

JAN BERGL / 12. 6. 2023

# Marian's „terribly sober unsolvables”

“In the last 25 years, Czech films haven't been very successful in the world. They are only seldom invited to participate in prestigious festivals and rarely appear in cinemas around the world,”<sup>[1]</sup> claimed Veronika Kratochvílová in the lead of her 1996 article.

The truth was that since 1990, Czech cinema had been represented by dozens of films, but mostly at specialised and less prestigious festivals, there was no “new new Czech wave” that would pick up on the success of films released from the vaults. The biggest response Czech cinema received overseas dates to 1996 and 1997 when *Kolja* (Kolja, dir. Jan Svěrák, 1996) received an Academy Award and the Locarno festival screened two Czech films. In addition to *Conspirators of Pleasure* (Spiklenci slasti, dir. Jan Švankmajer, 1996), it was the feature debut of 28-year-old Petr Václav *Marian* (1996) telling the story of the troubled titular (anti)hero who was taken from his family at a very young age, spent his childhood in a children's home and the rest of his short life as an outlaw.<sup>[2]</sup> “Any award thus brings even more pleasure,”<sup>[3]</sup> followed Kratochvílová her lamentation mentioning the Silver Leopard Award (in category Young film) and three other awards that Václav won at Locarno.

In addition to Switzerland, *Marian* was subsequently screened at festivals in other European countries (Netherlands, Greece) and overseas (Canada, Brazil), sold to distribution in various other countries and drew attention to the great talent of Petr Václav. Although the film was generally successful and received positive reviews, it didn't attract many people to the cinemas and the Czech Television broadcasts it only on the International Romani Day (because of Marian's ethnicity). But the film is, in fact, an opposite of its own black and blue poster with Marian's face, his accusing stare and red transcripts of conclusions his carers made (extorts caresses, refuses to answer, doesn't know colours...). It's a topical film full of contradictions and

questions without any traces of putting forth theses and emotional blackmail. The discussions triggered by *Marian* in the time of its release give us an idea about the film reception culture of the 1990s but remain generally valid to this day.

### **(Not just) Václav's trademark style**

But *Marian* isn't Václav's first significant film. He enjoyed success with short and medium-length films made during his studies at FAMU between 1987 and 1995. Before studying direction, he enrolled to the Department of Documentary film where he didn't feel so much pressure from the ruling Communist party. He also couldn't imagine coming up with his own stories at 19 years old.<sup>[4]</sup> His very first film is a 12-minute-long documentary titled *The Face of Žižkov* (*Tvář Žižkova*, 1989) reflecting the insensitive redevelopment of the titular Prague district which began in the 1970s when the Communist leadership decided to "place prefabricated concrete blocks of flats at the border of the historic centre and transform Žižkov into an example of modern socialist housing."<sup>[5]</sup> In its short running length, the film shows many elements characteristic for Václav's trademark style co-formed by the cinematography of Štěpán Kučera who worked on all Václav's subsequent films with the exception of two projects about Josef Mysliveček *Confession of the Vanished* (*Zpověď zapomenutého*, 2014) and *Il Boemo* (2022).<sup>[6]</sup>

*The Face of Žižkov's* artistic quality<sup>[7]</sup> is defined by two basic approaches. The first one tones the images in shades of grey which can figuratively be interpreted as a metaphorical portrayal of a "mouldering district," literally underscored by montage sequences of crumbling statues. Using a simple shortcut, Václav and Kučera define their objects of interest – once opulent facades of building, their faces representing the face of the entire district which fades away without care. The second approach involves the camera movement: slow inquisitive takes direct the viewers' attention, take them through narrow streets and courtyard galleries and examine the setting just like the makers the theme.

Equally important is the attitude Václav has when making his films: "I'm interested in outsiders, the aliens of this world, the side-tracked people. They have much more to say about the world than those who are well-off."<sup>[8]</sup> His social engagement is reflected in the voice he gave to old Žižkov residents and in a sharp criticism of the

Communist party – one of the interviewees was Marie Hubíková “of her own volition a former transformation project architect,” as the credits say. Similar traits are present in Václav’s following films *Cuộc sông ở Ubitovna* (1992) about the lives of Vietnamese immigrants in Czechoslovakia and the heavily stylised confession of an ageing Baroness *Mrs. Le Murie* (*Paní Le Murie*, 1993).

### **Preparations and the production of *Marian***

In addition to the above-mentioned short documentaries, Václav made two more student films: a film titled *Destiny* (*Úděl*, 1991) and two contributions to the Czech Television series *OKO – pohled na současnost* (EYE – looking at the present) from 1994. Roughly at the same time, he started planning his feature debut which was to become his first live-action film. In interviews, Václav described what he perceived as differences between live-action and documentary films<sup>[9]</sup>, but there was something more important than taxonomy, taking an attitude while filming. He also acknowledged that the possibility to use the methods of both formats at the same time is appealing to him.<sup>[10]</sup>

The first impulse to work on the script of *Marian* came when Václav heard a story from his friend – and later co-author – Jan Šikl, who encountered the real-life inspiration for the film’s hero during his tenure as a psychologist. Together, with Václav, they traced back Marian, visited the institutions where he spent some time and talked to people he knew. Václav once again found himself among “the aliens of this world” and used a real yarn to weave his live-action debut: with the exception of Radek Holub (who stood in for Šikl), Václav cast unknown actors and non-actors selected according to their real professions of carers, guards, wardens etc. The most difficult task was to get a child and adult actor who would look alike to play Marian. In the end, he found Štefan Ferko and Milan Cifra.<sup>[11]</sup>

Given the fact that an average Czech film in the 1990s had a budget between 10 and 20 million Czech Crowns,<sup>[12]</sup> *Marian* with a final budget of 22 million crowns was rather expensive. In order to finance the film, Václav and producer Kristina Petrová founded Tosara Film in 1994, but the film couldn’t be finished without numerous subsidies by French (CNC and the French Ministry of Culture) and Czech institutions. Czech Television, Krátký film and the State Cinematography Fund headed by Andrej

Stankovič supported the film with 10 million Crowns, a record amount of money at that time. All potential private sponsors approached by Václav refused to participate because they thought the film was a financial risk<sup>[13]</sup>. Although *Marian* managed to garner praise abroad, its attendance in the Czech Republic wasn't very high, only 20 000 admissions.<sup>[14]</sup> The film became the subject of period discussions about the usefulness of cultural subsidies which Václav defended referring to the social value of the film, just like Věra Chytilová who put in a good word on the project's behalf at the Prague City Hall.<sup>[15]</sup>

### **Poetics of “festival” films**

The question to what extent *Marian* could appeal to general Czech public wasn't raised only in connection to the fundraising, but also on a general level. Most journalists writing about the film used the abstract concepts of “festival” films versus “audience satisfying” films. They saw representatives of the second group mainly in American blockbusters occupying the top spots at the attendance ranking<sup>[16]</sup> a providing relaxation and entertainment to viewers.<sup>[17]</sup> *Marian* was naturally perceived as a “festival films,” mainly thanks to heavily medialised success abroad and also because of the handicapping label of a “series art-house film with an exclusive marginal topic.”<sup>[18]</sup> With the title of her article Sonja Kroupová tried to convince the public that “a festival film about a Romani outsider can be audience-satisfying,” but had to resort to established dichotomies – films “about something” and the rest.<sup>[19]</sup> Václav's intention to film a “normal film for general audience” clashed with the demand for a more heart-warming story which domestic audiences found in *Kolya*, the most successful film of 1996 in the Czech Republic.

Whereas Svěrák's *Kolya*, comprehensibly administering information and emotion, was close to western cinema (where it was received enthusiastically), according to Raimond Rezzonik – the former director of the Locarno Festival – *Marian* represented a return to the sensitivity of Czechoslovak New Wave films.<sup>[20]</sup> A huge part in the final form of these films was created by Ester Krumbachová<sup>[21]</sup>, and in the case of *Marian*, the situation was not different. Together with Václav, she discussed the costume stylisation and the colour schemes of entire scenes – tones of individual passages were supposed to symbolise oppression, love and other experienced emotions.<sup>[22]</sup> *Marian* alludes to classic modern films by accentuating the characters'

psychology and using inventive metaphors (Marian being compared to a flying bird with editing, leitmotiv of muddy boots). But unlike postmodern ironic works, “Václav rejects visual magic, uses long static shots and slow camera movement, avoids rapid movement and cuts, simply everything that could accentuate the narrative action and lead the attention to other priorities.”[23]

But *Marian*'s poetics is a bit more complicated. In contrast to New Wave films set outside time and space (“pathetic” allegories) or on the other hand set firmly in a single moment in history (films influenced by cinema vérité), *Marian*'s life story spans two decades and a change of political regime. But the authors depict the event only in passing (a blue casino neon sign is visible in the background) as the focus is placed on the intimate story of the protagonist, narrated without any claims to compactness and “completeness.” Most contemporary reviewers perceived the elliptical narration and resulting logical lapses as the authors' fault.[24] The plot dramaturgy was probably compressed in order to conform with the effort to depict *Marian*'s whole life in a little less than two hours, but if we were to take it as an intention without placing realist demands, it can be seen as another layer of the film's ambivalence. Individual passages put in sequence could represent labels of *Marian*'s personality and put together, they paint a picture of his life: the episode in which he finds a girlfriend called Tina may be a fantasy and materialised dreams rather than reality. Combining authenticity and “explication silence,” Václav's *Marian* is closer to the work of Bruno Dumont and Claire Denis than to New Wave filmmakers – albeit in a less radical form.

### **A Story of a Romani boy**

The second thematic scope the reviewers used to examine *Marian* was its depiction of the position of the Romani minority in Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic respectively. Just like in case of the audience satisfaction, Václav tried to shift the focus from a specifically defined problem to its general validity and underscore the universal applicability of his work.[25] Some of the reviewers accepted this perspective, for instance Tereza Brdečková saw *Marian* as a “metaphor of the alienation of existence in the hostile world of (post-)communist reality,”[26] but for understandable reasons, no one could avoid mentioning *Marian*'s ethnic origin. [27] There's some truth in Václav's observation that we're not used to perceiving Romani people as Czechs or even as people,[28] and that *Marian* meritoriously pointed this

out, but as long the ethnic origin of people will play any role in a society, it will hardly be excluded from artistic reflection thematising it. It's hard to imagine that a story with a Romani protagonist could be perceived as unmarked, especially in the Czech society of the 1990s.

The relationship with the Romani minority was problematic, to say the least, throughout the entire Czech history and it worsened considerably after the Second World War due to the socialist regime. Czechoslovak leadership tried to help (not only) the Romani people by building the missing infrastructure, improving hygienic condition and raising the salaries of blue-collar workers,<sup>[29]</sup> but their efforts to progress with “non-repressive assimilation” included repression of language, culture and traditions. The approach promoting education inclusion and frequent overlooking of petty misdemeanours committed by Romani people only led to increasing aversion of the majority towards this ethnic group.<sup>[30]</sup> The Velvet Revolution didn't reverse the development, but with the insecurities it brought into people's lives, it amplified it. Politician Miroslav Sládek spread racism throughout the society, using media to falsely claim that Romani people were responsible for the majority of criminal act<sup>[31]</sup> and his depiction of the Romani people as loafers, pimps and goons was adopted by the popular film *Nudity for Sale* (*Nahota na prodej*, dir. Vít Olmer, 1993). Other films focusing on the Romani people in any way were really scarce in the Czech Republic.<sup>[32]</sup>

*Marian* was primarily a story of a *Romani* boy and journalists often asked about the extent of stereotyping in the film. Václav's and Šikl's consistent efforts to be realistic are in direct opposition to a folklorish kitsch with “singing and dancing” and are also very distant to the idealisation of relationship with the Romani ethnic group from the 1950s agitprop *My Friend the Gypsy* (*Můj přítel Fabián*, dir. Jiří Weiss, 1953). On the other hand, with its fragmentary form – label exposition – *Marian* allegedly created clichés of other kind, an ordinary story, “dozens, perhaps hundreds of such Marians.”<sup>[33]</sup> That gives foundations to the film's perspective which observes the main hero without any judgement and condemnation. *Marian* is engaged only marginally; it merely observes the problematic reality – that was reproached by Jiří Cieslar who said that the descriptive (illustrative) approach outweighed analysis.<sup>[34]</sup> However, he appreciated the portrayal of the “terribly sober unsolvables” – questions without (easy) answers: “What should the carers and their wards do?”<sup>[35]</sup> Where are

the roots of their miserable life situations? Is their rehabilitation even possible?

### **Terribly sober unsolvables of film reception**

Cieslar's "terribly sober unsolvables" eventually doesn't apply only to situations depicted in Václav's feature debut, but also to topics surrounding it. Reception of every work of art will always be driven by local context in which it appears. It's therefore natural that Canadian and Romanian audiences were interested in other aspects than Marian's ethnicity<sup>[36]</sup> and Czechs were unable to look past the story of a Romani boy. The hierarchy of popularity and resulting profitability of various film forms (live-action films appeal to the biggest number of viewers, documentaries have a smaller audience basis and experimental films even smaller...) will probably never disappear. But the way these things are discussed in public reflects and at the same time shapes their reception. It cannot be assumed that *Marian*'s moderate success is to be blamed on the media's assumption that it wouldn't be an audience friendly film, however, a priori division to festival and "commercial" films certainly didn't help even though the writer subsequently denied it. The media reflections of *Marian* show that thirty years ago, the mental gap in comparing the two film categories was much deeper than today, however, drawing attention to it and debunking the myth of "important boring art" and "no-obligation commercial entertainment" is useful as long as these labels are present in public space.

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#### **Diploma theses:**

Jiří Blažek, *Vít Olmer's Exploitation: A Sensationalistic View of Post-Communist Society* (Exploatace Víta Olmera: Bulvární zrcadlo polistopadové společnosti). Prague: Charles University 2015.

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## Newspaper and magazine sources:

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Tereza Brdečková, Člověk chovaný v zajetí. *Respekt* 7, 1996, no. 47 (18<sup>th</sup> –24<sup>th</sup> November), p. 18.

Jiří Cieslar, Marian. *Literární noviny* 7, 1996, no. 50 (11<sup>th</sup> December), p. 15.

Jan Foll, Marian – barevnost proti uniformitě. *Lidové noviny* 9, 1996, no. 266 (13<sup>th</sup> November), p. 12.

Jan Foll, Outsideri na vedlejších kolejích. *Lidové noviny* 8, 1995, no. 238 (11<sup>th</sup> October), p. 11.

Helena Hejčová, Marian. *Kinorevue* 6, 1996, no. 10, p. 28.

Jan Jaroš, Marian vypráví příběh. *Reflex* 7, 1996, no. 49, p. 50.

Eva Jeníková, Český film Marian o opuštěném dítěti ozdobil Stříbrný leopard i další ceny. *Svobodné slovo* 88, 1996, no. 267 (14<sup>th</sup> November), p. 13.

Veronika Kratochvílová, Leopard splatí dluhy. *Večerník Praha 2*, 1996, no. 164 (22<sup>nd</sup> August), p. 13.

Jan Lukeš, Osudová tíže jinakosti. *Týden 2*, 1996, no. 47 (24<sup>th</sup> November), p. 95.

Eva Kucová, Chytilová žádala radnici o peníze na film pro kolegu. *MF Dnes* 6, 1995, no. 232 (4<sup>th</sup> October), p. 2.

Lucie Netopilová, Václavův Marian – výpověď o životě na okraji společnosti. *Denní telegraf* 5, 1996, no. 267 (14<sup>th</sup> November), p. 11.

Sonja Kroupová, Festivalový film o romském outsiderovi může být divácký! *Denní telegraf* 5, 1996, no. 270 (18<sup>th</sup> November), p. 13.

Jakub Patočka, Na velmi dlouhé lokte, Interview with Petr Václav. *Literární noviny* 12, 2001, no. 43, p. 15.



Jaroslav Sedláček, Marian. *Cinema* 6, 1996, no. 11, p. 52.

Mirka Spáčilová, Marian je statistickým průměrem. *MF Dnes* 7, 1996, no. 269 (16<sup>th</sup> November), p. 19.

Mirka Spáčilová, Marian si festivalový aplaus ověří konečně doma. *MF Dnes* 7, 1996, no. 266 (13<sup>th</sup> November), p. 266.

#### **Internet sources:**

<https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/regiony/2180425-zizkov-neni-harlem-asanace-mela-pred-40-lety-zmenit-sveraznou-ctvrt-v-sidliste> [published 22nd July 2017; quoted 4<sup>th</sup> December 2022]

<https://kinomaniak.cz/filmy/marian> [4<sup>th</sup> December 2022]

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#### **Notes:**

[1] Veronika Kratochvílová, Leopard splatí dluhy. *Večerník Praha* 2, 1996, no. 164 (22<sup>nd</sup> August), p. 13.

[2] Marian is imprisoned for an attempted murder and subsequent murder. According to period reviews, the closing credits stated that Marian committed suicide in prison at the age of 22. The version broadcast by Czech Television, however, omitted this paragraph.

[3] Kratochvílová, op. cit.

[4] Helena Hejčová, Marian. *Kinorevue* 6, 1996, no. 10, p. 28.

[5] On the transformation of Žižkov see: „Žižkov není Harlem.“ Asanace měla před 40 lety změnit svéráznou čtvrť v sídliště. Available on WWW:

<https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/regiony/2180425-zizkov-neni-harlem-asanace-mela-pred-40-lety-zmenit-sveraznou-ctvrt-v-sidliste> [published 22nd July 2017; quoted 4<sup>th</sup> December 2022]

[6] Most likely – the production information about Václav’s student film *Destiny* (Úděl, 1991) cannot be found.

[7] Václav originally wanted to be a painter. He later discovered that in film, he can combine images, literature and music. In: Jakub Patočka, Na velmi dlouhé lokte, Interview with Petr Václac. *Literární noviny* 12, 2001, no. 43, p. 15.

[8] Jan Foll, Outsideři na vedlejších kolejích. *Lidové noviny* 8, 1995, no. 238 (11<sup>th</sup> October), p. 11.

[9] „Documentary films are about (...) understanding the topic, observation, description, reflection.“ In Helena Hejčová, op. cit.

[10] Patočka, op. cit.

[11] Mirka Spáčilová, Marian si festivalový aplaus ověří konečně doma. *MF Dnes* 7, 1996, no. 266 (13<sup>th</sup> November), p. 266.

[12] Denisa Marešová, *Space Films: pioneer of independent production in the transformation of Czech film era after 1989* (Space Films: průkopník nezávislé produkce v transformační éře českého filmu po roce 1989). Brno: Masaryk University 2013, p. 24.

[13] Eva Kucová, Chytilová žádala radnici o peníze na film pro kolegu. *MF Dnes* 6, 1995, no. 232 (4<sup>th</sup> October), p. 2.

[14] Available on WWW: <https://kinomaniak.cz/filmy/marian> [4<sup>th</sup> December 2022]

[15] Kucová, op. cit.

[16] Top 10 most successful films in Czech cinemas included American films *Independence Day* (dir. Roland Emmerich, 1996), *Dangerous Minds* (dir. John N. Smith, 1995), *The Rock* (dir. Michael Bay, 1996) and *Twister* (r. Jan de Bont, 1996).

[17] Jaroslav Sedláček, Marian. *Cinema* 6, 1996, no. 11, p. 52.

[18] Sonja Kroupová, Festivalový film o romském outsiderovi může být divácký! *Denní telegraf* 5, 1996, no. 270 (18<sup>th</sup> November), p. 13.

[19] ibid.

[20] Jan Lukeš, Osudová tíže jinakosti. *Týden* 2, 1996, no. 47 (24<sup>th</sup> November), p. 95.

[21] E.g. *Diamonds of the Night* (Démanty noci, dir. Jan Němec, 1964), *Dasisies* (Sedmikrásky, dir. Věra Chytilová, 1966) and *All My Good Countrymen* (Všichni dobří rodáci, dir. Vojtěch Jasný, 1968).

[22] Jan Foll, Marian – barevnost proti uniformitě. *Lidové noviny* 9, 1996, no. 266 (13<sup>th</sup> November.), p. 12.

[23] Jan Jaroš, Marian vypráví příběh. *Reflex* 7, 1996, no. 49, p. 50.

[24] E.g. Magdalena Bičíková, Marian v pastáku křivd. *Lidové noviny* 9, 1996, no. 269 (16<sup>th</sup> November), p. III.

[25] See Lucie Netopilová, Václavův Marian – výpověď o životě na okraji společnosti. *Denní telegraf* 5, 1996, no. 267 (14<sup>th</sup> November), p. 11.

[26] Tereza Brdečková, Člověk chovaný v zajetí. *Respekt* 7, 1996, no. 47 (18<sup>th</sup> –24<sup>th</sup> November), p. 18.

[27] Even though Eva Jeníková mentions the information at the very end of her text. See Eva Jeníková, Český film Marian o opuštěném dítěti ozdobil Stříbrný leopard i další ceny. *Svobodné slovo* 88, 1996, no. 267 (14<sup>th</sup> November), p. 13.

[28] Foll, Marian – Colour against uniformity.

[29] Jana Ščamburová, *Media Reflection of the Roma Minority in the Czech Feature Film after 1989* (Mediaální reflexe romské minority v českém hraném filmu po roce 1989). Olomouc: Palacký University in Olomouc 2015, p. 20

[30] *ibid*, p. 21.

[31] Jiří Blažek, *Vít Olmer's Exploitation: A Sensationalistic View of Post-Communist Society* (Exploatace Víta Olmera: Bulvární zrcadlo polistopadové společnosti). Prague: Charles University 2015, , p. 78.

[32] Films *The Brats* (Smradi, 2002) and *El Paso* (2008) by Zděnek Tyc focus on Romani people. Tomáš Magnusek followed *Nudity for Sale* with his exploitation trilogy *Bastards* (Bastardi, 2009–2012).

[33] Mirka Spáčilová, Marian je statistickým průměrem. *MF Dnes* 7, 1996, no. 269 (16<sup>th</sup> November), p. 19.

[34] Jiří Cieslar, Marian. *Literární noviny* 7, 1996, no. 50 (11<sup>th</sup> December), p. 15.

[35] *ibid.*

[36] Foll, Marian – Colour against uniformity.