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How to make comedy? Oldřich Lipský and his films

This July marks the 100th anniversary of the birth of Oldřich Lipský. During has career spanning more than three decades, he made over twenty films – exclusively comedies in various forms – that have become iconic and are still screened today. Despite that, there is no monography or comprehensive publication focusing on his person or work. It's perhaps due to the fact that his filmography has become encoded in our national cultural DNA and we have the feeling that we know it so well and it's not necessary to examine it further. Nor isn't Lipský's work regularly examined in diploma theses at various film universities. The following text focuses on the most popular and remembered part of Lipský's work, film parodies, although this genre label isn't particularly fitting for Lipský's work and serves mainly as a blanket term.

The Pelhřimov native died in 1986 during the production of *The Great Movie Robbery* (Velká filmová loupeř, 1986) finished after his passing by Zdeněk Podskalský. Lipský's final film fittingly revolves around a sci-fi invention allowing people to travel through realities and TV screens. But this film came at a time when parodic comedies weren't popular anymore. Not even genre icons such as Lipský and Vorlíček matched the quality and ingenuity of their best films from the 1960s and 1970s. The popularity of parodies skyrocketed in the 1960s and soon after, they adopted elements of fantasy and sci-fi comedies. In the 1980s, parodies started inclining towards satire and were burdened by the period circumstances, i.e. the very thing they initially parodied and the very thing that made them so humorous and timeless. Even the humour in demand migrated towards popular comedies by Zdeněk Troška and the distinctive poetics of Zdeněk Svěrák and Ladislav Smoljak which was originally brought to the silver screen with the help of Oldřich Lipský.

Late 1950s and early 1960s tend to be associated mainly with new wave and auteurs. But thanks to political liberalisation, a door opened for genre films which were perhaps even more important for the film industry. Comedies became more than just satirical agitprops and could serve the purest purpose – humour itself. That was reflected in their enormous popularity which, in fact, endured to this day as comedies have remained the most sought-after product. As evidence by an interview with the director of the Central Film Rental Service Vladislav Mašek, the industry was well aware of this fact during the period of Normalisation. In the interview, Mašek mentions that the attendance decreased in early 1970s due to a lower number of Czechoslovak films crucial for attendance numbers in village and small town cinemas and that he has high hopes for four comedies in development – *"Four Murders are Enough, Darling"* („Čtyři vraždy stačí, drahoušku", 1971), *"You Are a Widow, Sir"* („Pane, vy jste vdova", 1971), *Weddings of Petr Vok of Rožmberk* (Svatby pana Voka, 1971) and *Hogo Fogo Homolka* (1971).[1]

This telling foursome illustrate the comedic diversity and various trends. Lipský bending the crime film genre, Vorlíček's sci-fi, historical comedy by Karel Steklý and a sequel to Jaroslav Papoušek's popular series with elements of new wave tendencies. The first two titles are more or less built on parodic outlines brought to the forefront of production and artistic tendencies thanks to Lipský's phenomenally successful film *Lemonade Joe* (Limonádový Joe aneb Koňská opera, 1964). This parody of Western tropes wasn't the first one of its kind in Czechoslovak cinema. In a sense, it dusted off the forgotten poetics of the First Czechoslovak Republic, mainly the work of Martin Frič, who was a formative figure for Lipský's generation of comedic filmmakers, as evidenced by a self-flagellating interview with Zdeněk Podskalský who says then when making *Blockbuster* (Trhák, 1980), he should have followed Frič's advice and not "parody a parody".[2]

Parodic tendencies were present already in the First Republic cinema – we can name for instance *The Kidnapping of Fux the Banker* (Únos bankéře Fuxe, 1923), *Catch Him!* (Chyťte ho, 1924), *Lelíček in the Services of Sherlock Holmes* (Lelíček ve službách Sherlocka Holmese, 1932) and *The Hard Life of an Adventurer* (Těžký život dobrodruha, 1941). A post-war example is *The Poacher's Foster Daughter* (Pytlákova schovanka anebo Šlechetný milionář, 1949) notorious for its production and ideological history. But until the "Lemonade Man", as Lipský nicknamed it, parodies

were scarce. The reason was likely the box office flop of the expensive film *Pancho's Wedding* (Pancho se žení, 1946). The film was almost finished in 1944 during the war but was shelved for some time. One of the reasons it entered distribution was that Czech cinemas desperately needed a comedy. But the ideologically engaged reviews ruthlessly tore into Rudolf Hrušínský's second and last film as a director, although it's a thought-provoking attempt at parody of Western genre patterns released in a politically complicated time of big social turmoil.

The road to Kolaloka

In the 1940s, Jiří Brdečka published a humorous magazine series titled *Lemonade Joe* (Limonádový Joe) which was later adapted into a stage play. One of the adaptations was directed by Oldřich Lipský who had a successful spell at the Divadlo Satiry as a manager and director. Lipský's time in the popular theatre of small forms was very formative for him as he established the foundations for long-time collaborations with his brother Lubomír, Miloš Kopecký, Karel Effa, Josef Hlinomaz, Stella Zázvorková and Vlastimil Brodský. Incidentally, the repeated casting of the same actors was something Lipský was criticised for. In 1962, Barrandov approved the literary script co-written by Lipský and Brdečka. For Lipský it was crucial to be able to work on the script as a director. His colleagues, such as Zdeněk Svěrák in *Úsměvy českého filmu* [3], described Lipský as a pragmatic, and Lipský himself confirmed it in several interviews, his work on literary scripts establishes a clear directorial continuity and a unified poetics.

Although this text mentions that the "new wave" of Czech comedies served predominantly the humour itself, this doesn't fully apply to *Lemonade Joe*. The film's most important traits are genre playfulness and the ingenuity of its ideas, but it has a satirical element, highlighted when compared to Brdečka's original series. In an interview for Rudé právo Lipský describes it with the following words: "The film isn't merely a parody on a kitschy Western film, but with its satiric elements, it aims higher. This adaptation is about two competing companies: one sells whiskey and the other lemonade. But it's not just that. It's about how money affects people and their relationships"[4]. It's important that the film's humour doesn't serve the satire, it's the other way around. The satiric line is conditional to the humour and serves as a basis for other gags and puns. Highlighting the absurdity of capitalism in which

money and product promotion are the benchmarks of relationships and character motivations fully aligns with the playful fictional world.

Before *Joe*, Lipský made four feature films, held various assistant positions at Barrandov a co-directed sad (in light of Vlasta Burian's fate) agitprop *The Hen and the Sexton* (Slepice a kostelník, 1950). He debuted with *The Show is On* (Cirkus bude, 1954), a film exploring the backstage of circus, a theme close to his heart, as he was a lifelong fan of circus. Lipský himself later made experiments in Czechoslovak Circus where he combined the performance of circus artists with film screenings during an international tour. He used multimedia elements also in the theatre and compared his productions to film editing as he tried to employ time jumps and shatter the sterility of theatre. His following films were the anthological film *Jaroslav Hašek's Exemplary Cinematograph* (Vzorný kinematograf Jaroslava Haška, 1955) and musical comedy in Yugoslavian co-production *A Star Travels South* (Hvězda jede na jih, 1958) which the regime found too cosmopolitan and after its premiere at the Bánská Bystrica Film Festival, it was banned. It entered distribution in 1964 but was banned again nine years later. The ban of the film was one of the reasons that Lipský focused on his work in the circus where her made the documentary title *Circus is Here!* (Cirkus jede!, 1960)

What was interesting was Lipský's approach to sci-fi comedy *The Man From the First Century* (Muž z prvního století, 1961) situated in a utopic world in the future where humanity has moved past money, anger and hatred. All vices are personified by a man from the past – a scheming, opportunistic and spiteful protagonist named Josef who tries to subvert the idyllic society. The film is loaded with socialist ideology but it's inspiring to watch it through a purely comedic lens and see how Lipský and Miloš Macourek (this was his first scrip collaboration) play with the sci-fi setting and juxtapose realistic portrayals with the absurd plot and stylised naivety. Technological marvels are portrayed as bizarre inventions and technological development nearly eradicated feelings and emotions. The film uses the artistic superficiality of period Soviet sci-fi – the subversive magnificence is underlined not just by the futuristic props but also by the widescreen format – and adapts it to conform to its humour. It bends the stylistic and genre methods to the benefit of the comical elements.

A syntactic manual for humour

That leads us back to the Lemonade Man where Lipský capitalised on all the abovementioned methods and turned them into a mature and timelessly captivating film seen in the cinemas by more than 4,5 million viewers and awarded many international awards including the San Sebastian Silver Shell. Lipský and Brdečka didn't reject the Western genre; on the contrary. They both liked it, whether it was in written or film worm, and parodied the run-of-the-mill and pulpy approach to genre, which is in essence highly cinematographic, as confirmed by the opening sequence of the bar brawl, which is unusually kinetic and its chaos includes Lipský's trademark micro-gags. The filmmakers remain true to the things we know from American Westerns. The colour and widescreen format allude to silent films. The costumes are characteristically archetypal – as a morally solid lawman, Joe is clad in white and the corrupted villain Hogofogo wears black.

The film uses a framework of clearly defined genre tropes and formal techniques and Hollywood-style causal narration. The parody isn't based in what Westerns look like and they way they are narrated. It's in the subversion of viewer expectations on individual levels and situations. When Joe finds out Tornado Lou saved him because of love and not money, he declares he decadent and runs away. He doesn't get caught in the dilemma of loving two women as the narrative would seemingly have him. Joe's heroic acts aren't motivated by bravery, but by the promotion of Kolaloka – at least at the beginning. The bad guys torture Joe not by force, but by staining his white clothes. The film's climax isn't a duel or an emotional conclusion of a romantic plotline, but rather a family reunion, sudden riches in the form of discovering oil, stock market success and introducing a new alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverage WhisKola.

In addition to the subversion, the film relies on playfulness bending the genre specifics. That's a clear parallel to Lipský's future parodies. His films didn't conform to genre norms, but it was the other way around. It is therefore problematic labelling them as parodies. They form an independent and entirely self-sufficient comedy stream later joined by other filmmakers, most notably Václav Vorlíček. Lipský was second to none when it comes to combining pure film gags with foley and poignant lines. He was influenced by pantomime and circus and knew very well that a proper gag doesn't need any words. He uses pure film (special effects) passages, such as his favourite accelerated movement, looping sequences and playing them backwards,

overexposed shots; some of the musical passages adopt music video aesthetics so we can call them television songs deliberately torn out from the previous stylisation and indulging in multiple expositions. Lipský revels in these passages although they don't drive the plot in any way and serve a pure aesthetic pleasure.

The humour stems from action sequences and situations often hidden in tiny details and precise framing including characters and objects entering and leaving the frame. Lipský lets the characters smoothly interact with the setting and props. It's a synthesis of almost all available elements forming elaborate humour based not just in the art of film but also in literature and theatre as the performances and dialogues and strongly influenced by the Liberated Theatre. The characters also accept the absurdity and nonsense in the fictional world. A perfect example is the scene when Joe comes back to the Saloon after he embarrassed Hogofogo at the graveyard.

Joe enters the Saloon while Tornado Lou sings the blues. The camera follows Joe who's heading to the bar where he stops, pushes away a glass of alcohol and turns with his back to the bar. The enamoured Lou stops her song and heads to Joe who loses his focus while in the second plan, a mirror opens up and a bandit points his gun at Joe. Lou jumps in front of Joe to protect him. The camera changes and the composition now includes five characters. In the centre is Doug who waves his hat and shouts "fire" or "don't fire" depending on whether he stands Lou stands before Joe. On the right, the mirror opens and closes, between Doug and the mirror stands the bartender who hides behind the bar and on the left side, Joe constantly switches with Lou. Lipský subsequently dynamically cuts to details, the rhythm is set by the squeaks of the mirror and the film is accelerated. The synthesis of thrill and humour climaxes by shooting down a painting which, along with the view, collapse on the bandit. When it seems everything's over, the bartender walks up to the bandit, tucks his head down and pretends nothing happened. We can suppose that the bandit is heavy drinker so the scene actually visualises being "plastered".

This scene proves that although the film comes across as playful and impulsive, it was, in fact a meticulously planned, timed and elaborate title. The scene works on all levels and unites everything that was mentioned before. It works with tension so crucial for the Western genre but overrides it with farcicality and absurdity stemming the bandit's inability to shoot at the right moment. On individual levels, the scene

disrupts expectations supported by formal aspects. When Joe asks whether the nights are cold, the camera closes in on him to see him deliver the line “Then I should probably… wear warm clothes.” But the gag itself is much more than the line and its delivery. It relies on the thorough connection to the formal aspects and their ordinarily serious function which it turns into humorous.

Watching these scenes, everything seems natural. But in reality, it’s a result of skilful and ingenious work that seems so smooth and organic that we don’t find it necessary to analyse it. This discipline is, however, extremely hard. Both the period press and Lipský himself agree that comedies are the toughest genre. In his interview with *Rudé právo* in 1964, Lipský said: “Comedies often have to conform to unnecessarily high standards which either tie your hands or discourage you. It’s not about giving up on the standards, but you need to consider that comedies are much more difficult than other genres and should therefore be held in higher regard. And these are not my words, I think it was Chaplin who said something along these lines”.[5]

Time travel and falling corpses

After the enormous “lemonade” success – the film is 9th on the list of top 10 most visited Czechoslovak films before 1989 – Oldřich Lipský attained a prominent status. He managed to keep it by sticking to ideologically harmless comedies. That enabled him and Miloš Macourek to start their formally and narratively most ambitious film *Happy End* (1967) whose brilliance and experimental nature is fully appreciated retrospectively as in its time, it was perceived as a mere “joke” (it was criticised even by Jan Kliment, an infamous film critic from the socialist era, otherwise a big supporter of Lipský’s work). In *Happy End*, which is narrated in reverse, Lipský more than ever drew inspiration from the tradition of silent slapstick comedies and (rather deliberately) reflected what the film was in relation to itself. Lispký again joined forces with Macourek in the sci-fi comedy *I Killed Einstein, Gentlemen!* (Zabil jsem Einsteina, pánové…, 1969) in which they played with the concept of time travel. Just like in their first sci-fi, they used various gadget – such as a mammoth device for shaving and hair clipping – to build gags. Both loved absurdity and the sci-fi genre enabled them to play with the effects of time travel on the causality of the fictional world.

Another parodic comedy made a year later, *"Four Murders are Enough, Darling"*, mixed elements of crime and gangster film. Just like in Macourek's collaboration with Vorlíček *Who Wants to Kill Jessie?* (Kdo chce zabít Jessii, 1966), this film heavily utilises comic book aesthetics and comic book stories form one of the central narrative motifs. Illustrations for both films were made by Kája Saudek. But the comic book aesthetics wasn't the authors' goal. In both cases, they used its elements and rules as artistic devices, all in the spirit of experimenting with genre formulas. The illustrations serve as transitions between scenes and sometimes replaces parts of the scenes such as the final car chase of enemy gangs. The comic book aesthetics in the form of visually striking signs and titles is also a non-diegetic element when the protagonist demonstrates how he allegedly gave someone a beating. The frame freezes and onomatopoeic comic book captions appear. In another scene, we see the mix of diegetic and non-diegetic when a fight takes place behind a closed door while the captions appear. After a while, the protagonist starts reacting to them observing them closely even though up until that point, the film used them non-diegetically.

Stylistics and the approach to humour construction have all the traces present in *Joe*. But the narration has a strong imprint of Macourek's style. Although it's a narrative moved by causality, we watch layers, repeats and variations of several situations which become increasingly absurd. After all, the whole film revolves around the protagonist George Camel opening door behind which he finds dead bodies. Door is the most important element of every setting, whether it's Camel apartment or the door in the newspaper office where he goes to offer his poems. Entering and leaving sets the rhythm of individual scenes and builds and subverts viewer expectations. Another layer is the sudden interest of public and how much it can change a man (even though the interest was aroused due to his alleged killing spree) and how easily we're able to give up on our moral code and accept a role given to us by someone else. Another nice touch is the fact that although Camel despises comic books and pulp literature, he eventually become heir protagonist.

Global and local

After a series of several comedies, films for children and collaborations with the duo Svěrák-Smoljak, where he was an equal creative partner and even worked on the script of their debut *Joachim, Put Him into the Machine* (Jáchyme, hoď ho do stroje,

1974), Lipský returned to parodies and collaborations with Jiří Brdečka with a variation on pulp stories about the intrepid detective Nick Carter. While *Lemonade Joe* and *Four Murders* were set in America and the characters were American, although from fictional towns, *Adela Has Not Had Supper Yet* (Adéla ještě nevečeřela, 1978) benefitted from an American character in a Czech setting. In addition to genre games, the humour stems from the clash of two different cultures, both parodied empathically. Whether it's beer drinking, fighting styles, technical invention or the collision of pragmatic force with analytical deduction. More than ever, Lipský could „run wild" on masks and costumes, another significant source of humour in his films. Various costumes and identities were adopted by Hogofogo in *Joe* and the gang boss in *Four Murders*. But in this film, disguises play an even bigger role in the story. Lipský worked with identity changes for instance in *Joachim, Einsten, "Mareček, Please Pass Me a Pen!"* („Marečku, podejte mi pero!", 1976), *Six Bears and Cibulka* (Šest medvědů s Cibulkou, 1972) and *The Three Veterans* (Tři veteráni, 1983).

Just like *Murders*, *Adela* creates parallels between the film's character and its fictional counterpart. Nick Carte is a famous detective who's also a star of many pulp novels. Just like it's inspiration, the film can work as a stand-alone title and also an episode of a series as it has an open ending. It's also playfully framed as an orchestral composition with a conductor at the beginning and at the end. The opening sequence with the conductor is interspersed with detective illustrations and a different grotesque piano music. Classical music, i.e. high art, is deliberately interrupted by low culture. As if the authors wanted to declare that labelling doesn't make any sense and low and high culture can work together. An again, *Adéla* isn't making fun of the detective genre, it's a playful and enthusiastic title somewhere between homage, parody and transfer of genre tropes to local specifics. As such, it is comprehensible to local as well as international audiences. Although Czechoslovak audiences weren't that familiar with Western films, they had a chance to understand the basics and tropes of the genre thanks to their utilisation instead of deconstruction.

The last title of the creative duo Lipský-Brdečka was a Jules Verne adaptation *The Mystery of the Carpathian Castle* (Tajemství hradu v Karpatech, 1981). Adaptations of Jules Verne had a special role in Czechoslovak cinema thanks to Karel Zeman. With equal imagination, but this time serving comedy, Lipský and Brdečka made their own

adaptation. *The Carpathian Castle* has popular sci-fi gadgets used by the villains, a gothic aesthetic and adventurous elements. It's Lipský most epic parody. He used the lush Carpathian nature which is magical in itself and enhanced it by supernatural phenomena (some with rational explanation, some with no explanation) just like Verne did. The trick is to accept the imaginative nature of the film. Both *Adéla* and *Castle* have much more parodical elements than *Joe*. In his interview with *Rudé Právo*, Lipský admitted that *Joe* will be enjoyed best by people who know Westerns. But the pulp novel adaptations weren't so popular and neither was Verne's novel. Brdečka and Lipský abandoned their intention to parody concrete titles and in *Castle*, they parody chiefly the sci-fi setting so typical for Verne, while almost entirely omitting the specific plot of the original novel.

In reality, the film parodies the local vernacular and folklore. It uses a dadaist language combined of several dialects, allegedly from the Chod region, the Krkonoše mountains and Moravia, and creates a parody on the stereotypical folklore imagery. More than any other abovementioned film, *Castle* is a series of scenes superordinate to the whole. The authors focus mainly on exploring the fictional world and its inhabitants instead of narrating the plot interspersed with causality. In an interview with magazine *Záběr*, Brdečka even said the novel was bad. He disliked its lengthy structure, detailed descriptions of characters who would later die and most of all its seriousness. But it all formed a perfect basis for developing another sequence of absurdities which the writers enriched with vampire elements which weren't present in the original. The result was a syntactical culmination of their careers who, thank their similar sense of humour and passion for genre cinema, got along extremely well. Although the period reviews were rather mixed, the film is now perceived as the last part of a loose trilogy embodying pure comedy, however pragmatic and skilled craftsmen both Brdečka and Lipský were.

Before his death, Oldřich Lipský made another sci-fi comedy with satirical overtones *Cordially from Earth* (Srdečný pozdrav ze zeměkoule, 1982) in which two aliens explore our world full of subversively extensive waste containers and socialist architecture. Lipský and Brdečka were supposed to collaborate on *The Three Veterans*, but after Brdečka's sudden death, Lipský finished the script with Zdeněk Svěrák. Oldřich Lipský died from complications related to a perforated ulcer. Even after many years, he remains the uncrowned king of Czech comedy. Comedy which seemed simple but

required meticulous preparation and devotion to one's craft. Lipský's friends and collaborators often described him as a sad man who wanted to make films to bring joy to the audiences as well as himself. He didn't give many interviews, and when he did, it was almost exclusively for *Rudé právo.* In the 1980s, he wrote a series for magazine *Květy* where he recapitulated his career. But we have chance to get to know him through his work, which is often the best way. Let us conclude with a characteristic definition of humour which was given by Miloš Macourek, but applies for Lipský as well:

"When I write a scene set in a shop where a housewife talks to a shop assistant, I get bored and sleepy. I keep telling myself how nice it would be if the shop assistant reached under the counter and pulled up a man with a fishing rod saying I don't have sardines, but I can offer you this. I just don't like a story unless it has fantasy, nonsense and absurdity, until the impossible becomes possible, simply until you can laugh and be amazed at the same time. Film – as Louis Feuillade put it – isn't a sermon, a lecture or a puzzle. It's entertainment for your eyes and your spirit. I cannot agree more. But the topic first has to entertain me so I can in turn entertain the audience."[6]

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Notes:

[1] *Kino*, 21st January 1971, p. 16.

[2] *Film a doba* 32, 1986, no. 5, pp. 276–277.

[3] Pavel Valduch, *Úsměvy českého filmu*. 33rd episode, Czech Television 1996.

[4] *Rudé právo*, 4th June 1964, p. 3.

[5] Ibid.

[6] *Kino*, 3rd September 1970, p. 8.