inflammatory documentary called *Testimony from the Seine* (Svědectví od Seiny, 1970). It included a deliberately edited wiretap of Procházka's visit at Professor Václav Černý's. Procházka succumbed to the increasing pressure and a serious illness in February 1971.

Jumping over Puddles Again was the last film he was involved in before his death. The idea to film the book by Alan Marshall was born with the first Czech edition of the Australian novel published in 1962. However, since priority was given to other projects, the filming rights were only purchased, and the film was realized seven years later. Procházka not only wrote the screenplay, but also consulted on the casting and selection of the cinematographer with Kachyňa. His name could not appear in the credits, though (it was Ota Hofman instead). The apolitical family film was passed and distributed throughout the normalization period. Except for *The Stress of Youth*, the other films by Kachyňa – Procházka were gradually removed from the distribution list.

Kachyňa had to promise to the new Czechoslovak State Film management he would distance himself from his cooperation with Jan Procházka. This was one of the reasons he could continue filming without a significant break, contrary to many of his proscribed colleagues. He could only make another two films based on Procházka's stories, *St. Nicholas Is in Town* (Městem chodí Mikuláš, 1992) and *The Cow* (Kráva, 1992), after the 1989 revolution.