

MARTIN PLEŠTIL / 16. 5. 2024

# Jiří Suchý as a film director

In the late 1960s, the renaissance-style artist Jiří Suchý was considered the leading figure of popular music and the innovative Semafor Theatre, which at that point had been an established brand with distinct poetics and packed venues for ten years. The lyricist, playwright, poet, singer, actor and painter mentioned in several interviews at the time that he had been drawn to cinematography since his childhood but had no thought of studying at the then almost indispensable FAMU (Film and TV School of Academy of Performing Arts) because of his poor academic records. In his childhood however, he was shaped primarily by the cinema, which he frequented more often than the theatre. But since he never underwent any film school studies and as he was fascinated with the Liberated Theatre, he finally decided to pursue a theatrical path in the 1950s, but he did not give up on the film strip, and over time he wanted to focus on it as well.

In 1955, he filmed a short sketch called *Forward and Backward* (Napřič a nazpět, 1955) on his own 16mm camera, in which he performed together with his friend Ivan Novotný. He later released the surviving fragment on the videotape *When Perplex was 16mm* (Když bylo perplex 16 mm, 1998), together with other amateur undertakings. During the 1960s, he continued to work in amateur conditions at his own expense, filming with his colleagues from Semafor while transforming some of his short works to theatre plays. He also filmed music videos, some of which made it to the screen of the Czechoslovak Television. For the filming of the nine-minute *Big Show* he rented professional equipment and the Short Film crew.

In the journey to Suchý's first feature-length directorial project, we must mention the fact that the popularity of the Semafor Theatre and its songs was also reflected in the film projects of other filmmakers. Antonín Kachlík cast Suchý together with Jiří Šlitr in the musical comedy *There Were Ten of Us* (Bylo nás 10, 1963), which, in addition to the comedy duo's performances, features their songs. Miloš Forman built

his medium-length quasi-documentary debut *The Talent Competition* (Konkurs, 1963) around the Semafor Theatre. Even as a co-writer, Suchý worked on the spectacular revue *If a Thousand Clarinets* (Kdyby tisíc klarinetů, 1964), based on a chamber production that Suchý, Šlitř and Ivan Vyskočil had already staged at the Theatre Na Zábřadlí. Together with Jiří Menzel and Josef Škvorecký, he wrote *Crime in the Night Club* (Zločin v šantánu, 1968), which contains songs by the Suchý-Šlitř duo, but at the same time is not based on any original content of the Semafor Theatre.

The year 1969 is crucial for Suchý's original film work, as this was when he intensely worked on the film *Sect* (Sekta) which is based on his theatre play of the same name. The filming took off but was halted during production and not completed. Suchý returned to its production in 1979, again in modest conditions, continuing to build on the material he had already shot. At the same time, however, he received an offer from the Kučera-Juráček creative group at Barrandov to produce an original project – for which he had the freedom to choose the subject, write the script and eventually also to take over directing it. This was the moment when one of the most popular artists of his time got his longed-for opportunity.

### **Restrictions and adversity**

Suchý gained full authorial control at a time when the Barrandov Studio was undergoing a process of restructuring and facing normalization changes. At the same time, however, it was giving a chance to several directorial debutants, such as Ester Krumbachová, Drahomíra Vihanová, Ivan Renč and Petr Tuček. For the first three, as well as for Suchý, this was also their last opportunity to work for this studio. Suchý selected purely original material, in which we can find traces of the Semafor Theatre poetics, but overall, it is a distinct film work, completely different from the revue-like *If a Thousand Clarinets* or the genre homage *Crime in the Night Club*. Neither Suchý nor Šlitř appear as actors in the film. The literary script was approved on 29 April 1969 with the provisional working title *The Bride* (Nevěsta), which has stuck with the film. Filming began on 2 September, at the same time as Juráček's *Case for Rookie Hangman* (Případ pro začínajícího kata, 1969) filming was being concluded. Juráček's pivotal work received limited distribution outside the major cities, totalling 404 screenings and around 27,000 viewers, the smallest number for a potential so-called vault film.

The distribution of Suchý's *The Bride* was also deliberately limited. The number of screenings stopped at 1,973; with around 200,000 spectators having viewed the movie. While these are not catastrophic numbers, given the popularity of Suchý's persona and the number of interviews and texts the press published about *The Bride* during its production, it is a low number, especially when compared to the hit film *If a Thousand Clarinets*, which had an audience of four million. Proof of the limited distribution is a note by the director of Czechoslovak State Film, Jiří Purš, on the film's production sheet: "I had comments, I don't know if they were taken into account. I recommend limited distribution without any advertising!"

Contemporary reception on the film was mostly divided and often contradictory. The magazine *Tvorba* accused Suchý of an eclectic, unoriginal film style, and regretted numerous missed opportunities towards the end of the movie. The periodical *Obrana lidu* criticized the excessive inspiration drawn from literature and the unsophisticated film language, while *Rudé právo* criticized the lack of humour and poetics known from Suchý's theatrical work. *Lidová demokracie*, on the other hand, praised Suchý's for his sources of inspiration and appreciated his effortless ability to assort several influences into an original cinematic piece.

However, all the articles mention the director's fascination with other works and the inspiration he drew from them. In an interview for the magazine *Kino* that took place during the filming, Suchý mentioned he was inspired by Nezval's poeticism, and in the magazine *Záběr* he spoke about the style of Federico Fellini and Jean-Luc Godard. Although partial comparisons with the domestic New Wave movement are also possible, Suchý doesn't draw only from the authentic rawness of Miloš Forman's stories captured by a handheld camera, but despite the high stylization, we cannot compare his work solely to the deconstructive *Daisies* (Sedmikrásky, 1966) by Věra Chytilová or the visually stimulating and imaginative work of Juraj Jakubisko. Situated somewhere between the aforementioned works, *The Bride* is a truly remarkable piece that draws equally from film, visual art and poetry.

### **From poem to film, from film to poem**

From the very first scenes, the black-and-white film clearly indicates the mood and contrasts in which the pace and the overall atmosphere will be set. The overexposed

slow-motion shots of a wedding, overflowing with white, where a line of children carry the bride's veil, are starkly intercut by the raw reality of a poultry factory, where the protagonist Zdena is plucking hens impaled on hooks rotating on a mechanical circuit. The reality of everyday life is sombre in tone, the strange timelessness of the protagonist's life underlined by the drizzly weather. Nineteen-year-old Zdena is searching for herself, and she dreams of marriage as if it were the only possibility of personal fulfilment. Her woes are intensified by an encounter with a tramp who tells her fortune. The rather charlatan-like odd man tells Zdena that she must get married by November 3<sup>rd</sup>.

Affected by the fortune-telling, Zdena soon leaves home and wanders the world in search of a groom. While at the beginning the dream dimension and the real plane are clearly separated using the exposure, as we wander and interact with strange characters and situations, we can no longer distinguish what is reality. Both planes blend and overlap. The narrative structure is determined by the protagonist's unfocused and ambiguous state of mind, while also draws from the structure of poems. This is reflected primarily in the overall rhythm and pace of the narrative. We witness fragmentary scenes that are arranged based on the protagonist's feelings and metaphorical associations. Moods and genres change as abruptly as the teenager's sense of an uncertain future and impulsiveness.

The film's poetics draws directly from the style of Suchý's poetry but it is not a didactic transcription. Rather, it is an experiment in portraying the hard-to-capture magic of literary poetry through the raw images of cinematic language. In literary terminology, *The Bride* could thus be described as a lyric-epic genre. Despite its loose, almost sentimental structure, the screenplay does not give up on causality, albeit distant from the classical Hollywood narrative. Suchý sketches several motifs and situations that come to a climax later on. After all, the whole story unfolds based on a prophecy that triggers the protagonist's journey to find her groom. The consequences of the seemingly unrelated scenes come to their climax in the end. Most of the time, however, coincidence and the emotional connection of the ensuing images play a prominent role.

A parallel is apparent here with the aforementioned filmography of Federico Fellini. The scenes and their succession, the mixing of imagination and reality and the

inability to tell them apart, and above all the concept of the main character bear many similarities. Although Zdena begins her journey on her own volition, most of the time she is inactive in the storyline, letting herself be carried along by the flow of events, just like Mastroianni with *La dolce vita* (1960). She observes with her eyes rather than allowing her actions to be the carrier of narrative change. Like a scene cut out of *La dolce vita*, there is also an instance when Zdena experiences a wild apartment party at the home of the actress Marta, who takes Zdena in. It portrays both the glamour and the absurdity of this social event, at the end of which a romance with a charming young man awaits, followed by very rapid disillusionment and sobering up. However, Suchý's playfulness and desire to capture the abstractness of poetry prevails, in contrast to Fellini's bleak depression and social satire.

As for the other director mentioned by Suchý – Jean Luc-Godard – we find his inspiration in the self-reflective character of the film and its alienating effects. Suchý captures a conversation between Zdena and the actress Marta, where they explicitly discuss nudity in film, and if Zdena were to emerge naked from the bathtub in front of the camera, the film would have to be inaccessible to minors. Suchý then explicitly refers to this scene at the end, when Zdena reveals her breasts in front of the camera in an out of focus shot. When dealing with nudity in films, he also opts for a montage of shots from other works featuring an uncovered Brigitte Bardot or Hana Brejchová. At the same time, in one of the scenes he decides to let Zdena look directly into the camera or to let one of the frames freeze. In the apartment of one of the characters we also find photographs of Jiří Šlitř, in the other a portrait of Charlie Chaplin.

Suchý explicitly pays a bitter tribute to Chaplin himself in one of the dream passages. His photograph is seen in the apartment of a young man, Ondřej, who is introduced to us as a madman. He is irrational and sees the world as an imaginary place. So we become immersed in the fabricated world of Chaplin's photography, which is stylized as a grotesque, including accelerated motion and intertitles. In it, Chaplin is pursued by an angry mob, and Suchý styles the King of Comedians, as the crowd calls him, as Jesus carrying his own cross. This can be perceived as a comment on when Chaplin became a victim of McCarthyism in the US, even though he had long been one of the most popular social icons of the time.

Slapstick comedy was another of Suchý's passions and lifelong fascinations, which he also addresses in his documentary portrait *Jiří Suchý – Tackling Life with Ease* (Jiří Suchý – lehce se s životem prát, directed by Olga Sommerová, 2019). In this documentary, he presents his favourite slapstick comedies and their authors with the help of a television screen, he refers to Laurel and Hardy, or the original and dynamic humour of George Formby. Suchý also outlines gags based on physical action and situational comedy in *The Bride*, and he is not afraid of going to the absurd, following the example of popular filmmakers of the silent film era, such as when Zdena pulls down her father's trousers when falling to the ground. What prevails, however, is the sheer grotesqueness of human life that is hard to grasp.

### **The playfulness of sorrow and fate**

The aforementioned poeticism, whose philosophy *The Bride* follows, albeit with a very bitter undertone, proved to be an influence during the filmmaking. Suchý himself described the film as a somewhat sad comedy. Like in the case of the artistic direction of the association Devětsil, we witness here the submission of form to emotion and enjoyment of life, and playfulness with form itself. Suchý emphasizes the connection between man and the surrounding world and seeks to overcome alienation. That indifference and disregard for the fate of the individual, which was criticized by poeticism, can be found not only in the scene with Chaplin; these aspects pervade the entire film. Unlike the credo of its artistic predecessor, *The Bride* does not take a purely optimistic view of the world, and it uses playfulness to portray raw moments or negative qualities.

In Ondřej's apartment, Zdena turns into an Egyptian statue, and a group of elderly academics start talking dirty about her, and they even start touching her. Zdena and Ondřej then choose to flee by plane. We also witness a scene with a married professor, who tries to charm Zdena under the guise of suffering from loneliness. Suchý portrays the pitfalls of false love and reflects the sleaziness of objectifying women. Almost all men are problematic and refuse to sacrifice their personal needs and pleasures for the sake of a potential relationship. In fact, the only guileless character is Ondřej, who allows his imagination to run free. The motto of his personality, and indeed of the whole film, is summed up by Ondřej's remark „You must understand the picture gallery game, otherwise you will never understand what I

write.“

Zdena, however, is rational, and refuses to accept the dream reality and leaves Ondřej because of a misunderstanding. When she returns to him at the end, after unsuccessful encounters with other men, he is a different person. As a result of his encounter with Zdena, the previously boundless fountain of imagination has turned into drab mundanity. Ondřej's confrontation with this woman, for whom he was passionate, but who had a different and very demotivating view of the world, destroyed him. The house across the street is suddenly too ordinary and the former place without any rules is just an ordinary building without any dreamlike charm. For example, the doll collector Jiří, in an apartment overflowing with dolls, holds on to the illusion that he takes care of them all and that each one has its own specific characteristics. He would like to have Zdena as one more addition to his doll collection.

The clash between the rational and the imagination is underlined by the question: who determines our future in the end? Zdena, in the fragile years of adolescence, is afraid of being responsible for her own destiny and prefers to let it be determined by a dubious oracle. Suchý reminds us of this imaginary burden with a non-diegetic drawing of a hand with a description of the prophecy. Zdena believes that if she does not act according to the prophecy, which serves as a kind of life manual, she will never be happy. *The Bride* playfully channels the problems and anxieties of adolescents who find it hard to define themselves in any way. With fear, she prefers to cling to a specific and prescriptive narrative.

Interestingly, we don't witness any of Zdena's inner monologues. In fact, we are reminded the entire time that someone else is always telling her story, since she is not really responsible for her own fate, or at least she thinks so. The inner emotions and the transitions between segments are conveyed by non-diegetic songs that are seamlessly incorporated into the story and move it along. The songs by Suchý, Šlitř and Havlík are originals for this film and are as important to the narrative as the images. Suchý and his cinematographer Jiří Macháň, who later worked on horror tales with Juraj Herz, combine these images with sensitivity, switching between a lyrical and illuminated touch and dark reality. Like the Cubism that Suchý admired, *The Bride* breaks down the visual scheme and compositions so that we witness the fictional

world through a different perspective.

### **The first and the last?**

Jiří Suchý's only feature-length directed film remains to this day a remarkable experiment. The eclectic synthesis of a numerous influences is, in the end, a truly unique work that is difficult to classify and stands almost on the periphery of other contemporary works, even though it was created by one of the most popular artists of the time. Suchý never received another opportunity as a director. From his later work we can mention a couple of films, *Jonáš and Melicharová* (Jonáš a Melicharová) 1986) and *Jonas 39,5 C* (Jonáš II, aneb jak je důležité míti Melicharovou, 1988), for which he wrote the script, performed in and adapted performances from the Semafor Theatre for the screen. However, he was forbidden to direct these films and Vladimír Sís took on this role, with whom Suchý had frequent disputes. He returned to the screen only after a long period of time – as he was inconvenient to the regime of the time, Suchý couldn't appear on television or in films for several years, and his theatrical activities were severely restricted.

Suchý's breakthrough as a film director came after the Velvet Revolution, when he founded his own company, Perplex, which specialized in the production of independent and low-budget films. Under this label, he produced several recordings of his performances and experimented with a cassette camera. All of his projects were produced outside of distribution and went directly to the video market. However, the films were always closely linked to Semafor Theatre poetics and plays. Therefore, *The Bride* remains a unique film to this day, which raises the question of what kind of director Jiří Suchý could have been if he had been given other opportunities. During the making of his only feature film, he told the magazine *Kino* that he would like to work alternately in film and theatre. However, he was never allowed to do so again.

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