

MARTIN ŠRAJER / 26. 1. 2023

Kurt Goldberger

The term Czechoslovak New Wave usually encompasses live action films from the 1960s. After the 12th Congress of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in December 1962, there was a resurgence of documentary films which, in reports about the period cinematography, are often overshadowed by fiction. The creative foundations were, however, similar. Just like authors of live-action films, documentary filmmakers critically examined topics that had been considered taboo until then and using new filming techniques, they tried to break free from old schemes and obsolete production practices and draw closer to reality. Direct real footage and reportage methods helped documentary films to be received as one of the tools of rehabilitated sociology. For instance Václav Táborský, in his film *They Wait Every Sunday* (Čekají každou neděli, 1962), drew attention to the issue of adoption. In *That's My Bucket* (To je můj kyblíček, 1963), Radúz Činčera playfully explores the phenomenon of collective ownership. In *Moravian Hellas* (Moravská Hellas, 1964) Karel Vachek provocatively highlights the artificiality of folklore traditions. One of Evald Schorm's and Jan Špáta's sociological documentaries, film survey *Why?* (Proč, 1964) also attracted considerable attention.

While debating the emotional deprivation of children growing up in children's homes, one of the historical sources used to this day is a film titled *Children Without Love* (Děti bez lásky, 1963) by Kurt Goldberger. Together with Bohumil Vošahlík and Miro Bernat, Goldberger was one of the most prominent personalities of Czech scientific and educational cinema of the 1950s and 1960s. His filmography can be used to track the transformation of domestic documentary filmmaking in the two aforementioned decades. Goldberger (8th September 1919) was born in Opava to a German-speaking family of a Jewish liquor merchant. Shortly after finishing a German grammar school, Goldberger and his parents emigrated to Great Britain due to increasing antisemitism in the late 1930s. While in Opava, his interests included technology and as an

amateur radio enthusiast he built his own amplifiers and microphones. After emigrating, Goldberger shifted his focus and enrolled at a university in the Devon County to study physics and natural sciences.

During the Second World War, Goldberger worked in English film studios first as a sound engineer, then as a cinematographer and director. In 1943, upon the request of the exiled Ministry of Foreign Affairs, he enlisted in the Czechoslovak Armed Forces in exile. He was put in charge of a group that was supposed to document the engagement of ground forces at the Western Front. After the war, he used the footage to make a mid-length documentary *The Journey Home* (Cesta domů, 1946) following the Czechoslovak Independent Armed Brigade in the Battle of Dunkirk. After Goldberger returned home to Czechoslovakia, even President Beneš attended the film's premiere. Goldberger then accepted a position in Czechoslovak Army Film, but because of his pacifist nature, he quit soon after. In 1946, Elmar Klos hired him to the Short film Studio. Under the influence of British civilism, Goldberger made a recruitment agitprop titled *The Fight for Coal* (Boj o uhlí, 1946). The film was a response to a competition held by the Ministry of Mining for the best film mobilising people to increase the production of coal. Thanks to courageous production with contact sound, which was at that time and in such conditions very unusual, *The Fight for Coal* won the competition as well as several other awards and was screened also abroad.

The title of Goldberger's promotional film for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs *This Far Away Unknown Country* (1947) paraphrased Neville Chamberlain's speech given after his return from Germany where he signed the Munich Agreement. The former British Prime Minister mentioned a small unknown country somewhere in the middle of Europe. Goldberger wanted to show his British friends how beautiful and diverse his homeland actually is. The Ministry ordered several language versions and used the film to promote Czechoslovakia.

After the 1948 Communist coup in Czechoslovakia, Goldberger moved to creating scientific, educational, popularising and commissioned films in which he utilised his lifelong interest in nature and technology. He also steered clear of political topics and didn't have to take part in spreading the ideology with which he didn't agree.

In the 1950s, he made several films about cars and public transportation (*Engines – our Pride* [Motory – naše chloubka, 1951], *Infallible Dispatcher* [Neomylný výpravčí, 1954], *Just Like Home* [Jako doma, 1955]) and medicinal discoveries (*The Microbe of the Past* [Mikrob minulosti, 1950]. His educational series chronicling surgeries of heart and lungs received international acclaim (*Lung Resection* [Plicní resekce, 1956], *Surgical Treatment of Mitral Stenosis* [Operativní léčení mitrální stenózy, 1957], *Transseptal Left Heart Catheterization* [Transeptální katetrizace levého srdce, 1962]). In collaboration with cinematographer Svatopluk Malý, Goldberger built a special camera stand which enabled them to film the procedures from a distance of only several centimetres.

During filming, Goldberger participated in first tests of machines for extracorporeal circulation and artificial hearts and lungs. But he wasn't a mere observer of the advancement of heart surgery. As a physicist and engineer, he acted as an intermediary between the medical team of Professor Jan Bedrna, the founder of Czech cardiac surgery, and engineers. The experiences he gathered during the process inspired him to make *Slow Life* (Zpomalený život, 1962) capturing a heart surgery from the point of view of the surgeon. A dialogue between the mother of the woman on the operating table and the surgeon acts as an emotional commentary.

Although Goldberger's films were screened and praised all over the world (Italy, Sweden, USA, USSR), he was rarely allowed to leave the country during the 1950s. The delegation usually consisted of selected officials. His parents stayed in England, but because of the closed borders, Jewish origin, and participation in foreign resistance, he couldn't visit them.

In 1958, he made a commissioned film for the Czechoslovak Airlines *Above the Clouds* (Nad oblaky, 1958) combining an educational and scientific description of how planes work with real footage from a flight from Prague to Cairo. Czechoslovak planes are presented as the pride of Soviet industry. Especially their safety, comfort, and quality of refreshments which include things like steak, schnitzel, ice-cream and slivovice.

Short film *On the Right Course* (Na správném kursu, 1960) uses a captivating dramatic form to explain the principles of radiolocation guidance of jet planes. Before Gagarin's space flight, films *Before Launch into Space* (Před startem do vesmíru,

1960) and *Weightlessness* (*Zažili jsme stav beztíže*, 1960) introduced the quest for conquering space to viewers.

Before Launch into Space comprehensively explaining the obstacles related to a space flight was a world-wide sensation. Among other things, Goldberger used the film's generous budget of approx. one million crowns to build a model of a centrifuge used by astronauts during their training. With cinematographer Vladimír Lorenc, they tried to simulate a reduced-gravity aircraft flight in a studio. According to Goldberger, some experts truly believed that Czechoslovakia conducted space experiments and wanted to participate.

Launch was the culmination of an era when Goldberger focused on new a developing scientific field. His following series of socially themed documentaries about children started with an instructional film about proper methods of nutrition *I Won't Eat That* (*Já to papat nebudu*, 1961). In collaboration with child psychologist Zdeněk Matějček, Goldberger made a documentary titled *Children Without Love* (*Děti bez lásky*, 1963) aiming to explain the emotional deprivation of children placed in institutions such as nurseries, kindergartens and children's homes. As the government presented these institutions as untouchable achievements of socialism instead of an emergency solution, this topic was largely ignored. Goldberger broke the silence. Along with Svatopluk Malý, he visited dozens of institutions for infants, nurseries, kindergarten and interviewed doctors, nurses, parents and orderlies. Footage filmed on contact camera without any previous preparation and reconstruction is accompanied by the author's commentary. Together with Matějček, he tries to explain the deprivation syndrome caused by emotional suffering in early childhood and introduce a new scientific field – child psychology. Instead of a scientific educational film exploring certain exact phenomena and explaining them, we examine a problem and try to understand its causes. The film awarded in Karlovy Vary and Venice triggered a discussion about family policy and contributed to the extension of maternity leave and ban of night shifts for women.

In his documentary *People* (*Lidé*, 1965), Goldberger focused on adoption of abandoned children with disabilities. Thanks to his report from a Pugwash Conference *Responsibility Called Pugwash* (*Zodpovědnost zvaná Pugwash*, 1965) following scientists trying to avert the threat of nuclear destruction, Goldberger started to

collaborate with UNESCO and together with Jan Špáta made several commissioned films for the organisation.

Thanks to UNSECO, Goldberger got a diplomatic passport allowing him to travel rather freely around the world. He was also able to visit his parents in Britain more often. In the 1960s, he spent only several months a year in Czechoslovakia and so the number of the films he made here dropped. He was usually able to make one film per year. Most of the films owe their appeal to the director's ability to combine didactic and dramatic elements, a comprehensible explication and captivating presentation, reason and emotions and thus bridge the gap between scientific educational films and documentary films.

In the second half of the 1960s, Goldberger, just like his colleagues, used the restored societal function of documentary films and made a critical documentary about the obsolescence of Czech railway transport *Faster* (Rychleji, 1967) and simultaneously anti-Nazi and anti-Communist contemplation about the violence committed on Czech Jews *Books of Human Fates* (Knihy lidských osudů, 1967).

After the Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, Goldberger emigrated for the second time, this time to Munich. Thanks to his knowledge of German and the renown of his scientific and sociological films, he quickly found his place and made a four-episode-series for the ZDF Television for parents of children under the age of three titled *School for Parents* (Eltern Schule). For ARD, he made films about the future of transportation, and about children's homes. The relations between parents and their children were also the main motif of his following documentaries.

In 1980, he founded his own company Goldberger Film GmbH where he employed Czech sound engineers (he repeatedly collaborated for instance with Vladimír Vízner) and editors who emigrated just like him. After the Velvet Revolution, Goldberger planned to make a film about Czech-German relations during the era of the First Czechoslovak Republic. But before he could make it happen, the technically gifted filmmaker who never stopped looking for an optimal form an audiovisual presentation of the given subject, died from an illness (20th October 2004).

Literature:

Lucie Česálková, *Atomy věčnosti: Krátký film 30. až 50. let*. Prague: National Film Archive 2014.

Jana Hádková, Interview with Kurt Goldberger. *Illuminace* 3, 1991, no. 2, pp. 115–129.

Antonín Navrátil, *Cesty k pravdě či lži*. Prague: The Academy of Performing Arts 2002.

Martin Štoll a kol., *Český film. Režiséři-dokumentaristé*. Prague: Libri 2009.