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Headed for civil activism – Český žurnál 2015

The depersonalisation of obstetrics in the Czech Republic, the shark-like practices of Andrej Babiš, racism in social housing, society divided by the civil war in Ukraine, the hazy foreign policy of the Czech Republic – in a nutshell, those are the key themes of the third series of Český žurnál auteur documentaries.

08 Leaving aside its decision not to award the prize for best documentary film, the 2015 Jihlava International Documentary Film Festival will be remembered for the furore caused by *Matrix AB*, which won the Audience Award. Only very few mainstream media outlets failed to report on this documentary portrait of Andrej Babiš, or at least on the angry reaction of the documentary's subject. Many viewers and commentators alike used the film as a springboard for forming their opinions in discussing Mr Babiš or the film's director Vít Klusák. It soon transpired that the dismayed Babiš was not the only person who considered the documentary to be one-sided.[1] Klusák was accused of being biased by many viewers who were clear that as the creator of a documentary he should remain objective and impartial at all times and abstain from picking out only those facts that fit his concept and intentions.

Similarly pointed accusations of bias and the presentation of purely subjective opinions followed the screening in Jihlava of *Cukr-blog (Sugar-blog)*. Director Andrea Culková opted for an intimate video journal as the form for her documentary. Its aim was to draw attention to the harm done by refined sugar and questionable practices of the sugar industry. Her response to attempts to downplay the seriousness of the topic and its systematic marginalisation by the media was to create a scathing accusal in which she does not shrink from labelling sugar as a drug that kills. No matter how remote the two documentaries are from one another in terms of the explored themes and chosen narrative format, what they have in common is the

personal involvement of their creators, deployed to varying degrees. Neither Culková nor Klusák are afraid of sharing their own negative opinions and of using the documentary film format to issue what they see as a necessary and urgent warning against the risks sugar poses to human health and Andrej Babiš poses to democracy in the Czech Republic, respectively. Other films in the third series of *Český žurnál* (*Czech Journal*) which included *Matrix AB* demonstrate that an urge to not only explore and document pressing issues, but also to ignite debate over them and suggest possible solutions, is not the exclusive domain of Klusák and Culková among contemporary Czech documentary makers.

Auteur documentary production in public service broadcasting

The first five auteur documentaries reflecting contemporary political and social issues were broadcast by public service broadcaster Czech Television (ČT) in March and April 2013. The concept originally proposed by Vít Klusák and Filip Remunda was only approved after new ČT management took up its position with CEO Petr Dvořák at the helm and Jan Maxa as the show and programme format development director (another key person in the production of *Český žurnál* is creative producer Petr Kubica). That approval was the first sign of a willingness to review and change the existing production mechanisms and to offer a more friendly face to documentaries with a pronounced signature from the creator.

In a shift from the previously established practice *Český žurnál* was approved before a script or even a theme had been agreed upon. The agreement merely obligated the creators to produce five one-hour (52-minute to be precise) documentaries capturing contemporary topics resonating across the society. As a result, the actual selection of the case of fired bus driver Smetana (*Svobodu pro Smetanu* (*Freedom for Smetana*)), the methanol affair (*Pančovaná republika* (*Adulterated Country*)) and the popular presidential election (*Spříznění přímou volbou* (*Kindred by Popular Vote*)) was entirely in the hands of the creators who thus enjoyed much greater creative freedom compared to the preceding era in ČT, when they would have been merely filling in “slots” in a schedule agreed upon in advance. *Český žurnál* thus may be better positioned, compared to other attempts to introduce TV trends from abroad, to demonstrate that ČT has begun to accommodate auteurs in some areas of its production. As a result documentaries on public service TV have become more varied

and more controversial.

With the changes happening in ČT's production, the television station's logo was displayed for the first time in films that would have previously been first shown to visitors of Jihlava film festival and not ČT viewers. Those films not only informed, they also instigated contemplation. Discussions over the topics portrayed as well as the manner of portrayal escaped the microcosm of the documentary film festival to the public domain, or at least the internet (where all films produced for *Český žurnál* are available for streaming).[2] Yet, compared to Jihlava, famous for its lively discussions following most of its projections, there appeared a yawning gulf between the filmmakers' willingness to discuss and that of the television viewer, accustomed to more accessible and less controversial documentary formats.

By confronting the indolent TV viewer with angry documentarists who "think through their films" and represent the younger generations (the oldest of them is Karel Žalud, director of *Já, horník! (I, Miner!)*, born in 1971) *Český žurnál* unwittingly also stirred up a clash of generations. Older viewers who prefer to while away their evenings watching the telly rather than seek content on the internet were suddenly asked to test the boundaries of their tolerance in confrontation with the sharply pronounced opinions of young and reasonably brazen filmmakers, so unlike anything previously seen on a public channel. The filmmakers themselves do not hold back when it comes to rebuking traditional television production and established formats, even having arrived on the rather conservative institution's payroll.

Only a detailed sociological survey could provide some reliable information on the age stratification of *Český žurnál* viewers and the measure of their (dis)approval of the way individual topics were explored. However, there is no doubt that films like *Dělníci bulváru (Tabloid Labourers)*, *Gadžo* or *Matrix AB* collided head on with the prevalent notion of what sort of shows the medium of public service should "by law" be broadcasting. This clash was probably best manifested this year in a letter penned by the management of Vinohradská Hospital in response to the annotation of *Pět zrození (Five Births)* that showed, without any embellishment, the manner in which birth labours were taking place in the hospital, and included the following:

“With respect to Czech Television’s mission of public service, it is utterly unacceptable that the medium takes on this derogatory conclusion referring to our hospital and presents it as the only correct view on an issue that the team of authors and creators not only do not understand but also do not even attempt to grasp. They merely try to fit manipulated facts into their predefined framework. Czech Television also finds itself in breach of its inviolable rules such as balanced and objective reporting if it provides room and support for productions that present lies in the processing of a given theme, but the medium also contradicts its own principles as it presents the series *Český žurnál* as a discussion-enticing and personal approach by individual directors exploring themes in surprising contexts while employing refined filming language.”[3]

Films overtly applying the auteur’s viewpoint and operating on the borderline between civil activism and investigative journalism have become an alternative, welcomed by some and shunned by others, to mainstream mass media that tend to either avoid higher levels of criticism in their reporting or pursue a policy of populist appeal, reaffirming in so doing various prejudices and stereotypes they should instead be examining and uprooting. Where facts and emotions are manipulated in the films of *Český žurnál*, whether they depict the killing of a Roma lad in Tanvald (*Život a smrt v Tanvaldu* (Life and Death in Tanvald)), life in a Roma ghetto (*Gadžo*) or most recently the state of Czech obstetrics (*Pět zrození*), that manipulation is more often than not reflected in an admission that the person behind the camera is one with an opinion plus the power to decide what will get recorded on the film strip and how. The impartiality (or the lack of it) that the films of *Český žurnál* are so often reproached for is an overt tactical component and a way to shatter the viewer’s illusion that what was viewed was captured by a neutral, all-seeing camera that has its own angle of view but not its own opinion.

Alternative view

Both the positive and negative responses to *Český žurnál* must have been numerous and vocal enough for ČT to invest in the second and third series (spring 2014 and November and December 2014, respectively). Vít Klusák and Filip Remunda remained the key figures behind the project. They first claimed attention by bringing to light the tragicomic awkwardness of events in the Czech public space by creating *Český*

sen (*Czech Dream*) in which they uncovered some of the behind-the-scenes practices of advertising agencies. From the initial playfulness of their early films, their poetic approach as auteurs has developed in recent years into a more earnest stance, without forfeiting their personal involvement or a fine sense for the thin line between the noble and the trivial. On the contrary, the degree of involvement in an issue that they have taken to heart appears to be increasing despite the more grown-up approach. That is certainly what their two contributions to this year's edition of *Český žurnál* suggest: Klusák's *Matrix AB* and Remunda's *Blízký daleký východ (Near Far East)*, both of which amount to, unlike other parts of the series, an above-standard length of 70 minutes each. As a duo, they also created *Má vlast Afghánistán (My Homeland Afghanistan)* which was broadcast as the last of the series by ČT and is the only programme not to have been shown in Jihlava prior to its TV premiere.[4] The last *Český žurnál* series saw Tomáš Kratochvíl return (previously *Gadžo* plus a follow-up feature-length film *Češi proti Čechům (Czechs against Czechs)*) and join forces with Roma activist Ivana Čonková to make *Ubytovny (Lodging Houses)* while newcomer Erika Hníková (*Ženy pro měny, Nesvatbov*) contributed with the abovementioned *Pět zrození*.

In addition to common efforts to defy the panicking media, refrain from offering simplistic solutions and approach issues at hand in corresponding contexts, the films also without exception offer viewpoints opposing the dominant, or at least the noisiest, trains of thought. The creators of all five films give voice to those who are usually not heard in the media, be it for economic or political reasons or simply because they speak in quieter voices than those found by the media to be more attractive. It may come as a surprise that the above applies even to Klusák's documentary on omnipresent Babiš, presented from the viewpoint of someone disconcerted by the unlimited power of the country's current finance minister. Even though Klusák vented his apprehensions without restraint only in the final argument with Babiš, the preceding selection of recorded situations and the apparent effort to catch the politician red-handed betray the intention of creating a picture different from that presented for example by media financially dependent in one way or another on Babiš. *Matrix AB* is not an investigative documentary that would uncover obscure facts of the politician's personal life and ignite new political affairs. In line with the overall closely engaged approach of authors contributing to *Český žurnál*, the film's

breakthrough quality lies both in viewing Babiš's hunger for power as a serious threat and in daring to articulate that stance openly.

Erika Hníková is another author who does not go very far out of her way to analyse her chosen issue in *Pět zrození* or to set it in broader contexts. Similarly to *Matrix AB*, for which Klusák was considerably limited in his filming by Babiš's unwillingness to be filmed, Hníková was partly limited by production constraints and partly stemming from her decisions as a auteur (filming took place over 12 days in a Prague maternity hospital). Hníková strives to make up for the narrow scope with her commitment and apparent alarm at seeing the cold and impersonal attitude of the hospital's staff towards the mothers. The rapid and mass production of children that are taken away from their mothers immediately after birth takes place under the constant hum of various pieces of machinery, and with the assistance of a considerable amount of chemical substances as well as associated paperwork. In interviews, Hníková admits that her aim was to ignite a discussion and that that was the reason for visiting a big maternity hospital with its greater likelihood of pointed situations, the last of which was summarised by an exhausted father by saying: "It was a tad more demanding than I had expected." The director decided to draw attention to an issue – discussed often and with an increasing sense of urgency in the mass media by obstetricians themselves – even at the cost of risking some simplification likely to draw fire for a perceived purposeful picking out of only those situations and pieces of information that fit the chosen narrative. Even though there is a very real risk of the method of expression attracting more attention in discussions provoked by *Pět zrození* than the standout opinion expressed by the film, it is quite impossible to separate the film's theme and its composition. Even were it a discussion focused mainly on the manipulation of facts, it still could not detach itself completely from the manner in which children in this country can come into the world. The deed done by Hníková, who dared to shine a light on the most contentious aspects of obstetrics in this country "from below", i.e. from the mother's viewpoint, despite pressure from authorities often considered untouchable, can ideally become an inspiration for other silent or silenced groups.

Tomáš Kratochvíl is another filmmaker for whom a willingness to make films reflecting his opinion (of discontent) as the auteur, instead of primarily reflecting personal poetism, comes naturally. His *Ubytovny*, created over a period of two years, depicts

the dysfunctional institution of social housing as a manifestation of anti-Roma moods permeating Czech society. He spells out his position early on with a disarming straightforwardness. According to Kratochvíl, people live in lodging houses with undignified conditions because of society-wide xenophobia and a lack of government interest in the socially disadvantaged members of society. The director commiserates with them and defends their interests. Once again, it is by no means a well-balanced report for the evening news but a personal accusation aimed at majority-society and the ruling elites that also contains a warning against the potential impacts of a prolonged underestimation of the issue. When he describes a lodging house as a “sort of a mild penitentiary”, he is pointing out the possible predetermination of the future fates of the socially disadvantaged and excluded children growing up under highly demotivating circumstances. The film concludes with a statement: “It is necessary that society exerts pressure on MPs.” Kratochvíl clearly does not consider *Ubytovny* as a mere exploration of an attractive topic that provides a subject worthy of a film; he sees it as an open-ended issue that commands revisiting.

In addition to being conceived and produced out of their respective creators’ personal urges to call attention to a particular issue, the three films analysed here also have in common the putting of a greater emphasis on the “opportunity to be there” over aesthetic sophistication. On the other hand, the documentaries *Pevnost* (*Fortress*, 2012) directed by Lukáš Kokeš and Klára Tasovská, *Velká noc* (*Grand Night*, 2013) directed by Petr Hátle, and *K oblakům vzhlížíme* (*To the Clouds We Look Up*, 2014) directed by Martin Dušek evidenced a distinct promise that the upcoming generation of documentary filmmakers would place considerable emphasis on an aesthetically appealing elegance of the kind seen in contemplative live-action films created for the festival circuit. Compared to these, contributions to *Český žurnál* never seemed to fret much over the audio-visual aspects. This is most likely down to more than just the requirement for remaining as topical as possible with the corresponding impacts on the time available for the realisation phase (a requirement that was not common to all films). To describe the generation of filmmakers as one that is focused primarily on the outward look would therefore be too much of a generalisation neglecting the seemingly trivial fact of the form usually following the film’s theme. Occasionally, the urge to convey a message, to express an opinion on an issue or to define one’s relative position is simply stronger than the need to create a

stylistically original work that would, on the other hand, increase the likelihood of the film remaining just as spellbinding years later when the topical relevance had long since expired.

Looking into the future

Filip Remunda's *Blízký daleký východ* is by no means a closed chapter but rather a contribution to a discussion that is still very much alive. Similarly to the year before and his *Obnažený národ* (*Nation Laid Bare*, 2014), Remunda once again went abroad, namely to Ukraine in this case, to look for parallels in reasoning and moods prevalent in Czech society. His exploration among ordinary people living in a country split by war is interspersed with exclamations such as: "This would probably take pretty much the same course in our country" (in reference to the masses falling for political populism). Remunda also pays increased attention to the slow rate of the removal of relics of the communist era, such as Stalin's portraits and statues of Lenin. Whatever the rate of disappearance of physical memorabilia of the past, the Soviet era clearly survives in the minds of many Ukrainians, generally torn between a sentimental attachment to the East and the desire to achieve Western lifestyles. Remunda does not look for an answer to the question of why people of the same nation have turned weapons on one another. In his private humanitarian mission, spurred on by his close links to Ukraine, he limits himself to merely conveying the events witnessed. Although his emotive comments accompany virtually the whole film, and even though he does not hold back his surprise at not all Ukrainians wanting their country to become an EU member state, he acts as an attentive listener rather than as an initiator intent – in line with performance art – on triggering situations. Lending a voice to those not usually heard applies to Remunda and his film on not one but two different levels. By means of numerous small yet emotionally powerful stories depicting divided families, he brings to the forefront the neglected tiny everyday historical events while also resuscitating the theme of the civil war that has been overshadowed in the Czech media space by the migration crisis. The film thus provides an alternative to the prevalent manner of reporting on the Ukrainian conflict as well as to news topics that have recently taken precedence.

In geographical terms, the film most removed from the Czech environs is Vít Klusák and Filip Remunda's *Má vlast Afghánistán*. Although its contemplations of the

concepts of heroism, patriotism, courage and honour take part mostly in Afghanistan, the triggering event for the film that also provides a frame for the narrative was the burying of four Czech servicemen in the Czech Republic after they were killed during their Afghan mission. Attempts to understand the complicated situation of servicemen on foreign missions and their ambiguous trains of thought are interspersed with discussions back home over the themes of the fear of terrorism and the need to mount a defence against the radical Islamist threat by attacking it in the territory occupied by terrorists. Quick conclusions of populist politicians and other public figures arrived at without knowledge of historical relationships act as pieces of a multi-layered mosaic that intentionally creates more questions than answers thus emphasising the complexity and ambiguity of issues surrounding the matter of securing a country's borders against threats from abroad. The film's creators go against the flow of the times that – as fittingly described in the film by defence minister Martin Stropnický – “shun complex issues”. The filmmakers force their lay protagonists, and the audience with them, ask of themselves some serious questions, the answers to which will not only help in the understanding of what has already taken place but will also increase interest in what may be yet to happen. The epilogue, made on 17 November 2015 in Prague's Albertov, makes the film the most recent addition to *Český žurnál*, giving more weight to the belief that today's Czech documentary filmmakers have lost nothing of their zeal for things to come while they expect a similar willingness to listen and think for oneself from their audiences.

Following the second series of *Český žurnál* that focused predominantly on general themes, such as the cohabitation of Czechs with the Roma minority (*Gadžo*), the Czechs' attraction to holidaying in Croatia (*Obnažený národ*) or their fascination with the private lives of celebrities (*Dělníci bulváru*), the vast majority of the most recent series can be seen as reverting to contemporary affairs that deserve speedy resolution. A sense of urgency, attempts to ignite a lively discussion or to move the situation along in the desired direction while viewing the chosen theme from a clearly defined position, be it outlined by means of textual notes (*Pět zrození*), behind-the-camera comments (*Blízký daleký východ*) or in direct confrontation with people representing the explored issue (*Matrix AB*, *Ubytovny*), all contribute to the blurring of the boundary between a film documentary and an act of civil engagement.

This time around, the redesigning of documentary film conventions does not take place by means of adding any marked formal features, such as through applying approaches common in fiction films and the staging of situations, but rather via a narrower relationship between text and contexts, between the film and the social space in which it is made and to which it responds. It brings out the possibility of comparing the quality of individual films not only on the merits of how convincing their arguments are or how inventive their narratives are, but also based on their degree of social resonance. It is apparent that the main motivation of the four auteurs was not to make films that would stand the test of time, but films with the potential to change the course of events. The context of growing extremism within society and of giving in to populism and to quick judgements makes this documentary filmmaker's urge both understandable and priceless, and something that stands in for the critically thinking social elites.

Notes:

[1] Outside the film, Babiš's opinion is also available [here](#).

[2] See <http://www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/10408111009-cesky-zurnal/>.

[3] For the complete letter to the ČT CEO see <http://www.fnkv.cz/zprava-otevreny-dopis-generalnimu-rediteli-ceske-televize>.

[4] A possible explanation may be offered by the fact that the epilogue was recorded only after the festival, on 17 November.