

ALENA PROKOPOVÁ / 12. 4. 2018

Parody according to Jiří Brdečka

The multitalented author mainly humanized the Czechoslovak film through his parodies. The author of the *Limonádový Joe aneb Koňská opera* (Lemonade Joe or Horse Opera, 1964), Jiří Brdečka leaned on an intimate knowledge of the parodied elements and the ability to create his own fictive worlds.

Writing about the „hundred-year old“ Jiří Brdečka is often marked by reflections on the split talent of an author endowed with the ability to work both with words (writer, journalist, screenwriter, director, lyricist) and pictures (artist, draughtsman, illustrator,...). We could certainly imagine mainly his filmmaking legacy to be more focused or extensive. However, the cooperation with Jiří Trnka, Jan Werich, Karel Zeman and with Oldřich Lipský extended over two periods marked with strict censorship – the 1950s (or the period starting from the 1948 communist coup) and the normalization period of the 1970s. In these years, the „splitting of talent“ was nothing unusual in the Barrandov Studio film dramaturgy (to which Brdečka contributed with his films *Král Králů* [The King of Kings, 1963], *Slaměný klobouk* [Straw Hat, 1971] and *Ukradená bitva* [The Stolen Battle, 1972]). To the author working with the genre of irony, not even the production for children could bring full satisfaction, whose education (but not entertainment) became one of the priorities of the nationalized cinematography.[1] Even though Jiří Brdečka authored two successful feature fairy tales (*Byl jednou jeden král...* [There Was Once a King..., 1954]), *Obušku, z pytle ven!* [Doggie and Three, 1955]) and a few animated films for young audiences, he was never an „author of stories for children“.

We mainly associate Brdečka's sense of adult irony with the format of a parody, perfectly corresponding with his nature. However, this genre was not allowed to appear in the Czechoslovak feature film after 1948, also considering the warning

case of *Pytlákova schovanka aneb Šlechtný milionář* (The Poacher's Foster Daughter or Noble Millionaire, 1949). The fear that more naive viewers would take the story „seriously“ and the strengthening of the parodied elements would lead to their desire for an ideologically and aesthetically unsuitable (i.e. forbidden) product resulted in a practical liquidation of the genre. This was even though before that, parody had been deeply enrooted in theatre (most significantly in Voskovec's and Werich's *Osvobozené divadlo* (Liberated Theatre), in literature[2] and Czech film, as extensively summarized by Petr Szczepanik.[3]

When the Barrandov Studio dramaturgy took the first freer breath, film satire became acceptable, which could be used as an instrument of class conflict (even though there were exceptions, such as the feature fairy tale *Tři přání* [Three Wishes, 1958] or the sci-fi film *Muž z prvního století* [The Man from the First Century, 1961]). However, the „socialism-building satire“ only castigated some imperfections of the new, socialist world seen as relics of the past social order and expected to be removed. (That this concept was wrong is also shown by the genre which Jiří Brdečka was contributing to for some time as well – cartoons and caricatures –, which were often toothless due to the censorship though).

Later on, satire got out of control, which gave rise to the melancholic modern fairy tale *Až přijde kocour* (When the Cat Comes, 1963), one of Brdečka's most personal screenwriting projects, or to a sarcastic criticism of the regime in *Bílá paní* (The White Lady, 1965). In the 1960s, many timeless parodies or partial parodies were made[4], which work even today thanks to their political non-engagement – an element that could only develop in the ideologically more relaxed Czechoslovak society of the 1960s. It was indeed possible to put parody into an envelope of a propaganda explanation or interpretation instructions (such as in the case of the additional epilogue to *Pytlákova schovanka*). However, this subgenre in its nature resists such manipulation, as it relies on a paradox: an intentionally completely uncritical and coldly realistic perspective of the fictive world.

Parody is an „adult“ genre and requires an experienced mind. Jiří Brdečka certainly had a good teacher in Zdeněk Jirotka who became a member of his family at the end of the 1930s by marrying Brdečka's older sister. At that time, the writer was already preparing his comic novel *Saturnin* (first published in 1942), where the main character

initiates the foundation of the parodic Office for the Correction of Novel Stories. In addition to being an avid spectator, Brdečka entered the scene before long: between 1939–1940, the then 22-year old author was engaged by the *Ahoj na neděli* magazine to write parodic short stories about a noble gunman who later became the hero of his most successful film *Limonádový Joe aneb Koňská opera* (1964). However, Brdečka already made a Western film parody 15 years earlier – in 1949, he made a short puppet film called *Árie prémie* (The Song of the Prairie) together with Jiří Trnka. The play with a stagecoach moving through the landscape with reference to classic cowboy films (especially to Brdečka's beloved *Stagecoach* [dir. by John Ford, 1939]), could probably only come into being thanks to the inconsistency of the only emerging censorship.

Looking back, *Árie prémie* is a complex study to Brdečka's *Joe* – both in terms of the parodic tone, design, characters and their relationships, and Jan Rychlík's aria *Sou fár, tu jú aj mej*.^[5] Brdečka – by the way one of the few Czechoslovak filmmakers with a good grasp of foreign languages – wrote the lyrics in a fictive English-Mexican dialect. (For Trnka's film, this song was sung by the operetta stars Oldřich Dědek and Slávka Procházková, whereas in Lipský's feature film, it was interpreted by the popular singer Karel Gott). However, Brdečka's interest in the American music culture becomes most pronounced in *Joe* with one impressive blues (*Horácův pohřební blues* sung by Miloš Kopecký) and two bar chansons (*Když v báru houstne dým* and *Mé zvlhlé rty, což nevidíš*, both interpreted by Yveta Simonová), and also a serious cowboy song (*Balada Mexico Kida* sung by Waldemar Matuška^[6]). Moreover, Brdečka himself made a six-minute animated version of the American Western ballad *Oh My Darling, Clementine*, adding non-serious lyrics to it, four years before Jiří Suchý (for the film *Drahoušek Klementina* [My Darling Clementine, 1959], the song was sung by the popular chanson singer Rudolf Pelar). Brdečka's „serious“ interest in Western lyrics is illustrated by his Czech version of the classic country ballad *Ghost Riders In The Sky*, which he made while writing lyrics for the theatre version of *Limonádový Joe* in the *Divadlo estrády a satiry* theatre in 1955 (the song *Ďáblovo stádo* was sung by Rudolf Cortés).

As for using the Western pattern in a film of a different genre, Jiří Brdečka didn't hesitate to apply it in an adaptation of Alois Jirásek's historical short story *Ztracenci* (Lost People, dir. by Miloš Makovec, 1956). He also proved his „serious“ knowledge

of the Wild West as a theoretician, authoring the article *O westernu polemicky*[7] and the non-fiction book *Kolty bez pozlátka*, first published in 1956. Interested in the true stories of gunman legends for a long time, he even sent a letter to the American director George Roy Hill in 1971, who was shooting the Vonnegutian drama *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1972) in Czechoslovakia. The idea of making a film about the true adventures of the „Wild“ Bill Hickok captured the attention of the author of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969); however, it was recommended to Brdečka by certain Barrandov Studio officials not to attend the arranged meeting. Brdečka's Western fascination thus culminates in *Limonádový Joe*, his last Western film on the silver screen.

In connection with Jiří Brdečka, what could apply to a parody in the Czech environment is that it should not only be based on a thorough knowledge of the parodied material, but also on the ability of the authors to pass it also to those viewers who don't know this material at all or only know it very superficially. A good example confirming this statement is the exaggerated „Bondian cause“ resounding in the Czech cultural environment in the mid-1960s.[8] It was the authors' departure from the original and their poor judgement which led to the fact that the superficial parody *Konec agenta W4C prostřednictvím psa pana Foustky* (The End of Agent W4C, 1967) didn't work. This is even more curious given the fact that the screenwriter Oldřich Daněk and director Václav Vorlíček probably knew the stories of 007, even though they were not screened in Czech cinemas. It was because privileged persons including the Barrandov filmmakers could watch many films censored out for different reasons during private screenings thanks to demo film copies (this was true basically until 1989).

However, the knowledge of Brdečka and other enthusiasts had disconnected from the viewers' experience already much earlier – when Protectorate cinemas stopped screening American films. (As a friend of the future appreciated archivist and historian Myrtil Frída, Brdečka also attended secret screenings of film materials stored by the Germans, which of course included Westerns[9]). After several years of forced abstinence, a brief connection between Western experts and viewers was established as late as in 1963, when the more than ten-year old Western *High Noon* (dir. by Fred Zinnemann, 1952) was screened in Czechoslovak cinemas.[10]

However, the melancholic psychological drama about an elderly sheriff outnumbered by opponents in a Western backcountry didn't have much in common with *Limonádový Joe*, released about one year after Zinnemann's film, mainly due to the fact that Brdečka had been working on the story of the unbeatable, noble Lemonade Joe for more than two decades, inspired by old, classic cowboy films and books. He gradually made him appear in short stories (1940), a novel (1946), two theatre plays (1944, 1955) and the above mentioned Trnka's animated film (1949).

Lemonade Joe's establishment in the Czechoslovak cultural environment is the result of cooperation of the entire similarly tuned team though. It not only included the director Oldřich Lipský and the above mentioned composer Jan Rychlík, but also Jiří Trnka who created an animated insertion into the film and together with Břetislav Pojar co-authored the design concept, which just like the narrative approach was influenced by the experience with animated films. Important was also the contribution of some creative actors, mainly Miloš Kopecký. The actor playing Horác Badman alias Hogofogo appeared as the main villain in another two parodies by Brdečka and Lipský – as Baron Ruppert von Kratzmar (*Adéla ještě nevečeřela* [Dinner for Adele, 1977]) and Baron Robert Gorc from *Gorcena* (*Tajemství hradu v Karpatech* [The Mysterious Castle in the Carpathians, 1981]). This was probably not only because Brdečka wanted to cooperate with the same actors, but also due to his codification of the visual appearance of characters, which were assigned similar roles in different stories, which is already apparent from some of his drawings and sketches. As a result, the design and stylization of Karel Fiala as Joe were „preserved“ for another actor playing positive characters in Brdečka's and Lipský's film parodies – Michal Dočolomanský (detective Nick Carter in *Adéla ještě nevečeřela*, Count Teleke from Tölökö in *Tajemství hradu v Karpatech*). Of another kind is the engagement of Květa Fialová and Olga Schoberová in *Adéla ještě nevečeřela* – and of Rudolf Hrušínský in *Adéla ještě nevečeřela* and *Tajemství hradu v Karpatech*. [11]

As for the parodic stylization, Nick Carter from the comedy *Adéla ještě nevečeřela* was probably meant to be a bit „Bondian“, even though he has the business-like pragmatism in common with Joe who turns out to be a travelling salesman selling lemonade. Nick was written according to the hero of the same name from American trash criminal novels, which is not ideal for parodic purposes. Whereas *Limonádový Joe* was slightly reminiscent of old cowboy films and pulp magazines, readers had no

memory of Nick Carter books in the 1970s. However, Brdečka with Oldřich Lipský were drawing their fictive worlds freely, creating story rules for the viewer retroactively. *Adéla ještě nevečeřela* technically isn't a parody of a specific genre or subgenre, but – similarly like *Pytláková schovanka*, even though much less densely – it parodies a certain type of (extinct) adventurous stories. Here, it is mingled with nostalgia for the good old times represented by the old Prague in the film.

Nostalgia doesn't belong to a parody though, which is almost „heartlessly“ non-sentimental, ruling out the viewer's compassion with the characters. The pragmatic, self-indulgent character of Commissar Ledvina, sensitively played by Rudolf Hrušínský in *Adéla ještě nevečeřela* is not only the opposite and a human complement to the inhumanly perfect Nick, but also a guide through the narration who the viewer can identify with – which is a character that has nothing to do in the fictive world of a parody, disturbing its complexity.

As for Brdečka's and Lipský's third film – *Tajemství hradu v Karpatech* –, its parodic structure is disrupted even more severely. Brdečka was a bit at sea when adapting *Tajemství hradu v Karpatech*, he was stressed and was working under time pressure. He didn't have time for a meaningful deconstruction of Jules Verne's novel and rebuilding of a new story, and couldn't and of course didn't want to follow the probably most ingenious Verne's adapter Karel Zeman (whose *Vynález zkázy* [The Deadly Invention, 1958] he helped round off with a nonchalant commentary).

In *Adéla ještě nevečeřela*, and especially in *Limonádový Joe* Brdečka managed to create a complex and functioning fictive world parodying something the viewers had little or no idea of. This time it was a parody of a specific literary work, which didn't offer any trash and naive material to the parodist's sharp eyes though. Not even the sterile, only three-year old Verne's adaptation *Tajemství Ocelového města* (The Secret of Steel City, 1978) could serve as a source inspiration. It is not much wonder that facing the „impossible“ task, Jiří Brdečka compensated for his uncertainty by escaping to the Carpathian „Salashar“ dialect he made up for the film and also used in the lyrics to the song of the brave police force, which then actually occurred in *Tajemství hradu v Karpatech*. The film has been very popular with the viewers, even though in Brdečka's loose parodic trilogy, it doesn't really assume the place of honour.

Notes:

[1] If the censorship was less strict for animated films, it might also have been due to the fact that the censors were not able to read, and subsequently assess the subject matters and screenplays (as Břetislav Pojar said in the interview in 2009 – Pavel Skopal (ed.), *Naplánovaná kinematografie. Český filmový průmysl 1945 až 1960*. Praha: Academia 2012, p. 171.

[2] One of the „most dangerous“ authors of this kind was apparently Jaroslav Žák, whose parodic-satirical novel trilogy from 1948 (*Ve stínu kaktusu, Konec starých časů*, *Na úsvitu nové doby*) could only be published after 1989. However, it is almost unbelievable that in 1959, the entire parodic *Bohatýrská trilogie* was allowed to be published, on which he cooperated with Vlastimil Rada.

[3] Chapter Rehabilitace čistého smíchu a „vášeň pro parodie“ (1963–1969). Petr Szczepanik, *Továrna Barrandov. Svět filmařů a politická moc 1945–1970*. Praha: Národní filmový archiv 2016, pp. 333–367.

[4] On the scene of Stetson City built in the Barrandov Studio for the film *Limonádový Joe aneb Koňská opera*, Emanuel Kaněra realized a 30-minute parody of silent Westerns *Šlechtný cowboy Sandy aneb Prohraná nevěsta* (The Noble Cowboy Sandy or Gamble Bride, 1964). Pavel Hobl used parodic elements in the sci-fi gangster film *Ztracená tvář* (The Borrowed Face, 1965), and Miloš Macourek with Václav Vorlíček made a successful crime film with cartoon elements *Kdo chce zabít Jessii?* (Who Wants to Kill Jessie?, 1966) and the Bondian parody *Konec agenta W4C prostřednictvím psa pana Foustky* (The End of Agent W4C, 1967), and in the 1970s, they continued in this trend with sci-fi comedies „*Pane, vy jste vdova!*“ (You Are a Widow, Sir!, 1970) and *Což takhle dát si špenát* (What Would You Say to Some Spinach?, 1977). Oldřich Lipský followed up on *Limonádový Joe* with the experimental *Happy end* (Happy End, 1967) and the films *Zabil jsem Einsteina, pánové...* (I Killed Einstein, Gentlemen, 1969), „*Čtyři vraždy stačí, drahoušku*“ (Four Murders Are Enough, Darling, 1970), and Brdečka's opuses *Adéla ještě nevečeřela* (Dinner for Adele, 1977) a *Tajemství hradu v Karpatech* (The Mysterious Castle in the Carpathians, 1981) and *Velká filmová loupež* (The Great Train Robbery, 1986). The parodic trend

was also joined by Bořivoj Zeman (horror trash parody *Fantom Morrisvillu* [The Phantom of Morrisville, 1966]) or Ladislav Rychman (detective film *Šest černých dívek aneb Proč zmizel Zajíc?* [Six Black-Haired Girls, 1969]).

[5] „Sou fár, tu jú aj mej for-tu-náj mí tu sej. Mu-ča-čí-ta mia kára verá an maj dej sej áj. Tú jú, aj mej sou fár mí tu sej, on ví stár. An maj vej djú aj sej tu maj valí dú aj lej sou gej. Tú jú, aj mej sou fár mí tu sej, on ví stár. An maj vej djú aj sej tu maj valí dú aj lej sou gej Gud-báj, gud-báj, gud-báj“.

[6] The name of the song doesn't match Matuška's character in the film though – his name is Kojot Kid, not Mexico Kid.

[7] *Film a doba* 11, 1965, No. 4, p. 208–211.

[8] In the mid-1960s, Bond films were discussed by Czechoslovak journalists including Brdečka (text *Kdo jste Jamesi Bonde?*, *Divadelní a filmové noviny* 9, 1965, No. 9/10 /29. 12./, p. 10.) The reactions on the silver screen not only include the parodies about Agent W4C, but also the completely serious drama by Zbyněk Brynych *Transit Carlsbad* (Transit Carlsbad, 1966).

[9] Tereza Brdečková, *Jiří Brdečka*. Řevnice: Arbor vitae 2013, p. 20.

[10] However, Zdeněk Smetana made a short animated parody directly based on Zinnemann's film called *V pravé dopoledne* (High Morning, 1964).

[11] Hrušínský was interested in Western: in 1944, he started directing the parody *Pancho se žení* (Pancho is Getting Married), meant to make fun of Wild West adventurous stories. However, it was only released in 1946 and according to Szczepanik, the negative reactions to it potentially contributed to the fact that no other film parodies were made before the 1948 communist coup).