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Pravda – Godard’s truth about Czechoslovakia

“Let me return to the events of August 1968. With my closest friend, screenwriter Pavel Juráček, we wanted to kill Godard because he was one of the few intellectuals who approved of the invasion. Three weeks later, he came to Prague, filmed some footage, and planted a flower in the Franciscan Garden. He wanted to make a film showing us Czech as scoundrels who deserved to be invaded. Juráček and I seriously thought about going to the garden, taking a hammer, killing him, and ending the French New Wave along with him. But he disappeared, and we abandoned the idea because we came up with it in some bar. Fortunately, Godard never finished the film or at least didn’t publish it.”^[1]

This is how director Jan Němec remembered the Prague visit of his famous French colleague in an interview almost 50 years later. Němec’s stories about real events were always close to myths and legends. But in this case, he was telling the truth. At least partially.

Godard and his crew indeed came to Czechoslovakia after the Warsaw Pact invasion of August 1968. The film he made and published – despite Němec’s speculations – is proof. It was, however, not screened in Czechoslovakia. The first official Czech screening of *Pravda*, Godard’s polemic documentary essay about the situation in Czechoslovakia after the invasion, was held at the Jihlava International Documentary Film Festival in 2005.

Godard came into closest contact with Czechoslovakia^[2] around the time he co-founded the militant Dziga Vertov Group, named after the Soviet montage master. Within this collective, he made a dozen films in the late 1960s and early 1970s, particularly in tandem with young Maoist Jean-Henri Roger and another director,

Jean-Pierre Gorin. Although it's hard to pinpoint concrete authors of collectively produced films, the available production information indicates that it was Godard who had a pivotal role in the final cut of *Pravda*.

Godard, accompanied by Roger and cinematographer Paul Burron from a similarly oriented art group called Medvedkine, came to Prague in April 1969, not a couple of weeks after the invasion as Němec claimed. Gorin discussed some ideas with Godard but didn't directly participate in making *Pravda*.

According to Godard's biographer, Antoine de Baecque, he was originally invited to Czechoslovakia by Jiří Pelikán, director of Czechoslovak Television. They had met in Paris in the spring of 1968. Pelikán wanted Godard to film a meeting of pro-reform politicians in Prague. He even negotiated the involvement of local filmmakers from the Krátký film studios. But the invasion put a stop to this co-production project.

After Godard's friend the producer Claud Nedjar put in a good word for him at the American production company Grove Prose, they offered Godard \$6,000 to make a documentary film about the Prague Spring. Nedjar allegedly talked the company into thinking that Godard was in Prague in August 1968 and captured the arrival of Soviet tanks. The money coaxed out of the studio with this lie was supposed to be used to film more footage and finish the film (which was non-existent at the time).

Immediately after they arrived at the Prague airport, the three men were assigned a State Security detail and an interpreter. With permission from the authorities, they were allowed to film only trams, trains, government building and the interiors of factories on the outskirts of Prague. It was nearly impossible to film direct interviews with the people of Prague, who were suspicious of the foreigners with a camera.

One day, the crew heard in Radio Tirana that a group of philosophy students had occupied an unnamed school building. They arrived at the place sometime before the Police, who subsequently suspected the three Frenchmen of being in league with the young rebels. As a consequence, the authorities took away their car and most of their equipment, and the interpreter was reassigned. In the end, they had no other option than to return to Paris, humiliated. Czechoslovakia was a lost country to them.

But the permanent state supervision wasn't the only obstacle. At the very beginning of their 10-day-visit, Godard realised that it was no longer possible to capture the attempted political reform of Marxism (which made Czechoslovakia a capitalist country in the eyes of the Chinese government and Maoists such as Godard himself). He found a new theme in the disunity of Czech society between Soviet and American imperialism.

Godard perceived Czech intellectuals and artists, represented by Věra Chytilová in a form of short interview, as reactionaries, whose inclination towards democratic socialism expressed submission to the West. He suggests that Miloš Forman emigrated to the USA because of his insufficient devotion to the revolution. Even Prague students carrying black flags of mourning instead of red banners of revolution are accused of toothless humanism.

The film with a dialectic schema (description, analysis, self-criticism) begins with footage of everyday life in Prague. The camera notices Coca-Cola bottles, expensive cars, billboards along the road from the airport and other anti-socialist deviations, proving that this is a capitalist country. In the voice-over, Vladimir (Lenin) has a dialogue with Rosa (Luxemburg).^[3] While watching workers, clerks and students who are occasionally given a chance to speak, the narrators make ironic commentary about the pseudo-Communist effort of the reformation of Marxism which in their point of view lead to deviation from the idea of real socialism.

We then see an analysis of the malignant pervasion of Western culture and American capital to Czechoslovakia. The previous imagery is shown again, but this time "corrected" by a commentary reading for instance news by the Chinese press agency. In the last part of the film, Vladimir announces that it's necessary to remove the discrepancy between the image and sound and take control of the means of artistic production. He claims the film must conclude not with more images, but with a class conflict. The last sentence of the commentary reads: "Long live the ideas of Mao Zedong!"

Accompanying almost 60 minutes of 16mm camera footage, filmed often spontaneously and sometimes secretly from a car or a window hotel and showing Prague streets, schools and businesses, is Godard's (Vladimir's) monotonous voice. He cites Mao

Zedong's notes and Brecht's book *Me-Ti* inspired by Chinese philosophy.

In addition to using an inventive visual and sound montage and meaning-bearing usage of red colour, the film expressing the contempt of Western liberalism and Dubček's "socialism with a human face" is remarkable particularly because it managed to offend and exasperate artists, politicians, dissidents, ordinary citizens and both Soviet and Czechoslovak authorities (thereby actually uniting them). But there were some who defended this controversial work. According to Jonas Mekas, for instance, it was Godard's best film.^[4]

In a joint statement, the Dziga Vertov Group called *Pravda* a failure and a bourgeois and superficial analysis of the situation in Czechoslovakia.^[5] Godard also later re-evaluated his opinion. He admitted that he wasn't able to capture the reality of an occupied country and, alluding to the amount of wasted material, described his dogmatic film detached from reality as a Marxist-Leninist waste.^[6]

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<<https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC28folder/GodardGorinPolitics.html>>

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Notes:

[1] Aleš Stuchlý, Jan Němec: Chtěl jsem zabít Godarda. *Czech Radio* [cit 5th June 2023]. Available online: <<https://plus.rozhlas.cz/jan-nemec-chtel-jsem-zabit-godarda-5195163>>

[2] Not counting his jingle for the 22nd edition of Ji.Hlava IDFF from 2018.

[3] *Vladimir et Rosa* (1970), another film by the Dziga Vertov group, uses the same characters.

[4] Jonathan Rosenbaum, Eight Obstacles to the Appreciation of Godard in the United States [cit. 7th June 2023]. Available online <<https://jonathanrosenbaum.net/2022/05/52144/>>

[5] Irmgard Emmelhainz, *Jean-Luc Godard's Political Filmmaking*. Palgrave Macmillan 2019, p. 54.

[6] Jean-Luc Godard, Jean-Pierre Gorin, Bourgeois Garbage and Revolutionary Garbage: An Interview with Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin. *Seven Stories Press*. Available online: <<https://www.sevenstories.com/blogs/86-bourgeois-garbage-and-revolutionary-garbage-an-interview-with-jean-luc-godard-and-jean-pierre-gorin>>