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Murders: the Czech Way. Czechoslovak detective films (II)

The aim of the nationalized film industry was to mainly produce films that would facilitate the audience's understanding of the problems of the world. Genre production was not exceptional either. After the assumption of power by the Communist Party, there were attempts to create a socialist detective film mainly characterized by portraying crimes not only threatening an individual, but the whole system. However, the creation of an ideologically adequate picture of society with acceptable reasons for crime sometimes happened at the expense of the detective story format.

„[...] there were arguments about film comedies and detective stories from the beginning of the 1950s: whether it was possible to create their socialist realistic versions, how to remove the sediment of kitsch from them and how to involve them in the ideological battle and the new, ‚more quality‘ socialist culture.“[1]

After the nationalization of the industry, it was necessary to assess the existing traditions, to draw on some of them and define oneself against other ones. Film and literature represented ideal tools for spreading the new values. Already shortly after the War, there were first social elements appearing in detective books, which were still tolerated at the time. However, a critical period for Czech detective stories came after 1948. In the new socialist society, there was no room either for crime, or for Western popular genres perceived as a relic of capitalist culture. According to the socialist regime, more serious crimes only happened in a bourgeois society. To replace the existing ideologies by communist ideas and change the organisation of society meant to eradicate the evil.

In the 1950s, there was a belief that a detective story would divert the attention of workers from contemporary problems and that it was a weapon in the hands of reactionaries (aiming at distracting the workers so they couldn't focus on building a socialist society and fighting against imperialism). Together with other low valued genres (apolitical comedy, melodrama), detective stories were seen as an escape from reality not performing its social mission and contributing to a political and moral decay of the society. As Pavel Melounek said in this context in the 1980s, „there was probably no other genre forced to reshape its themes and motifs under the new socialist conditions to such an extent as the crime film.“[2]

What also played a role here were the attempts to suppress the popular genres per se, manifesting themselves most in the crusade against pulp fiction. According to the Soviet model, also detective stories were primarily to serve an educational function, and not to be there for fun. The detective comedy for the youth *Křížová trojka* (Three of Clubs, 1948) was described as portraying the „life of apprentices in recreation centres provided to them thanks to the people's democratic government's care for the working youth.“[3] The audience of *Dnes o půl jedenácté* (Today at Half past Ten, 1949), a detective drama on parasites slowing down the bloom of our economy by their illegal trading, was expected to appreciate that the „film very well portrays the typical parasites in the times after the revolution.“[4]

Any crime was to be recoded into a crime against socialism, an expression of hostility against communism. That's why beside minor economic crimes, the class conflict comes to the foreground, finding its best expression in dramatic espionage films. There was a shift of emphasis from the logic of criminal investigation to the relationship of crime and class. The motivation to commit a crime changed from personal to political. A typical offender was a spy cooperating with Western Powers and committing treasonous acts. External and internal enemies, generally advocates of the „former order“, had to be clearly labelled, ideally by a member of the state security forces representing the official ideological position.

Aside from replacing common crimes by problems of the socialist society, detective stories were also completely deprived of detectives investigating on their own, and the investigator's position was significantly limited. Individuals with extraordinary deductive skills were replaced by a team that was well coordinated to emphasize the

effectiveness of the collectivist principle. Only gradually, the Security members were humanized by the description of their common everyday issues. The occasional romanticization of criminal investigators' work, allegedly committed for instance by Martin Frič in his *Bílá spona* (A White Slide, 1960), was criticized in the newspaper while at the same time meeting the demands of the audience for attractive adventurous films.

Crimes of the past

Miroslav Hubáček's *V trestném území* (In the Penalty Area, 1950), taking place not long before the 1948 Czechoslovak coup d'état, can be considered a perfect example of a detective film of the new type. Corruption practices in sport revealed after the murder of a football club official thus could be portrayed as a relic of the time before the unification of sport. *Případ Z-8* (Case Z-8, 1949) by Miroslav Cikán is a typical tendentious espionage film. In the interest of a smooth execution of the Two-Year Plan, both Western spies and domestic saboteurs need to be detected and captured.[5]

Immediately after the War, Miroslav Cikán made *Lavina* (Avalanche, 1946), an example of an open detective story in which the viewer knows the murderer from the beginning. Open detective stories (sometimes called crime stories as opposed to police stories) revealing the identity of the offender already in the exposition continued to be made even after the 1948 coup. For the filmmakers, it was an opportunity to acquaint the viewer in detail with the offender's character, social background and motivation for the criminal act. The process of characterizing the antisocial hero is more prominent in these films than the gradual collecting of clues to find the offender; more than about the anatomy of crime, it's about the anatomy of the criminal. The focus on social circumstances of crime is even stronger in the 1960s while at the same time, the psychology of the characters is depicted in greater detail in connection with the great interest of media in murders with sexual motives.

A potential use of a traditional detective story to critically reflect more general social phenomena and social conflicts, a practice common in many foreign films after the War, was still out of the question. A criminal was an exception from the applicable rules of society, and not their symptom. As Ivo Pondělíček said in this context: „the

genre commonly analyses the motive and carrying out of a crime, only portraying the antisocial aspects in an individual fate, mostly with no ambition whatsoever to portray the sources of crime as a social phenomenon.“[6]

Between 1951 and 1952, no crime film was made in Czechoslovakia. Crime fiction is partially rehabilitated only in 1953; however, only within the limits already set by *V trestném území* – a detective story, or its espionage version, should take place in the past and show things that have already been overcome. That’s how *Kavárna na hlavní třídě* (A Café on the Main Street, 1953) came into being, taking place during the First Czechoslovak Republic as described in the social novel of the same name by Géza Včelička. The detective story is a pretext for the criticism of the capitalist system.

A twenty year old murder is solved by the investigators in *Na konci města* (On the Outskirts, 1954) with a story and screenplay by the experienced detective story writer Eduard Fiker. The clumsy detective narrative shows well how the reluctance (or inability) to imitate the more dynamic style of Western filmmaking *could completely kill the dramatic aspects and suppress the thrill. The same was true of Severní přístav* (North Dock, 1954). Even though Jiří Hrbas called it „the first attempt to create a new type of detective films in Czechoslovakia,“[7] its plot is a model product of its time showing how security bodies can deal with saboteurs undermining the workers’ morale.

Waking up from a coma

In spite of the attempts to eliminate the classic detective fiction, which included stopping the translation of „harmful“ works by Anglo-Saxon detective fiction writers, its popularity with Czech readers and viewers continued, which best manifested itself during the renaissance of the genre in the 1960s. However, there were some indications of a turn for the better even earlier.

Zlatý pavouk (The Golden Spider, 1956) by the documentarist Pavel Blumenfeld or *Padělek* (The Forgery, 1957) based on a three-act play by Eduard Fiker were attempts to create a „pure“ detective film. Exceptionally, also Edvard Valenta wrote detective fiction including a screenplay for *Případ ještě nekončí* (The Case Is Not Yet Closed, 1957), directed by the debuting Ladislav Rychman. With its realistic depiction of the environment of a research institute reflecting the director’s documentarist

experience, the film instructed the viewer that criminalistics is about logical reasoning, scientific methods and everyday hard work.

A significant impulse for the „pardon“ of detective stories was the July 1958 Moscow conference on popular genres which were accepted here as part of the official socialist literature usable for educational and propaganda purposes.[8] The official rehabilitation of crime fiction was also partly based on the awareness that the themes of socialism-building novels were somewhat exhausted and the demand for Western type entertainment was increasing.

The first publishing house to publish a classic Anglo-Saxon detective fiction after a long break was Práce with its *Románové novinky* edition. Since 1960, the translations of detective fiction by other than Soviet authors were more and more frequent. There was also a boom of detective novels on the domestic scene (Jan Zábřana, Josef Škvorecký, Jiří Marek, Václav Erben, Hana Prošková). The fact that detective stories were again a tolerated genre manifested itself in filmmaking as well. Instead of the previous effort to blur the boundaries between art and entertainment, a new type of detective films was created.

Besides Cikán's *Konec cesty* (The End of the Way, 1959), it was mainly *105% alibi* (A 105 p.c. Alibi, 1959) directed by Vladimír Čech based on a screenplay by Karel Cop that was representative for the required approach to the genre. To the crime film realistically depicting the work of investigators and characterizing the characters to a great detail in the spirit of Čapek's stories, Čech made a sequel called *Kde alibi nestačí* (Where Alibi is not Enough, 1961) based on Cop's screenplay again, and another one called *Alibi na vodě* (Alibi on the Lake, 1965) according to his own story and screenplay, which he created in cooperation with Jiří Marek. The great box office success of the trilogy with Captain Tůma (Karel Höger) and First Lieutenant Líbal (Josef Bek) convinced the representatives of the nationalized film industry about the advantages of further investments into the detective genre and the Barrandov Studio film dramaturgy embraced Čech's trilogy as a prototype of the socialist detective film.[9]

In the first half of the 1960s, the film production plans were transformed towards greater genre diversity. What was more taken into consideration were the viewers'

preferences and the possibility to sell films abroad. According to Petr Szczepanik, at the same time „the emancipation of detective films as an independent genre (distinct from the superordinate genre of „adventurous films“) was culminating and the emerging wave of parodies was focusing on the conventions of Western entertainment culture.“[10] The possibility to make detective films without limitations now not only lead to a steep increase of their number, but in many cases also to giving up on a higher artistic quality. Relying on the popularity of the genre, many authors took the easiest way and were only mechanically adding subject matter to the detective framework.

The increasing focus on criminality

A detective series of similar success as Čech's „alibi trilogy“ was made in the 1960s by Petr Schulhoff. For the first time, Rudolf Hrušínský played the reserved, practical Major Kalaš and Radoslav Brzobohatý First Lieutenant Varga in Schulhoff's feature film debut *Strach* (Fear, 1963) based on a novel by Eduard Fiker *Kilometr devatenáct* (Kilometer Nineteen). The following two films, *Vrah skrývá tvář* (The Murderer Hides His Face, 1966) and *Po stopách krve* (Traces of Blood, 1969), Schulhoff made according to his own screenplays. Major Kalaš also appeared in *Na kolejích čeká vrah* (The Murderer Waits on the Rails, 1970) based on Fiker's novel *Série C-L* (the very first book from the Major Kalaš series) and in one of Schulhoff's last films *Diagnóza smrti* (Diagnosis: Death, 1979).

Aside from the meticulous and precise direction, Schulhoff's detective films were characteristic for their authentic depiction of the environment, almost documentarist description of modern investigation procedures and psychologically convincing characterization of the murderer. The focus on the realistic nature of the story was supposed to bring the detective films closer to the principles of socialist realism increasing the artistic quality of the subject matter. Also for instance *Páté oddělení* (The Fifth Department, 1960) or *Anděl blažené smrti* (The Angel of Blissful Death, 1965) are narrated in a sober, reportage-like style.

In the 1960s, the films were more often based on actual events and pointed out negative phenomena such as sexual crimes (*Vrah skrývá tvář*, *Po stopách krve*), pornography trade (*Alibi na vodě*) or illicit trading (*Kde alibi nestačí*). Also in *Znamení*

Raka (Sign of the Cancer, 1966), *Dům ztracených duší* (The House of Lost Souls, 1967) or *Hra bez pravidel* (A Game without Rules, 1967), criminality is explored as a social phenomenon rather than used for a thrilling narrative with progressive collection of clues (as in the Anglo-Saxon tradition).

Nevertheless, the veristic description of the acts of deranged criminals was always balanced by the reassurance that thanks to the omniscient and technologically well-equipped police apparatus, the crime can never win disturbing the socialist order more seriously. The moral catharsis based on the awareness that crime doesn't pay off goes hand in hand with the reassurance that the state guarantees security to its citizens. The victory of good over evil is a victory of the infallible, basically flawless system (not only compared to contemporary crime films).

One of the most active production teams focusing on detective films was the team of Jiří Šebor and Vladimír Bor. It was for instance Jindřich Polák (*Páté oddělení*, *Hra bez pravidel*), Miroslav Hubáček (*Černá sobota* /Black Saturday, 1961/), Jaroslav Mach (*Nahá pastýřka* /The Naked Shepherdess, 1966/, „*Rakev ve snu viděti...*“, /To See a Coffin in Your Dream..., 1968/) or Jiří Hanibal (*Dům ztracených duší*) who made their detective films for this team. Aside from that, three films were made in the second half of the 1960s based on stories by Josef Škvorecký: the musical *Zločin v šantánu* (Crime in a Music Hall, 1968), the narrative *Zločin v dívčí škole* (Crime at the Girls School, 1965) and the comedy *Šest černých dívek aneb Proč zmizel zajíc?* (Six Black-Haired Girls, 1969). The latter two films have the character of Lieutenant Borůvka (Lubomír Lipský) in common; yet another detective so prominent that despite of the effort to emphasize collective work over the work of an individual, he became one of the main attractions for the audience.

Normalization of detective films

Detective films maintained their hard-won popularity after 1968 as well. However, all political innuendos and new wave formal experiments had to go.

Genre production was the fastest solution to a threatening thematic crisis.

Unfinished detective subject matters and screenplays didn't need drastic modifications, and Barrandov Studio could thus still comply with the production plan without violating the new dramaturgical requirements. Only between 1970 and 1982,

more than fifty crime films were made. As a result of the mere sticking to an established standard without trying to take a new path and come up with something original, there were no trends within this particular genre (as opposed for instance to crazy comedies).

Even though the number of crime films during the 1970s normalization was record-breaking, most of them were easily interchangeable due to their formal rigidity. The drop in quality due to the continued overproduction was also reflected in the drop of interest of the audience. However, thanks to the relative easiness of production, the drop in viewers didn't constitute a significant obstacle.

Only a few films were seen by more than an average number of viewers; it was mostly those profiting from their connection with the comedy or parody genres (*Čtyři vraždy stačí, drahoušku!* /Four Murders Are Enough, Darling, 1970/, *Partie krásného dragouna* /Game of a Handsome Dragoon, 1970/, *Adéla ještě nevečeřela* /Dinner for Adele, 1977/). A combination of a crime subject matter and elements of comedy turned out to be most effective in terms of attracting the audience, all the more so with casting popular actors such as Jaroslav Marvan.

The first normalization film by the experienced crime filmmaker Petr Schulhoff was the open crime story *Vím, že jsi vrah* (I Know You Are the Murderer, 1971) based on the unpublished novel by the actor Alexej Gsöllhofer *Skrze koho pohoršení*. The film presents a psychological portrayal of a frustrated man whose jealousy makes him murder three women. The aim of the films paying special attention to the criminals' motivations was to convince the viewer that such individuals murder, steal and rape solely due to an individual psychological disorder, and not as a result of social circumstances (other films include *Smrt stopařek* /Hitchhikers' Death, 1979/, *Řetěz* /The Chain, 1981/, *Černá punčocha* /The Black Stocking, 1986/).

Schulhoff's film is representative of the period also in the characters of the investigators reflecting the tendency to rejuvenate detective films. The officer is played by the younger Eduard Cupák, and Jaroslav Moučka plays his colleague with a great deal of practical experience. A period-specific alternative to the traditional pair of investigators was also provided in *Na kolejích čeká vrah*, in which Major Kalaš, this time played by Jiří Sovák, is assisted by the beginning Second Lieutenant Karlíček

(Jaromír Hanzlík).

Aside from crimes of passion, the most frequent topics of the 1970s detective films included economic crimes. Only marginally, films touched upon alcohol and drug addictions (and if so, the result was on the verge of an unwanted parody, such as for instance in *Mravenci nesou smrt* /The Ants Bring Death, 1985/). At the beginning, films were often made based on novels by classic Czech detective writers, updated for the new times however – *Na kolejích čeká vrah* according to Jiří Marek, or films made based on Václav Erben's books with Captain Exner (*Čas pracuje pro vraha* /Time Works in the Murderer's Favour, 1979/, *Smrt talentovaného ševce* /The Death of a Talented Cobbler, 1982/). However, from the mid-1970s, the proportion of adapted books for films was significantly lower (it dropped from one half to one fourth of the total number).

To the established crime fiction directors from the 1950s and 1960s, such as Jiří Sequens or the above mentioned Petr Schulhoff, there was a new addition in the person of Dušan Klein (*Jeden z nich je vrah* /One of Them is the Murderer, 1970/, *Tajemství zlatého Buddhy* /The Mystery of the Golden Buddha, 1973/, *Případ mrtvých spolužáků* /The Case of the Dead Schoolmates, 1976/). Even though genre films seemingly presented an opportunity for directors to escape from work commissioned by the Party, the description of the procedures of security bodies was greatly distorted due to (auto)censorship. A comparably idealized image of the aims and methods of the State Security was also created by espionage films, the production of which increased again during the normalization (*Případ mrtvého muže* /The Case of the Dead Man, 1974/, *Tichý Američan v Praze* /Quiet American in Prague, 1977/).

There was a great boom of television detective films with their protagonists sometimes attempting to conquer the silver screen. *Rukojmí v Bella Vista* (A Hostage in Bella Vista, 1979) was made by editing two parts of *30 případů majora Zemana* (30 Cases of Major Zeman) and the heroes of *Hříšní lidé města pražského* (The Sinful People of Prague) even appeared in four films – *Partie krásného dragouna* (1970), *Pěnička a Paraplíčko* (Penicka and Umbrella, 1970), *Smrt černého krále* (The Death of Black King, 1971), *Vražda v hotelu Excelsior* (Murder at the Excelsior Hotel, 1971). This tetralogy is characteristic of the normalization crime film production by taking place during the First Czechoslovak Republic, where criminal activities were presented by

the official Party's ideology as being a much more common part of life (not only) in the capital. Set in the past is also *Tajemství zlatého Buddha* (1973) taking place in the 19th century or *Výstřely v Mariánských Lázních* (Shots in Mariánské Lázně, 1973) investigating a murder committed just before Hitler's rise to power.

The immanent curse of detective stories

With the improving social situation and relaxing censorship in the second half of the 1980s, there were a few more critical films, such as the open depiction of the socialist underworld *Bony a klid* (Tuzex Vouchers and Peace, 1987) by Vít Olmer or the tough crime film on corruption in high politics *Divoká svině* (Wild Swine, 1989), a predecessor of the domestic exploitation action crime films of the 1990s, all too enchanted by the Western film production (*Nahota na prodej* /Nudity for Sale, 1993/, *Vekslák aneb Staré zlaté časy* /Money Changer or Good Old Times, 1994/). Also two other stories on young people at and beyond the edge of the law gained great popularity in addition to *Bony a klid* – it was *Láska z pasáže* (Love in an Arcade, 1984) and *Kamarád do deště* (Bad-Weather Friend, 1988) directed by Jaroslav Soukup.

Aside from the films by Soukup and Olmer, there was no other more significant reviving impulse in the 1980s. The directors such as Jan Schmidt (*Podfuk* /Scam, 1985/) or Dušan Trančík (*Víkend za milión* /Weekend for a Million, 1987/) didn't leave the comfort zone, and only few detective films offered a more quality experience or attracted a more significant number of viewers. It is thus not surprising that the Barrandov Studio film dramaturgy increasingly favoured other genres. In contrast to the beginning of the normalization period, it was no longer common to make four to five crime films a year on average.[11]

With its style and freshly structured narrative successfully imitating their foreign models, a few recent crime films (*Gangster Ka*, 2015, *Rudý kapitán* /The Red Captain, 2016/), and the booming television detective films (*Mamon* (Mammon, 2015), *Modré stíny* (Blue Shadows, 2016)) are a testament to the ambition and will of domestic filmmakers to deal with this genre that has never quite taken roots in our country. It is still necessary for domestic detective film lovers to look for alternatives abroad, but at the same time, the chance is growing that in a few years, we will see a Czech film with a reasonable detective plot, charismatic investigators and (mainly) a proper

action scene. Hopefully, the sceptical prediction Karel Čapek made almost a hundred years ago won't turn out to be correct in the meantime:

„Every solution needs to be novel, it has to be a masterly original, work of invention and a new world record. Constantly, one has to look for new cases, something that hasn't been here yet, something that exceeds everything that has been here before, something compared to which no previous plot can hold a candle to, something... something marvellous. This is the immanent curse of detective stories, their demon, their misery and doom. Believe me, they are breathing their last, hunted down by this frantic chase.“[12]

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Notes:

[1] Szczepanik, Petr, Továrna Barrandov. Svět filmařů a politická moc 1945–1970. Praha: Národní filmový archiv, 2016, p. 305.

[2] Melounek, Pavel, Boj o identitu. Boj o diváka. K některým aktuálním problémům českého kriminálního filmu. *Film a doba* 1984, vol. 30, no. 12, p. 699.

[3] -Ži-, Křížová trojka. *Filmová kartotéka* 1949, no. 42 (11. 11.), p. 6.

[4] -šm-, Dnes o půl jedenácté. *Filmová kartotéka* 1949, no. 49-50 (30. 12.), p. 3.

[5] Cikán returns to crime films two more times, with *Na konci města* (1954) based on the original screenplay by Eduard Fiker, and *Konec cesty* (1959) according to a story by Jiří Mareš.

[6] Pondělíček, Ivo, Filmová anatomie zločinu. In *Svět k obrazu svému. Příspěvky k filmovému vědomí a videokultuře 1962-1998*. Praha: Národní filmový archiv, 1999, p. 306.

[7] Hrbas, Jiří (1954). Hovory o detektivním filmu. *Kino*, vol. 9, no. 11, p. 171.

[8] However, the renewed interest mainly applied to crime fiction; horrors and fantasy was still ignored apart from a few exceptions.

[9] Originally, Eva Sadková's *5 milionů svědků* (5 Millions of Witnesses, 1965) was supposed to be the third part of the „alibi series“.

[10] Szczepanik, Petr, Továrna Barrandov. Svět filmařů a politická moc 1945–1970. Praha: Národní filmový archiv, 2016, p. 305.

[11] Marek, Tomáš, Proměny českého kriminálního filmu v počátcích normalizace (1970–1975). Brno: FF MU, 2014, p. 90.

[12] Čapek, Karel, Holmesiana čili o detektivkách. In *Marsyas: Jak se co dělá*. Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1984, p. 130.