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Ivan Tatíček: The truth lies somewhere else; that's what we all knew

In the 1980s, Ivan Tatíček was one of the most significant makers of Czech alternative documentary films. Typical of his films is the improvisation and spontaneity he uses to authentically describe the everyday atmosphere of late socialism. Among other things, he is the author of four prominent films quite appreciated in their time: *Circle D* (Kruh D, 1982), *About Nothing Else* (O ničem jiném, 1983), *Metrofilm* (1984) and *There's no Place like Home* (Všude dobře, doma nejlíp, 1986). Using family film methods, he managed to capture not only the day-to-day life, but also many groups and personalities of the alternative scene, such as the Vrata theatre or Nahoru po schodišti dolů band. At the end of the 1980s, Tatíček left the video studio of the Armabeton construction company, became an independent professional and a member of the Video Section of the Fine Artists Association. At that time, he made a few pieces of video art (e.g. *Butterfly in a Tunnel* (Motýl v tunelu, 1989)). In the 1990s, he took part in the video art exhibitions Den videa (PKOJF, 1989), Český obraz elektronický (Mánes, 1994), ARCO (Madrid, 1993) and founded his own studio. His creative journey is marked by looking for kindred spirits and an interest in current technologies.

Was *Circle D* your first film?

Not the first one. My dad had a darkroom at home, and since the seventh grade, I was a keen photographer and I felt like making a film. A secondary school mate had won a video camera in a Russian poetry competition and made it available to me. I then made an attempt to shoot a motion picture with a few friends; the film roll hasn't survived, though. And then for some time I was again pondering what to do.

Were you a member of an amateur film club?

These clubs... it was clear to me from the very beginning that these were sort of gardeners with a video camera.

Were you interested in films at the time? What films did you see in the cinema?

I was mainly interested in photography, e.g. by Diane Arbus and August Sander. Back then, around 1983, it was very difficult to get any materials related to post-war fine arts. I was devouring everything that was published in the 1960s – well until 1968/69, when they stopped it. Even newspapers from this time were like a miracle to me. And this was only 12 years later. In the 1980s, there was a similar energy around the Tvrdohlaví (The Stubborn Ones) group of artists and mainly around music bands. As for films, I was devouring the Czechoslovak New Wave – Forman and Chytilová – mainly her *Game of the Apple* (Hra o jablko) and *Something Different* (O něčem jiném). I saw *Game of the Apple* like 10 times in the cinema, just like Antonioni's *Blow-Up*. The screening of Chytilová's films was banned in Prague, so we took a train and went to Pardubice to see *Calamity* (Kalamita) or *Prefab Story* (Panelstory). Things are completely different these days... things used to be more straightforward back then.

These improvised portrait shots in your films are inspired by Sander?

Putting people in front of a bed sheet? Yes, he kept using this motif for several decades (well, not exactly in front of a sheet). Two people helped me with this. We were like, "We all have time and feel like it – let's go shoot something." You can take a white sheet anywhere to the streets and the method was very simple. We just spread the sheet: "Do you want to be filmed? Come here!" I wanted everyone there, young and old alike. It took us about two days to shoot those scenes. It took much longer to shoot the entire documentary – I graduated in June, then we had time, but we had to do everything, including editing, by October because then I had to do military service.

The environment is very important in your films. Were you this spontaneous about specific locations as well?

Locations really matter to me. I want them to be a bit abstract, maybe modernist. The filming location was never a coincidence. For example, before filming *There's no Place*

like Home, I had visited the locations several times because people from the band lived close to them.

Your films from the 1980s have a very intimate, even family atmosphere. How were you working with the protagonists during the filming?

There was never a screenplay. It seems like unnecessary work to me to put down on paper something I already have before my eyes in great detail. If it were on paper, I would get lost in it and couldn't film at all. I know what should be where, and even scenes were staged on the spot. For example, in *Circle D* the protagonists were my schoolmates. I always gave them a task, they did something else and we filmed it. Then we spent three or four days at a cottage with Martin Gabriel, Vlastimil Kopřiva and Jiřina Kuchařová and hung pieces of the film on a clothesline and using white gloves (so as not to dirty them), we glued them together. Every film of mine until now has been made like this – there is always a group of people who feel like filming at that moment. And when it's not fun for them anymore, I start a new project.

Oldřich Kaiser and Jiří Lábus appeared in one scene in *Metrofilm*. Back then, they were already considered television and film stars. This is when you stepped out of the safe zone of your community of friends.

It was a scene made at the Muzeum metro station. David Pacholík, who appeared in the film, was subletting an apartment in our house together with Vladimír Helebrant. Both were members of the Němý Bobeš group. Helebrant composed the film music, which was then recorded in Liblice nad Cidlinou after the image had been finalized. I went there by train with an 8mm projector and screened the film for them in the local community centre. Another friend of mine, Miroslav Melena, knew Lábus and Kaiser through the Studio Ypsilon theatre where he worked as a scenographer. He arranged for me to come and speak to them in the Radiopalác, where they were making jokes as part of Petr Novák's concert. I brought them to the metro station, which was close by, and asked them to perform some sketch there. Whether it was a good decision or not I don't know in the end. But the metro was a perfect environment for the film, especially in December; I wanted to finish the film for the Mladá kamera festival. It doesn't rain or snow there and you can shoot until midnight.

Together with the metro location and the combination of media celebrities, music is crucial for *Metrofilm*. Did you intend to film *Metrofilm* as a video clip?

Even though it was strictly prohibited, I was watching German TV during my military service in Domažlice in the political educational cell. There I saw completely different video clips than those I knew from Czechoslovak TV, which was the only channel back then. This experience was very formative for my later projects as well. I knew that immediately after doing my military service, I had to make *Metrofilm*, and in my next films, I was trying to get close to this genre as well. The introduction of *Metrofilm* at the Mladá kamera festival was a cock-up. They were debating about it for at least three hours, and then they ironed it out somehow. What was kind of funny was that Michal Bregant was involved in the discussion as well; he was still a student back then. The film critic Pavel Melounek was a jury member as well, though. He liked the film and told me, "Look, I am friends with Marek Brodský and the Nahoru po schodišti dolů band. Would you like to make a documentary about them?" And so thanks to Melounek – and paradoxically thanks to the total failure of *Metrofilm* – I found myself among these more artistic bands.

Were you screening your films at other festivals besides Mladá kamera Uničov and Brněnská 16?

I only sent *Miss Rock'n'Roll* to Brněnská 16 in 1988 because Mladá kamera was only for authors under 30, and I was over 30 already. I appeared at other film festivals maybe once or twice, but 99 percent of films screened there were pieces of junk worse than on TV, so I was not really impressed. On the contrary, Mladá kamera had a really strong position in those five or six years I took part in it. There were really good authors: Čihák, Dražan, Hvižd', Bárta and others. However, *Circle D* premiered in Klub 7 in Strahov; after that, we screened it in a private room in the Municipal House just for ourselves, just after our graduation. *Metrofilm* was screened at underground screenings we had together with Martin Čihák in different cellars attended by a maximum 20 to 30 people.

As for the Mladá kamera festival, it is a known fact that its quality went down dramatically after it was taken over by the Czechoslovak Socialist Union of Youth in 1984. Did you feel a change?

Maybe this was just the moment of transformation when I came with *Metrofilm*. The year after, I was shooting with the Nahoru po schodišti dolů band. We were filming for a very long time, and it seemed that it wasn't even worth sending the film anywhere considering the terrible situation of the Mladá kamera festival. And after 1987, when I participated in the competition section again, the situation had calmed down, and our music documentary *There's no Place like Home* received the main prize.

How did your filmmaking method change after you entered the music community and cooperated with groups such as the Nahoru po schodišti dolů band, or theatre groups such as Vrata? Was there a significant difference when you were working outside of the circle of your closest friends?

Not really. I was always looking for people who would take it. It didn't matter whether it was schoolmates or a band.

Back then, in the late 1980s, the Nahoru po schodišti dolů band were performing with the Vrata theatre group. Vrata was a rhythmical movement theatre group similar to Sklep, but even more brutal. They were responsible for the entire choreography in *There's no Place like Home*. Their scenes were attempts at video clips made for existing songs. We were filming them without music, which was only added to the film material later. We made it in a very basic way. I had some say, but generally these scenes were theirs. Prominent were mainly Čtvrtníček and Suchý, who also performed during the concert, which was filmed as well. It took place at Na Rokosce, a club which was popular at that time, and it was a classic example of what a concert looked like in this grey era of the late 1980s.

Did you feel that the end of the communist era was a period of hopelessness and social depression?

Someone born in the tough communist era of the late 1950s who went to college in the 1970s or 1980s wouldn't see this era like that... On the contrary, as for bands, I think that this was the best period. This was the environment I was part of, and I didn't really care about the rest. I had no idea that things could be different, that everything was upside down – I only realized this after the revolution.

This might be related to the feeling of nostalgia which revolves around your films from that time.

We can look at it from the other side as well. The feeling of nostalgia might be evoked by the recording of those times itself, which is completely authentic in some aspects. In contrast, most things made in the 1980s – whether amateur, professional or mainly TV production – were false. The truth lies somewhere else; that's what we all knew. I didn't care about it much; I wasn't trying to reveal it. I only wanted to do authentic things. Only after all these years is there now a nostalgic feeling, which is quite surprising, but it can be the case...

At the end of the 1980s, you started making videos which brought you to another specific community – at that time, video artists associated in the Video Section. What brought you to this point?

I think I was very lucky. After military service and getting a civil engineering degree, I made the first unsuccessful attempt to enter the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts. Even though I passed the talent exam, there were other things back then that were decisive for admission into such schools. Then I was working in Armabeton, where there was an educational centre and a video studio. I had a Video2000 camera and a VHS since 1986, two punch in/out recorders and a lot of time. In those conditions, I made *Miss Rock'n'Roll*, some things for Vojta Lindaur, concerts of Vltava, Zuby nehty, Nahoru po schodišti dolů band, Aleš Drvota and a concert of Pere Ubu in Opatov for Lindaur. I was filming for artists as well, such as for the sculptors Jiří Beránek, Aleš Veselý and Kurt Gebauer. I was involved in multiple music and art projects. At the end of 1988, it was already possible to officially go freelance without the artist having to be a member of an association. In January or February 1989, I had a bank deposit made (I first had to get some German marks on the black market, and these were then deposited into my bank account by an international student). This way you could go West – I went to Munich to buy a video camera.

You were working in the video studio of Armabeton's promotion department for four years. What was the situation there, and what were you free to film?

When I started working there, there had already been a longstanding tradition of educational films. Back then, there were two engineers filming on 16 mm, and they needed someone to start shooting videos. They were my supervisors first, but during those four years I had about four different managers. I was kind of a hot potato; on the other hand, I think that I was shooting quite good things for them. I was filming for an educational centre composed of one classroom with two TVs. A regular electrician training was for instance held there. I was making educational documentary films. In the Mochovce nuclear power plant, I was for example climbing the cooling towers making a film about how formwork is made. I also documented two political events: Antonín Kapek presenting Armabeton with an award and the opening of the Libuš poultry undertaking.

How were you doing as a freelancer when you left Armabeton?

I was expected to shoot weddings for 12 Czechoslovak crowns per minute of footage. This way, I would get 500 crowns for 2 hours of filming. I bought a video camera, I even shot the weddings, but I was mostly working on bigger documentary projects – paradoxically, mainly for Armabeton. Within a year, I paid back the video camera and made my first piece of video art, *Butterfly in a Tunnel*, and two video clips for Honza Kalina and Sto zvířat. Of course, you can't make a living at it. Within my trade, I founded DADA Studio in 1991, which I made into a s.r.o. company together with a partner in 1993. We gradually became focused mostly on multimedia with Microsoft and Škoda Auto as our main clients. These were interesting projects.

Who brought you to the Video Section?

This was thanks to Roman Milerský, who had been a member of the Video Section from the very beginning. We met in the TV studio, where thanks to him I was secretly making subtitles for *Miss Rock'n'Roll* on a subtitling computer. He told me, "Look, we are going over to the Mánes Gallery. Do you want to come?" So, I went there and enjoyed it very much; there were great people there. It was in the second half of 1988. I think we mostly met once a month, and there were about 20 or more people there during these meetings. They were mostly chaired by Radek Pilař, who was a born manager. There were many interesting people who after the revolution got lucrative positions at universities, among other things thanks to the Video Section.

Petr Skala, another prominent Video Section member, has emphasized several times that for him the Video Section was an opportunity to leave his solitary position for a broader community with which he could share his thoughts. What did the Video Section mean for you?

My path was different. Skala had graduated from the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts and was working at Krátký film. He had a strong experience with the monopolized cinematography, and he was doing his own things almost undercover. By contrast, in my environment, nobody was dictating anything. This was also true for Armabeton, where I was earning my living and had a certain degree of freedom at the same time, whereas at Krátký film, Skala had to put up with the fact that he had to do things he didn't want to do or had a different approach to. For me, the Video Section was an opportunity to meet a community that was very different in some aspects than people from the bands, but their mindset was similar. I learned new things there because even though I had read and watched several materials, none had been on video art until that time. It was possible to gain information on contemporary world photography for example thanks to the great *Revue fotografie* quarterly or in the reading room of the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague, but news from the global or European experimental film scene, let alone video art, was completely unavailable!

Why was video so attractive to you?

It was easier, and what was mainly interesting for me was the possibility to discover the possibilities of film tricks. At the beginning, you could only get to doing it unofficially. At the end of the 1980s, nearly every ministry had a professional video studio. Czechoslovak TV naturally had the most technologically advanced one. It was fun to play around using tricks, like in *Butterfly in a Tunnel*. I always seized the opportunity to meet the right people and use technologies. I didn't have such a hardened attitude to film as did for example Martin Čihák...

The world of exhibitions was different from the one of festivals or clubs, where concerts were held as well. What was your experience with exhibiting video art?

For me, it was quite a smooth transition as there was a similar chemistry between these people. It's true that the world of bands was more of an underground one. My

schoolmates were one chapter of my life, which I only moved away from with *Metrofilm*. And then I spent years among musicians – even though there were filmmakers there as well. In the Video Section, about a quarter of all the people was involved in actual creative production; maybe even fewer. At the same time, it was important to have theoreticians as well, who were looking at video from a different perspective. There were not so many video art exhibitions after all. Den videa and ARCO was through Radek Pilař, who selected the individual exhibition videos as well. A year after Radek's death, the first exhibition of tapes took place in Czechoslovakia, entitled *Český obraz elektronický*. In this exhibition, we were already involved with my DADA Studio – we did everything from the catalogue, from loop editing to operational aspects.

What were your impressions of the international video art at the ARCO exhibition in Madrid?

Many people were maybe watching our section precisely because it was from Czechoslovakia. Maybe they liked the fact that it was a bit different. It was clear to us as well that our work was in a very different place. I personally didn't take home any direct inspiration from there. After the revolution, I really got into the technical possibilities of video, working in the editing room and with tricks. The interest in new technologies soon brought me to CD ROM, and after two years we managed to release the first Czech music CD ROM together with *Tichá dohoda*. We were really on top back then. To get it all into a computer was for me the high point of working with computer graphics, video, sound and tricks.

What was it like when the exiled video artists came back home?

Petr Vrána was the closest to me. I was shooting with him and visited him in Germany a few times as well. I didn't really know Michael Bielický much. For us, it was new what Vašulka had dealt with already back in the 1970s. I personally thought that video art had to be boring, slow. When the preparations of the Den videa exhibition were under way, I decided that my thing had to be slow, boring and stupid and had to have a silly, completely absurd name. This is how *Butterfly in a Tunnel* was made.

It sounds like you were making parodies of video art.

Parodies of something I didn't know – that would be quite hard.