

MARTIN ŠRAJER / 17. 10. 2023

# Five documentaries by Drahomíra Vihanová

Drahomíra Vihanová originally did not want to make documentaries. In the film *Burning* (Umanutá, 2012), she likens them to the pork knuckles, which she settled for when they stopped serving shrimp in the 1970s. In the same breath, however, she admits that she eventually settled in nonfiction films. Characterized by a distinct style and compositional precision reminding the viewers of musical compositions, her films from the normalization era are a proof of this. Working for the Krátký film studios, she was able to shoot the subjects she chose herself, in a way that was her own. The era undoubtedly had an impact on the subjects she could choose from, she could not make films about anything, but there was enough money for documentaries, even according to the director's own memories.

Drahomíra Vihanová's documentaries owe their musicality to her education. She studied at the Brno Conservatory and then musicology and aesthetics at the Brno Faculty of Arts. She wanted to further develop her musical talent, specifically for playing the piano, at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague under the guidance of František Rauch.<sup>[1]</sup> He did not recommend a career in music to her, though. Vihanová thus applied her sense of sound in radio. She also worked as a freelance scriptwriter in television and as an assistant music director. She could not direct on her own without a proper education. That is why she enrolled at Film and TV School of Academy of Performing Arts (FAMU) in Prague in 1960. She graduated with the thirty-minute-long drama *The Black Keys Fugue* (Fuga na černých klávesách, 1964), in which she tackled one of the central themes of her work, the role of art in human life, for the first time.

In the following years, she continued her education in editing at FAMU while working as an assistant director. She collaborated, for example, on Otakar Vávra's films

*Romance for the Bugle* (Romance pro křídlovku, 1966) and *The Thirteenth Chamber* (Třináctá komnata, 1968). In 1967, she spent several months doing practical training at Bavaria Film in Munich, editing French documentaries about the châteaux of the Loire Valley. She wrote the film short story *Men's Show* (Pánská jízda) together with Ester Krumbachová and Zdena Salivarová. But then a short text by Jiří Křen caught her attention and she put other projects on hold. However, the filming of *A Squandered Sunday* (Zabitá neděle) was interrupted by the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia.

Capturing the spiritual climate of the post-invasion days, this gloomy study of loneliness and alienation was not approved for production until six months later by Jan Procházka, the head of one of Barrandov's creative groups. The film was eventually finished, but it was found so depressing that it was banned right after leaving the cutting room. It was not distributed until 1990. Vihanová also had a forced break. She did commercials for a few years, often under someone else's name. She was able to return to directing in the second half of the 1970s thanks to Kamil Pix from Krátký film, who also employed Věra Chytilová and Evald Schorm at the same time, all in an attempt to make his company well-known.

Drahomíra Vihanová's first documentary was *Last of the Clan* (Poslední z rodu, 1977). The 15-minute-long film depicts the everyday life of František Kříž, an Orlické Mountains native who continues in the tradition of his ancestors and prefers working with horses to heavy forestry machinery. He and his draught horse bring logs from the hills around the village of Deštné every single day. Up and down, up and down. Be it foggy, be it rainy, be it muddy. He repeats the activity with an almost sacred enthusiasm, further enhanced by the organ music by Jiří Šust. Vihanová narrowed her focus to man's relationship to nature and work. Kříž does not talk about anything else. The camera does not leave the forest. Everything important takes place among the trees.

Vihanová's following documentaries continue to reveal her preoccupation with people who have accepted their destiny and perhaps even found their mission in life. However, she increasingly deflected from the process common in live-action films. She only asserted her need for absolute control during editing, not during the actual filming. *Last of the Clan* was based on a detailed script. Both the pulling of the wood

and the fall of the horse were staged. Later, Vihanová started to point out the reality of the filming itself in order to reinforce the impression of authenticity and the “quest aspect.” It was this aspect of the creative process she focused on in her next documentary.

Made with Jan Špáta as the director of photography, *Quest* (Hledání, 1979) follows František Vláčil while he directs *Concert at the End of Summer* (Koncert na konci léta, 1979), a film about the life of Antonín Dvořák. The documentary combines scenes from the shooting, of Vláčil interacting with the crew and the actors, and scenes in which the acclaimed director walks alone through the countryside, wondering about his work. The moments when Vláčil forgets that he is being filmed are accompanied by Dvořák’s *Requiem in B minor* and *Carnival Overture*. The parallel between the two artists is also further highlighted by a take of Vláčil gesticulating from behind the camera as if he were conducting an orchestra.

The impressive film essay on the concentrated pursuit of a creative vision, whether in composing music or directing a film, makes do with very little spoken words (for example in the form of the then popular pseudo-philosophical commentary). The documentary relies on eloquent imagery and layered editing. “I have absolutely no intention to bore and overwhelm with lectures, descriptions... My goal is to arouse the viewer’s interest, to provoke reflection and dialogue, simply to elicit approval or disapproval. With this in mind, I use what I consider to be the most effective means: working with emotions...” Vihanová outlined her method in a poll for *Scéna* magazine.

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She recalled the 1980s as a time that was unusually well disposed towards documentaries; a time when she could make films about topics she cared about within the given boundaries. Being an external employee of Krátký film, she was not forced to do anything. She was not limited in how much time she could spend in the editing room. Nor did she have to deal with securing funding or distribution, two factors that would greatly complicate her work in the 1990s.[3] The smoothness with which she created may have been directly related to the subjects she preferred, since they conformed to the ideological priorities of her era. In late socialism, everyday work was perceived as a manifestation of commonplace heroism. Unlike in the 1950s, it was the work activities that were of most importance, not the public and political ones.

The director's conviction that people live to work is also clearly expressed in her *Interviews* (Rozhovory, 1983). In this documentary, Vilhanová introduced the team digging the B line tunnel of the Prague underground. To these people, the arduous and dangerous underground work provides satisfaction and security, as well as a sense of belonging. Having worked with the men on shifts, including the night ones, for several weeks before filming, Vilhanová was fascinated by how the nature of the work interfered with the interpersonal relationships.<sup>[4]</sup> The interviews with the workers during their breaks are interspersed with scenes from the underground and with arrivals to and departures from work. The probe into a specific work environment once again raises more general questions related to the quest for deeper meaning and internal values.

“Everyone aspires to something. Some people follow their aspirations without much trouble; some people go, fall, get up and fall again; some people are even driven to self-destruction by this force – but even in this case, it is not negativistic, because what is important, in my opinion, is the effort, the striving...”<sup>[5]</sup>

Vihanová did not stop asking what drives people forward, what fulfils them, even in her later films. She seems to draw inspiration for her own obsession from the stubbornness of social actors. She also expected full dedication to work and willingness to sacrifice a huge amount of time and energy to it from her colleagues. The link between her documentaries and the doubts that troubled her in her personal life is clearly visible in *Questions for Two Women* (Otázky pro dvě ženy, 1984). The film was originally supposed to be about the railway, but Vihanová was so intrigued by the ticket seller at the Srbsko u Karlštejna station that she zeroed in on her. Together with another woman filmed at the same time, the documentary presents a remarkable double portrait.

The first woman is Alena Konečná, a scientist from the Sigma Research Institute. The second one is Anežka Zlatníková, a working pensioner and poet. Dr. Konečná is an expert in macromolecular chemistry. Mrs. Zlatníková has trained to be a seamstress, completed a two-year course at an economics school, and worked as an employee of the state railways most of her life. Konečná is forty, Zlatníková seventy. Similarly to Věra Chytilová in her debut film *Something Different* (O něčem jiném, 1963), Vihanová juxtaposes two women of different professions, ages and backgrounds, who have

nothing in common at the first glance (and who never meet during the film). However, one common feature gradually emerges from the thoughtful composition of their testimonies, without any descriptiveness – the tenacity with which they pursue their goal in life: to be of some use to people.

Vihanová wanted the film to show that every life lived to the full, every job done with passion, whether you are a top scientist or a ticket seller, is meaningful. This time she interferes with the content via an introspective off-screen commentary and questions about life philosophy, and even appears on camera a few times. She does not hide her close relationship with the two women. She acts as their friend, the third actor in the film, and becomes part of the message. Vihanová dealt with the position of women in society also in her documentaries *The Garden Full of Nappies* (*Zahrada plná plenek*, 1982) and *Behind the Window* (*Za oknem*, 1989), but the gender of the protagonists she was trying to understand better was not decisive for her.

Similarly to Jan Špáta or Evald Schorm, but usually with more vigour and less kindness, she used her portraits of people, both men and women, to question the meaning of human existence and the ethos of work as one of the key manifestations of our existence. She tried to convey restlessness, searching, determination, and, finally, also reconciliation and anchoring in life, by all available formal means, especially by precise editing and multi-layered soundtrack. The anchoring in life is personified by Franz Eimann, a Sudeten German and the protagonist of *Everyday I Step In Front of Your Face* (*Denně předstupuji před tvou tvář*, 1992), her last documentary made with the contribution of the newly established Film & Sociology Foundation.

Vihanová had a small weekend house in Deštné. There was a man from a near village who was displaced after the war but returned to his native Orlické Mountains in 1958. The uplifting simplicity and order of his life is reflected in the liturgical form of the film. The individual parts of Eimann's ordinary day are compared with the corresponding passages of the Mass through editing. The old man's house, always permeated with light, resembles a temple. For the intransigent filmmaker, Eimann was a man who, through humility towards life and faith in God, found harmony with himself as well as an answer to the question of why we are born. And that is precisely the huge question Drahomíra Vihanová's documentaries ask, no matter whether they are

about a horse-rider, a naive poet, or workers in the Prague underground.

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### Literature:

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Veronika Kratochvílová, Otvírat zavřené dveře. *Kino*, no. 10 (09/ 05), 1989, p. 7.

Milena Nyklová, Posedlost Drahomíry Vihanové. *Film a doba*, no. 2, 1993, p. 65-67.

Rudolf Störzer, Dokument o krásné lidské posedlosti. *Záběr*, no. 14, 1984, p. 7.

-zb-, Hledání člověka. K portrétu Drahomíry Vihanové. *Záběr*, no. 15, 1990, p. 7.

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### Notes:

[1] Vihanová made a formally extremely rigorous documentary *Variations on a Theme of Searching for Form* (Variace na téma hledání tvaru) about Rauch and his art of interpretation in 1986.

[2] Jiří Tvrzník, Touží po slunci, ale nevdá jim déšť ani bouřka. *Scéna*, no. 4 (03/03), 1986, p. 8.

[3] Alena Müllerová, Okamžik ohlédnutí (letní anketa s tvůrci dokumentárního filmu). *Film a doba*, no. 2, 1995, p. 63.

[4] -jabl, Hledání a usilování v dokumentech Drahomíry Vihanové. *Záběr*, no. 13 (27/06), 1983, p. 7

[5] Jiří Tvrzník, c. d., p. 8.