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Investigation, examination, retreat

Notes on the position of Czech detective films immediately after the 1948 coup

Anyone intending to examine the history of Czech detective films should approach the first half of the 1950s with marked vigilance. A brief intuitive examination of the material suggests one shouldn't expect much: among other things, the entry into function of Klement Gottwald's new government after the communist coup led to gradual implementation of a Sovietising culture-political programme. And this one was not particularly favourable for detective films. Having a look into a mid-1960s meticulous list of (not only) detective books, we can see that its authors only started listing the books from 1955, remaining chastely silent about the years before. In contrast, it wouldn't be too difficult to find a sharp statement from the concealed period which would criticize the methods of detective stories, mock them or distance itself from them in disgust.^[1] This text approaches the matter in a different way. It argues that the late 1940s and early 1950s were marked by an unusually intense and multi-faceted debate on detective films, even though the murmur was mostly confined to meetings and, most importantly, never came to execution.

To base one's interpretation mainly on something that has never come into being might seem a bit impractical. However, to shed some light on the matter, this cannot be avoided: the many unauthorised, stopped or significantly transformed projects in the execution phase can be regarded as key. They bear witness to untapped potential, interrupted traditions or blind branches. Taking this perspective, it is more adequate to talk not just about detective stories, but about a broader framework of crime fiction – an umbrella term for a large group of genres on the topic of crime. As pointed out by Michal Sýkora, a detective story is marked by a clearly formulated theoretical background and specific narrative structure. However, it is far from being

the only option under the colourful umbrella of crime fiction, and the existence of often intuitively defined genre names makes it possible to examine the different traditions.^[2] Indeed, some of them wouldn't have stood up at all in the post-1948 social buzz; mainly those crime fiction genres emphasizing and aestheticizing the perspective of the criminal. Considering the ideological priorities of the post-1948 regime, a project looking at crime solely from the victim's perspective wouldn't have sparked enthusiasm either; even less so had it depicted the victim's thirst for vengeance or his or her individualistic and inner coping with injustice. The only perspective that remains is the one of investigators, and an intrusive question arises whether in the new order, someone even thought of initiating the creation of detective films.

As an illustration, let's have a look at an April 1949 meeting of the Film Council – a body of the Ministry of Information and one of the links in the approval chain of the nationalized film industry. One could expect many things from the powerful advisory body feared by many, but definitely not openness to the patterns of crime fiction. That's why it could be surprising what the reactions were to a draft story of the planned detective film *The Doctor's Diary* (Lékařův zápisník). The culture-political officer Čestmír Potůček expresses a predictable opinion: he calls detective stories a „purely capitalist product; the form will cease to exist under socialism.“ Nevertheless, the Council president Bohdan Rossa then takes the floor to claim, after some pussyfooting, that he „personally knew many people who liked detective stories, even in high administrative positions. (...) We will be making detective stories.“ Other participants echo Rossa's opinion – among others Bedřich Pokorný, an intelligence officer representing the interests of the Ministry of the Interior at the meeting (he even offers himself willingly to give some advice). However, not even the more open members of the Film Council intended to approve *The Doctor's Diary* or all detective stories. Oldřich Mandáček, one of the present supporters of detective stories and secretary of the Communist Party parliamentary group, makes the following observation about the draft: „It's the American type of detective stories which were there 150 years ago. What we lack here is a new detective expression.“^[3]

What can be inferred from the above? Mainly that one shouldn't overestimate the boldness of the individual statements. Even though Potůček, sceptical to detective stories, was seemingly outnumbered, one can assume that at a different meeting and

with slightly different participants, the balance of power would probably have changed. Paradoxically, the group of supporters appears more uncertain: the president Bohdan Rossa makes a tactical remark that detective stories are popular even with important people in the state administration, creating a virtual alibi for the case of a potential counterargument about the culture-political incompatibility of detective stories with the new values. However, no clear instructions had arrived by spring 1949 and the importance of the cited statements lies in the split between the more actively acting members of the body whose opinions on other matters were otherwise mostly aligned. Due to the fact that the acceptability of detective stories hadn't been clearly sorted out yet, there was a wide range of different opinions. This was one of the reasons why the secretary of the Communist Party parliamentary group could come up with thoughts about a new approach to detective stories, even though with the exception of some rather generic remarks, he didn't mention at the meeting what this new expression would lie in.

One of the more discussed variants of the times was the implementation of methods of a specific crime fiction genre: of the procedural detective story. This method was supposed to bring more authenticity to crime investigation through the description of the individual investigative procedures – often very frustrating because they are slow, routine and unreliable. In contrast to a genius detective, the main hero of a procedural detective story was a police force, often with several members, which added a collectivist ethos to the investigation efforts.^[4] This might have been one of the reasons why they were attractive to some post-1948 observers hoping to preserve detective stories. Another plus point for procedural detective stories was the fact that immediately after World War II, a corresponding phenomenon started hitting the silver screen. In the second half of the 1940s, many semi-documentary (motion) pictures were made in the United States, mostly in association with the elusive category of *film noir*. Several parallel accents intersected in the semi-documentaries: namely the visual style reminiscent of the classic noir corpus, emphasis on meticulous police detection and methods suggestive of news and/or documentary materials including a smooth-tongued voice over disciplining the listener or viewer. In semi-documentary films, the crime often required more than one genius private eye; more than genius deduction, what was required was a robust, meticulous and universally respected state apparatus.^[5]

The stylistic and narrative standards of the semi-documentary production cycle were set, among other things, by the American film *The House on 92nd Street* (1942). Even though it was made by quite a famous director, Henry Hathaway, there are two different names that are usually mentioned in connection with this film: Louis de Rochemont, so far mainly known as the initiator and producer of monthly news *The March of Time* (1935–1951), and J. Edgar Hoover, the head of the FBI, who arranged for the cooperation of the Bureau with the filmmakers. Rochemont was supposed to help credibly incorporate documentary elements into a motion picture, including news materials and an anonymous narrator matching the conventions. The cooperation with the FBI was meant to increase the authenticity: it included both short acting and pseudo-reporting performances of Hoover and his subordinates, and the provision of material about a real case on which the fictitious one was based. In the film, the efforts of the Bureau were presented as essential, the crime always as a despicable act and the fight against crime in an optimistic light.^[6]

The innovations brought by *The House on 92nd Street* attracted the attention of some officers in Czechoslovakia. When the film was presented to the censorship committee in April 1947, no one objected. This was not a matter of course: for instance in January of the same year, the committee unanimously condemned Alfred Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943). The reason was the sophisticated inclusion of the perspective of an elegant criminal who besides that managed to escape the police force and provocatively avoided public humiliation in the end.^[7] The rejecting voices shouldn't be overestimated in this case either – both *The House on 92nd Street* and *Shadow of a Doubt* were ultimately distributed in Czechoslovakia almost at the same time – but their threatening tone in the post-1945 Czechoslovakia paved the way for some things to come. The reactions of the press picked up: even though a journalist of the *Rudé právo* daily didn't deny the praise to the formal attributes of Hitchcock's „psychological detective drama“, he reprimanded the film for its „advocacy of criminality“, whereas the semi-documentary tribute to the work of the FBI was remarkably appreciated by the Communist Party central print authority. In the coming issues of the *Rudé právo* daily, Henry Hathaway's film was at the head of the list of American films worth watching in the cinema.^[8] Looking at the less politically oriented *Filmové noviny* newspaper, we will find out that both *Shadow of a Doubt* and *The House on 92nd Street* were clearly appreciated in the respective articles. The

reviewer wrote about the latter: „The film indicates one of the possible ways the film development can take“, and appreciated the adequate adaptation of the „Czech narrator“ to the speech of his American colleagues, which suggests that even though the film was subtitled, the voice over was ambitiously dubbed.[9]

Whereas the positive tone appreciating films like *Shadow of a Doubt* logically and soon disappeared after the 1948 coup, there was still a temporary question mark for possible followers of *The House on 92nd Street*. A negative answer – at least on the level of the above mentioned Film Council – came in autumn 1949. During the toilsome debate on the thematic plan for 1950, it was suggested that the topic of fight against crime could be inspired by Henry Hathaway’s film. However, Bedřich Pokorný representing the Ministry of the Interior flatly rejected this proposal: he claimed that the power of these security forces lied in their anonymity. In other words, he indicated that the investigators’ methods couldn’t be revealed considering the risk of misuse of this information. In this way, he significantly limited the room for manoeuvre of the authors as to how to build up these stories. On one hand, the idea to introduce the perspective of the criminal was discarded: both pointing out the alleged amorality of these works, and „so that you won’t say that it’s instructions how to do the sabotages“. But when Vladimír Václavík – the production director of the Czechoslovak State Film and the author of these words – comes up with the idea to move the emphasis to the activities of investigators, it fails to find support as well.[10]

A non-executed literary screenplay called *Two Faces* (Dvojitá tvář) then indirectly showed that Pokorný was not alone with his opinion. Even though the film was not made and no formats of the screenplay have probably been preserved, one can reconstruct the story from as many as three sources: a reference, a negative opinion of representatives of the nationalized film industry, specifically members of the Collective Leadership of Central Dramaturgy (CL CD), and assessment of the situation submitted by the respective authors or the creative team. Vladimír Václavík’s reference was written at the end of November 1949 – i.e. only four weeks after Pokorný’s rejecting remark – and based on this experience, Václavík included a tactical remark that the Ministry of the Interior would get a say. Both he and Elmar Klos in another letter mention the distinct form of the planned film: in February 1950, Klos likens the follow-up on semi-documentary methods to a „special form of a reconstructed documentary“.[11] Moving exactly a year ahead, we leaf through a

check on VI Creative Team of Jan Werich. One of their failed projects is called *Two Faces* – according to Jiří Brdečka, a „subject matter from a police search party background“. The author Bohumil Brejcha laconically mentions that his screenplay had been rejected by the CL CD. He doesn't provide any further comments, only Werich adds the following: „Certain coldness in *Two Faces* was caused both by the subject matter itself and by Brejcha's world view“.[12] What shall we imagine under coldness though?

It has to be said though that the explanation by the members of CL CD is rather vague as well. According to them, it is not possible „to only deal with the crime itself and with finding the murderer (...) it would only limit us to the methods of fighting against crime without exposing the social roots of criminality. A significant aspect of such an important matter would thus be omitted (...) to move the focus from the mechanical work of the criminal police to human characters“.[13] Who should be the characters and what is meant by the significant aspect wasn't clarified though. No source quoted here takes a clear view with respect to the non-executed *Two Faces*, each of them relying on evasive, whirling and ambiguous rhetoric, even though their respective motivations for this strategy had probably been different. Regardless of the various curves of the official statements, one thing is clear: the inspiration by semi-documentary methods became outmoded at the end of the 1940s and became a blind branch.

When in March 1952 the head of the screenplay department Jiří Síla mentioned „Brejcha's detective film *Two Faces*“ among screenplays without a final decision, it was a belated expression of hope.[14] Time had moved on: Both *Shadow of a Doubt* and *The House on 92nd Street* had been banned – or removed from the Czechoslovak cinemas – by that time, Bedřich Pokorný had been arrested and was awaiting the verdict in a show trial and many officers in the nationalized film industry were considering even more peculiar scenarios of adapting detective stories to contemporary needs.[15] And even though this was a daunting task, they gradually succeeded.

Notes:

[1] Voříšková, Jitka, *Špionážní, detektivní, kriminalistická dobrodružná literatura: Soupis literatury z fondu KLK, Plzeň od roku 1955–1963*, Plzeň: Krajská lidová knihovna 1964. A contemporary derision of the supporters of detective stories made even before 1948 is contained for instance in Jes., *Z galerie filmového diváctva. Kino* 2, 1947, No. 5, pp. 96–97.

[2] Michal Sýkora: K teorii detektivního žánru. In: Sýkora, Michal a kol., *Britské detektivky: Od románu k televizní sérii*, Olomouc: Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci – Filozofická fakulta 2012, pp. 7, 16–17. Cf. Leitch, Thomas, *Crime Films*, Cambridge – New York: Cambridge University Press 2004 discusses the umbrella, classifying the individual genres involved and relating them to the history of Hollywood cinematography.

[3] Cited according to NFA, f. Filmová rada (1948) 1949–1955, referenční označení: 2/1/11//4, popis: Zápis ze schůze. Anonym: Zápis z 10. schůze Filmové rady..., 20 April 1949, p. 12.

[4] Michal Sýkora: K teorii detektivního žánru. In: Sýkora, Michal a kol., *Britské detektivky: Od románu k televizní sérii*, Olomouc: Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci – Filozofická fakulta 2012, pp. 19–21.

[5] R. Barton Palmer: Borderings: The Film Noir Semi-Documentary. In: Hanson, Helen – Spicer, Andrew (eds.), *A Companion to Film Noir*, Malden – Oxford – Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell 2013, pp. 125–141. Cf. Telotte, J. P., *Voices in the Dark: The Narrative Patterns of Film Noir*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press 1989, pp. 134–178.

[6] The production history of the project is detailed in Pomainville, Harold N., *Henry Hathaway: The Lives of a Hollywood Director*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers 2016, pp. 119–122.

[7] NA, f. Ministerstvo informací, karton: 100, sign. Filmová censura, 1947, 191–215. Anonym: Zápis o jednání censurního sboru..., 9 April 1947, pp. 1–2. NA, f. Ministerstvo informací, karton: 97, sign. Filmová censura, 1947, 1–25. Anonym: Zápis o jednání censurního sboru..., 08 January 1947, pp. 1–2.

[8] Cited according to věk., Ani stín podezření (Promítá kino ´Pasáž´). *Rudé právo* 27, No. 86, (12 April), p. 2 věk., Dům na 92. ulici (Promítá kino ´Hvězdo´). *Rudé právo* 27,

No. 86, (12 April), p. 2. Anonym, Přehlídka filmů. *Rudé právo* 27, No. 92, (19 April), p. 2.

[9] Cited according to bž, Špionáž ve světle suchých faktů. *Filmové noviny* 1, 1947, No. 16, p. 7. bb, Thriller jdoucí do hloubky. *Filmové noviny* 1, 1947, No. 16, p. 7.

[10] Cited according to NFA, f. Filmová rada (1948) 1949–1955, referenční označení: 2/1/34//4, popis: Zápis ze schůze. Anonym: 33. schůze Filmové rady..., 02 November 1949, p. 21.

[11] Cited according to NFA, f. ÚŘ ČSF, Referenční označení: R14/BII/2P/7K (nezpracováno). Elmar Klos: Film 'Dvojí tvář', 11 February 1950. Vladimír Václavík: Film 'Dvojí tvář.', 30 November 1949.

[12] Cited according to ArBS, f. BH, sign. 1951 – A7 (Pracovní prověrky). Anonym: Zápis z prověrky 6. TK Jana Wericha..., 20 February 1951, pp. 1–2.

[13] Cited according to NFA, f. ÚŘ ČSF, Referenční označení: R18/AI/6P/7K (nezpracováno). Jiří Hájek – František Dvořák – Jaroslav Zrotal – Václav Wassermann: KV ÚD projednalo..., 31 October 1950.

[14] ArBS, f. BH, sign. 1952 – D19 (Referáty). Jiří Síla: Ujímám se na dnešním našem aktivu slova..., 14 March 1952, p. 3.

[15] NFA, f. ÚŘ ČSF, Referenční označení: R13/AI/3P/3K (nezpracováno). Artuš Černík: Výroční zpráva o čs. filmovnictví: /Čs. státní film/: Year 1948, undated, p. 279. A. Černík: Výroční zpráva o čs. filmovnictví: /Čs. filmová společnost/: Year 1947, Praha: Československý státní film 1952, p. 184. It must be noted though that the information on bans appears confused in these publications. Details on Bedřich Pokorný are provided in Dvořáková, Jiřina, Bedřich Pokorný – vzestup a pád. *Sborník Archivu Ministerstva vnitra* 2, 2004, No. 1, pp. 233–267.