

MARTIN ŠRAJER / 28. 2. 2023

Miro Bernat

While the year 1959 was not very favourable in some respects at all for the Czechoslovak cinema (e.g. the First Czechoslovak Film Festival in Banská Bystrica and the subsequent bans), in others, it was. At the 12th International Film Festival in Cannes, for example, a collection of three Czechoslovak films was screened for the first time; the feature film *Desire* (Touha, 1958) and the animated *Midsummer Night's Dream* (Sen noci svatojánské, 1959] were complemented by the documentary *Butterflies Do Not Live Here* (Motýli tady nežijí, 1958). All three films received the Special Jury Award, while the last film was also awarded the Palme d'Or for Best Short Film. The film essay devoted to drawings of Jewish children from the Terezín concentration camp is probably the most famous and most important item in the extensive filmography of documentary filmmaker Miroslav Bernat. On the outside, the Holocaust marked a departure from the agricultural themes it is usually associated with but in fact, its subject matter was much more diverse.

Miro Bernat was born on 16 May 1910 in Mašov near Turnov. He studied at the Real Grammar School and the Secondary School of Graphic Arts in Prague. He was also educated in music and singing and attended the drama school of Marie Marková-Nekolová. As a member of the headquarters of the Union of Workers in the Theatre, he had the opportunity to act and direct. He was also given small roles in the films *In the Little House Below Emausy* (V tom domečku pod Emauzy, 1933) and *Morality Above All Else* (Mravnost nade vše, 1937). At the theatre, he got to know the leading figures of the Prague art scene, such as Jan Durda, Jiří Voskovec and Jan Werich or František Hrubín. Before the war, he began to prepare his first film, *Making Love in Poloniny* (Poloninské milování), which, however, was not realized due to the occupation. During the Protectorate, he devoted himself to printing and photography. After the liberation, he also lectured on photography and aesthetics at the secondary graphic school in Prague's district Smíchov. In addition to that, he founded and ran

the photographic monthly V. F. (Věstník fotografů [Photographers' Bulletin]). He was also active as a journalist in *Lidová Kultura* and *Salon* papers, where he published his reports. But he was more drawn to theatre, film and visual arts. After 1945, he became a member of the Socialist Art Front and used to paint from time to time.

In 1948, Bernat was invited by actor Jiří Hlinomaz to work with the Short Film Studio, for which he was to make short fiction grotesques. After a change in the production programme, however, he was unable to realize his original ambition. However, he stayed at the Short Film Studio, and only moved to the newly founded Studio of Popular Science Films, where he first worked as assistant director and director of photography and author of the themes *Periphery*, *Building a Ship* and *Průhonice*, but those never made it into production. His first film was the instructional *The Organization of a Construction Site* (Organizace staveniště, 1951), which Bernat made using his own script and commentary. Quite quickly, he became one of the Studio's core directors, for which he was able to make three to four popular science films a year. He was able to keep his position even as he began directing auteur documentaries alongside commissioned films.

Bernat's initial thematic direction is evident from the titles of his films: *Duck Farms* (Kachní farmy), *Bark Beetle* (Kůrovec), *Pollination of Plants* (Opylování rostlin), *Bees Will Live* (Včely budou žít), *Bees and Flowers* (Včely a květy), and *Aphelinus Mali* (Vosička Aphelinus Mali). He was particularly interested in the animal kingdom, especially bees, to which he originally wanted to dedicate a feature film. However, the sixteen-page subject was not realized in the end. On the other hand, it was with the 1951 film about bees, *Bees Will Live*, that Bernat's long-term cooperation with the Ministry of Agriculture and the cinematographer Alois Jiráček began. The film, which advised beekeepers how to treat an epidemic of bee mite infestation, was screened at the Venice Biennale and later won a Silver Plaque and a diploma at the Beekeeping Film Show in Rome. Although his film was primarily intended for professionals, who would appreciate the unique footage of a bee's respiratory system and the mites living in the honeybee's antennae, it also appealed to a wider public with its engaging commentary, which would remain true for the rest of Bernat's filmography, with many titles transcending their utilitarian function towards creative conception. He returned to bees in 1952 with *Bees and Flowers* and again in 1956 with *The Law of Bees* (Včelí zákon), which offered cinematic footage of life in a beehive obtained through

laborious time-lapse photography.

In the 1950s, Bernat shot about twenty films, for which he is credited as the author of the subject, screenplay, direction and commentary. In addition to bees, he also dealt with other natural science topics, such as poultry farming in a state farm *Battery Farming* (Velkochov drůbeže, 1952), new methods of duck breeding *Duck Farms* (Kachní farmy, 1954), the protection of partridges from predators *The Partridge Region* (Koroptví kraj, 1955) and horse breeding in *Czech Horses from Kladruba* (Čeští koně kladrubští, 1957). The film *About Chickens* (O kuřátkách, 1953), made for the Ministry of Education, explains to children what happens with eggs in an artificial hatchery. It is accompanied by a commentary by Bernat's friend from his youth, the poet František Hrubín. Bernat's other natural science films were also characterised by their poetic qualities and effort to give the material a distinctive style, which, in addition to conveying facts about biology or animal protection, also celebrated the beauty of the Czech landscape and the importance of animals that belong to it. For him, the determining dramatic principle that made his films more engaging was usually the asking of questions and subsequent searching for answers to them, or the method of comparison and repetition.

Before the war, Bernat was already in contact with Jewish artists, such as Petr Kien. He organized photography courses for students who were excluded from studies because of their background. He was therefore no stranger to the Jewish community and its fate when he decided to make the film *Butterflies Do Not Live Here*. The emotionally powerful film from 1958 is made up of a series of simple and more elaborate drawings of children imprisoned in the Terezín ghetto during the war, whose impact in terms of emotions and content is underscored by Karel Reiner's music. The script was based on a motif that was often repeated in the paintings – longing for freedom and escape from the world of cruelty and incomprehensible violence. The poem, which is considered to be one of the best of Czech documentaries, has won numerous awards at domestic and foreign festivals, including the aforementioned Palme d'Or from Cannes. After the success of *Butterflies*, Bernat began to regularly make short popular science films as well as medium-length documentaries on topics that he found important. The temporary easing of censorship of films that were being produced at that time, both fictional and non-fictional, also helped his efforts.

From the 1960s onwards, Bernat's thematic scope expanded noticeably. His work dealt with the universe (*Dialogues With the Stars* [Dialogy s hvězdami, 1964], *The Apparent Movements of Planets* [Zdánlivé pohyby planet, 1965]) or archaeological discoveries (*The Iron of Great Moravia* [Železo Velké Moravy, 1965], *What Is Not Written Is Not in the World* [Co není psáno, není na světě, 1965]). In another film of his – *Glass, Glass, Glass* (Sklo, sklo, sklo, 1961), shot by cameraman Svatopluk Malý near furnaces that, according to Bernat's recollections, radiated temperatures of around 1,600 °C, the beauty of technical glass is revealed. A documentary with a strong humanist charge, *The Journey of a Thousand Years* (Cesta dlouhá tisíc let, 1961), focuses on the life of the Czechoslovak Roma using a popular form of sociological research of the time. A distinctive line of Bernat's work started to be represented by films about art, artists and other personalities from our history. For the centenary of the birth of the important poet, he shot the film *I, Petr Bezruč* (Já, Petr Bezruč, 1967). The personality and work of Fráňa Šrámek in the film *Let Me Sound* (Ať zním, 1968] are recalled in his letters, poetry and friends' memories. The founder of modern Czech sculpture, J. V. Myslbek, and his work on the sculpture of St. Wenceslas are recalled in the film *And the Prince Hefted a Spear* (A kníže kopí potěžkal, 1969).

Apart from poets and artists, Bernat also portrayed pioneers of science and technology (*Karel Klíč – inventor of the intaglio press* [Karel Klíč – vynálezce hlubotisku, 1957], *Jan Evangelista Purkyně* [1976], *Jan Kříženecký's Prague* [Praha Jana Kříženeckého, 1981]). In contrast to other documentary filmmakers, such as Kurt Goldberger, he continued his work smoothly even after 1968, when, for example, complying with the pro-population policy of the time, he made a ten-part series for the Czechoslovak Television, *Children Among Us* (Děti mezi námi, 1971), looking at the recommended educational approaches at various stages of a child's development. His film *Memory and Orbis Pictus* (Paměť a Orbis pictus, 1976) provided information on research into human memory based on psychology and brain physiology. Bernat also dealt with the human body, medicine and the workings of the mind in his films *Disorders of Consciousness* (Poruchy vědomí, 1972) or *Pain* (Bolest, 1979). On the occasion of the four hundredth anniversary of the birth of astronomer Johannes Kepler, Bernat made a sweeping colour documentary *Harmony of the World* (Harmonie světa, 1971), which takes us through Kepler's fascinating universe of thought.

Miro Bernat was one of the most prolific authors. From the 1950s till the 1980s, he made over a hundred films, for which he received a comparable number of awards at domestic and international festivals and exhibitions. Czech and foreign experts appreciated the fact that his works featured a very well thought-through structure, characterized by a balance of all expressive components. In their opinion, Bernat was able to approach virtually any subject matter with sensitivity and curiosity, thus opening it up to a much wider audience than one would expect given the specific nature of the subject matter.

Literature:

Václav Borovička, O motýlech, včelách, koroptvích a lecčems jiném. *Film a doba*, vol. 7, no. 12, 1961, pp. 840-841.

Antonín Navrátil, *Materiály k dějinám dokumentárního filmu II. Miro Bernat*. Praha: Státní pedagogické nakladatelství 1965.

Zdeněk Štábla, *Data a fakta z dějin čs. kinematografie 1896–1945*, vol. 3. Praha: Československý filmový ústav 1990.

Martin Štoll a kol., *Český film. Režiséři – dokumentaristé*. Praha: Libri 2009.

Náš portrét. Miro Bernat. *Zpravodajství: o krátkometrážních filmech*, vol. 1, no. 9. (7 May), 1957, pp. 9–10.