

JAN KŘIPAČ / 17. 8. 2021

# Ota Kopřiva

Although limited in scale, Ota Kopřiva's work was very original. In the 1980s, he only took on nine feature films. Despite this, he became one of the most significant cinematographers of his generation.

Otakar Kopřiva was born in Prague on 9 January 1948. He spent his childhood in Vysočany. His memories (licking a frozen handrail, jumping from a bridge onto a passing train) were later included by Zdeněk Svěrák in his screenplay for *The Elementary School* (*Obecná škola*).

In the second half of the 1970s, Kopřiva studied cinematography at the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts. In school projects, he mostly cooperated with Zdeněk Troška. Together, they made the études *One Ensemble* (*Jeden soubor*), *Leaving Before Dawn* (*Odejít před svítáním*), and *Passion* (*Vášeň*). Kopřiva graduated in 1977 with a thesis entitled *Electronic Methods in Professional Cinematography* (*Elektronické postupy v profesionální kinematografii*).

Immediately after his graduation, he officially became an assistant cinematographer at the Barrandov Film Studio, but from the beginning he worked in a higher position, that of the cinematographer, in the films *Cup for the Winner* (*Pohár pro vítěze*, dir. by Michal Vostřez, 1978), *On a Poacher's Path* (*Na pytlácké stezce*, dir. by Václav Gajer, 1979), *The Bulldogs and the Cherries* (*Buldoci a třešně*, dir. by Juraj Herz, 1981), *The Hour of Life* (*Hodina života*, dir. by Václav Matějka, 1981), and *Just a Step from Murder to Lie* (*Od vraždy jenom krok ke lži*, dir. by Petr Tuček, 1983). He only served as assistant cinematographer in the psychological drama *Fires and Burnt Out Places* (*Požáry a spáleniště*, dir. by Antonín Kachlík, 1981).

Kopřiva's first more important work was Troška's medium-length film *Search for a Blue Tone* (*Hledání modrého tónu*, 1980) made with the Společnost Fryderyka Chopina Studio in Mariánské Lázně in co-production with the FAMU Studio. Based on Jiří

Karen's book of poems of the same name, the story describes young Chopin's love for Countess Maria Wodzińska. Kopřiva complements the film's lyrical atmosphere with his carefully composed shots with atmospheric perspectives, rich colours, and low-key lighting. Already here, we can see the dynamic handheld camera which was later so characteristic of him.

Three years later, Kopřiva had a chance to make a feature film: the comedy-drama *Time You Were Married, Eva* (Evo, vdej se!) written by Halina Pawlovská and directed by Jaroslava Vošmiková. The contemporary story of a young teacher from the Prague outskirts required a much more minimalistic style. The camera captures cold concrete housing estates, impersonal interiors of public buildings, shabby clubs, and bars. Similarly unvarnished shots can be seen in Zdeněk Flídr's late debut *Everybody Has Talents* (Všichni mají talent, 1984). His civil style documenting the omnipresent decay of socialist reality grows even stronger in Kopřiva's later films made with Vít Olmer.

They first met professionally working on *The Glass House* (Skleněný dům, 1981), a film made in co-production with the Gottwaldov Film Studio where Olmer worked; Kopřiva was the second cinematographer in the film. When Olmer transferred to the Barrandov Film Studio, he invited Kopřiva to become his main cinematographer. In an obligatory libation to the "gods of the normalization period", the spy film *The Second Move of the Pawn* (Druhý tah pěšcem, 1984), they tried to depict the environment with maximum authenticity. Kopřiva believed that the purpose of lighting in a film is not to make the actors recognizable but to create the right atmosphere. To enhance the authenticity, they decided with Olmer to only use real light sources, for the lighting not to appear artificial. These sources were carefully selected to create an elaborated whole, the result being an artistically impressive film picture. The balance between authenticity and stylization was relevant to aspects other than lighting as well. The depictions of real locations were made special with deformed glass reflections, shots against the sun, or shooting over various objects. Even though *The Second Move of the Pawn* is a clearly a pro-regime work, it is among the visually most elaborate films of the 1980s.

The height of Kopřiva's work is the three films *What's Up, Doc?* (Co je vám, doktore?, 1984), *Like Poison* (Jako jed, 1985), and *Anthony's Chance* (Antonyho šance, 1986). In the first one, the image is less spectacular and there is less genre finesse. Kopřiva

is perfectly happy with little – with natural light, a lamp, a gas burner, candles. The scenes sink into shadows, are lit from one source, and the characters disappear into the dark. The plain style aptly depicts the emerging intimate relationship between the central couple and the topic of giving up on modern conveniences. The natural light of the village is contrasted with the artificially overlit interiors of the city, and nostalgia with the idealization of progress.

In *Like Poison*, Olmer and Kopřiva work with the contrast of the grey reality of the normalization period with the hero's inner experience (more frequent use of point-of-view shots, various poeticizing shots). Not far from a farce, this film genre allows for a faster pace, shorter shots, and fast cuts (flashbacks, imagination, parallel stories). The result is a colourful mosaic of everyday and stylized scenes, to which the hero escapes to avoid the omnipresent banality. However, at the same time, his escape first becomes ridiculous to the people around him and then even to himself.

An even more depressing depiction of life in the late normalization period is offered by *Anthony's Chance*. The story of a young worker who is trying to bounce back after the death of his wife was shot on locations in Nusle, Žižkov and Vysočany. The desolate reality of factories and neglected blocks of flats is enhanced with the low-intensity winter light, absence of natural colours, and frequent dusk and night scenes. Kopřiva compensates the nearly documentary shots, made mostly with a handheld camera, with warm neon colours and soft interior lightning, suggesting hope for Anthony and his new family.

A month after the première of *Anthony's Chance*, Vladimír Sís's music film *Jonáš and Melicharová* (Jonáš a Melicharová, 1986) was released in cinemas. Archive materials from the Semafor theatre are connected here with new scenes with a simple storyline. This time, Kopřiva stylizes the actors Suchý and Molavcová in artistically opulent scenes using colourful costumes, colour filters and a rich variety of lights. The image in Olmer's film *The Edisons* (Páni Edisoni, 1987), about a group of village boys excited about technologies and computers, is much more modest. The film was shot in the South Bohemian village of Čepřovice in high summer. The sunny shots full of children's games make *The Edisons* Kopřiva's most joyful film.

In his next film *Big Money* (Bony a klid, 1988), Kopřiva returns to the poetics of *Anthony's Chance* – only with factories, warehouses, and bistros being replaced by grim passageways, gambling houses, and night clubs. Kopřiva's camera is nervous, roaming, constantly moving. It follows characters operating on the edges of laws enforced by an oppressive power. No-one openly opposes the regime, but everyone tries to outsmart it and skirt the rules. With its emphasis on authenticity, *Big Money* is a poignant picture of the normalization grey zone. However, Ota Kopřiva did not live to see its première. He died of cancer on 1 April 1988.

In addition to cinematography, Kopřiva was also involved in the dramaturgy of the films he made with Olmer. Together, they refined the stories of technical screenplays and also later during shooting. “The screenplays written usually don't have film qualities. This is a weak spot of the screenplays here. Writing a technical screenplay, we imagine making a silent film. Only when there is nothing else left are dialogues employed. People are corrupted by TV; they are used to listening to it, and not watching it,” said Kopřiva in his only interview for the media.<sup>[1]</sup> These days, Kopřiva's contribution is downplayed also because he only appears as the cinematographer in the credits, and not as the author of the story and screenplay. But, for instance, the story of *Big Money* was written based on Kopřiva's, Olmer's and Radek John's (the screenwriter's) experience with illicit moneychangers. Only later, John and Olmer wrote a literary screenplay adapted into a technical screenplay. All three of them are mentioned as authors in an extract published in *Film a doba* in 1987. Important was also Kopřiva's role in *The Elementary School*. The film is based on school stories told by the film crew in *Like Poison* at the wrap party in Košice. “The most interesting stories were told by Ota, who grew up in the proletarian Vysočany,” said Olmer in hindsight. “One thing led to another and Svěrák said he would write *The Elementary School* for us. Already then, we agreed Ota would be mentioned as the co-author of the story.”<sup>[2]</sup> In the end, the film was directed by Svěrák's son Jan (Olmer rather chose to make *The Tank Battalion* (Tankový prapor)) and Kopřiva was forgotten.

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## Notes:

[1] Alena Bechtoldová, Rozhovor s režisérem Vítem Olmerem a kameramanem Otou Kopřivou. *Film a doba* 33, 1987, No. 5, pp. 246–247.

[2] Rozmarná léta českého filmu – Vít Olmer. Online:

<<https://www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/10267861763-rozmarna-leta-ceskeho-filmu/4691/>> [cit. 28. 04. 2021].

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