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Smoke: tracing the first rhythmical

The year 2019 marked the 30th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution that started the first free decade full of turbulent changes in the Czech Republic. The changes also naturally affected the Czech film industry, which underwent a complete transformation. The post-revolutionary excitement gave birth to some films that couldn't have been made before it (or much later), some of which unjustly sunk into oblivion right after their premieres. To commemorate the Velvet Revolution, visitors of the Karlovy Vary IFF and the Summer Film School Uherské Hradiště had an opportunity to see Czech(oslovak) films from the 1990s in a specialised section, but there was only one film that was screened at both festivals. The “rhythmical of the totalitarian age” *Smoke* (Kouř, 1990) by Tomáš Vorel Sr.

Those who have seen it don't need to be convinced about its uniqueness. Those who haven't may have already started wondering about the neologism “rhythmical” created by the film's author – we will come back to that term later. *Smoke* is unique not only from an aesthetic point of view (with its scenography, acting and the method by which it works with the musical genre and its conventions) but also from the production point of view. It is among those films whose production began before the revolution but whose final shape and form was moulded by the authors in view of the hitherto unforeseeable turn of events. The originally intended allegory of the socialist regime and the prototypes of its citizens compressed into a single factory-city got another layer, and attracted a cult following even though *Smoke* didn't draw much attention to itself back then. But “all in due time” as Mr. Šmíd played by Jaroslav Dušek says in the film. First, let's take a look at what came before *Smoke*.

Prague Five Lets off Some Steam

Even though Tomáš Vorel considers *Smoke* to be his feature debut^[1], at the time of its production he was far from an inexperienced artist. When he was a child in the Prague district of Braník, he performed with puppets in the family theatre Zvoneček founded by his father – a marionette collector. He got his first Admira camera from his mother after she noticed his interest in film. Growing up, he didn't lose his passion for theatre and film. He kept shooting amateur films and remained active in theatre, whether it was the legendary Sklep Theatre or the pantomime group Mimosa that he later – together with David Vávra – transformed into a more anarchistic version of itself named Mimoza (“mimo” and “za” being Czech words for “out” and “beyond”). Theatre critic Jan Dvořák later dubbed these two groups along with the Recital Group Vpřed, Ballet Group Křeč and Artistic Theatre Kolotoč as the Strong Five movement (or Prague Five).

Let's pause for a moment at the designation of the Prague Five as a movement. The artists who were supposed to be in this movement perceived it differently. “Until then, we never knew that we were in a movement. We would just come up with some crap and play and act for fun, to let off some steam, to get wasted and pased”^[2] reminisces Vorel. While from today's perspective we would tend to accentuate the political/critical level of their work, their production was, indeed, very apolitical for quite some time. They didn't try to establish a dialogue with the ruling party nor united by manifestos. They were linked by black, tongue-in-cheek and absurd humor, and their willingness to crack a joke at the expense of everyone and everything.

Along the same lines, halfway between homage and parody, Vorel made his short films *Law of the Samurai* (Zákon samurajů, 1978) and *Swift Arrows* (Rychlé šípy, 1979), and he didn't change his approach during his time at the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts (FAMU) in Prague where he – among other things – made the predecessor of *Smoke*, a 25-minute long film called *Ing.* (1985). The imaginary era of the Prague Five connected to the pre-revolution period culminated in 1988 when Tomáš Vorel directed an anthology film named *Prague 5* (Pražská 5, 1988), a collective film of the titular movement that entered distribution in the following year. Since *Smoke*, Vorel perceives his work as more autonomous, gradually moving away from the poetics of the Sklep Theatre, but as he himself was an inseparable part of the Sklep Theatre and by extension the Prague Five, we cannot simply separate these elements.

First feature rhythmical

The birth of project *Smoke* (with working titles such as *Ing. 88*, *Engineer Smokes Clays*, *Smokers*, etc.) is for that matter dated to the period of Prague Five's biggest fame, the second half of the 1980s, when it was initialized by the dramaturge Jan Gogola, Sr., impressed by Vorel's aforementioned student films. He suggested that Vorel should turn the story of the young engineer Mirek who must deal with pressing matters both in his personal and work life into a feature film and convinced him that it would be possible to film such a story in the Gottwaldov Studios. Vorel then began working on his first authorial film, and his friends from the Prague Five (namely Sklep, Křeč and Vpřed) were to help him with setting its tone and atmosphere. With their means of artistic expression, he planned to create the first new age musical – a rhythmical that is characterised by “tantalising rhythm of words and action, stylised gestures, choral recitation, musical performances and self-ironic humour binding everything together.”^[3] The genre label that *Smoke* bore proved to be crucial during pre-production and the approval process. A musical could be interpreted – as we can find in the production explication – as the most folksy genre, which provides the viewer with total fun and is also extremely stylised and thus exaggerated and addressing the reality only indirectly.^[4]

In retrospect, we can only hardly imagine that the poetics of the Prague Five could have been in line with the official culture and consumerism of the so-called Normalisation era (1968–1989) and would turn *Smoke* into a tame folksy musical. But we are talking about the “glasnost” era that was open to other films with daring themes exploring formerly taboo topics, such as *Bony and Peace* (*Bony a klid*) and *An Uncertain Season* (*Nejistá sezóna*) – both of which premiered in 1988 – and it can be said that the time of its production spoke in favour of *Smoke*. The result was as expected – the rhythmical turned the rules of classical musicals upside down. It is set in a dark, smoky factory and instead of pleasant feelings and sentimentality it evokes unease, and instead of kind humour it makes us laugh through ironic and absurd humour. The song lyrics written for *Smoke* by Lumír Tuček, the author of theatre plays of the recitation group Vpřed (who also helped to write the film's script), are usually not sung but rather recited (or rapped) to a cacophonous mixture of saxophone, flute, synthesizers and even an eaves pipe and a can.

The non-traditional soundtrack and the “inappropriate” setting shape also other formal elements of the rhythmical. The characters do not perform elegant choreographies, but at times rather stagger, at other times jerk their bodies and rapidly jump and run without ever being permitted to leave the industrial setting of the factory. Singing doesn't open gates to a surreal world of fantasy and dreams – although the characters do enter this world in a scene when alcohol (or dry ice?) turns a celebration of International Women's Day into a Dionysian hallucinogenic party. The general impression of the distorted world of *Smoke* is enhanced by the work of cinematographer Martin Duba and his work with light. Despite frequent close-ups of the characters' faces, we don't get to read their expressions as they are in the dark or semi-dark. This technique corresponds to the colour pallet significantly reduced to monochromatic surfaces of grey and blue and sometimes supplemented by striking red and black elements. Vorel and his co-authors indeed managed to concentrate all the filth and smoke of socialist public institutions into the factory-city, where there is no difference between your home and workplace, where you can barely breathe and can hardly stay, where scarce patches of green hide under layers of old documents. And all that labelled as a musical, “the most utopic of all forms that Hollywood ever released into the world.”^[5]

***Smoke* in the cinemas**

The development of *Smoke* was very complicated. First of all, it had to be moved from the Gottwaldov Studios to the Barrandov Studios to the First Dramaturgical Group of Jiří Blažek. No official reason was stated. Blažek claimed it was due the financial aspects of the project, but in reality – according to Vorel and Gogola – it was a reaction to Vorel's signature of the petition *Několik vět* (A Few Sentences).^[6] The preproduction (mainly various rehearsals) started in late October 1989 and ended in January 1990, which means that fundamental changes in society happened during the preproduction. The authors thus had to change “only” their ending. Instead of the originally planned simple happy ending, they killed off the character of the General, the head of the factory, and made the film's main hero, Mirek, kill his incompetent boss loyal to the system, ing. Šmíd. Concurrently, a social revolution breaks out and the factory inhabitants sweep the streets chanting, “It is worth it!” But Vorel didn't succumb to one-sided optimism. He let the character of Mirek get arrested (understandably) for murder and. in the film's last scene, shows the old elites quickly

joining the newly established society and chanting the same things.

Smoke premiered a year after that, on 1 February 1991. From the box office point of view, it wasn't much of a success, probably for more reasons. Whether one of them was the overflow of American production in distribution – as Vorel says – is debatable, since the number of foreign films had been increasing gradually already since the second half of the 1980s, and statistics show that Czech audiences didn't lose their interest in domestic films. The blame lies probably in a combination of a change in lifestyle, new possibilities of spending leisure time, and chiefly weak promotion of the film, something that Vorel also mentions.^[7] With its 51,300 viewers, *Smoke* was not a box office hit, but in due time (and also thanks to the help of a re-run in cinemas six years later) it became something unique within the Czech film industry – a cult film. Not a famous and popular film, but rather a film that was at first ignored only to be rediscovered later and subsequently popularized by its passionate viewers and fans.

The *Smoke* cult

The fans love *Smoke*'s original vision, differentness and marginality that the film perfectly complements with deliberately bad acting, its style and also the ambivalent feelings it arouses among other viewers. Many things from the film cannot be evaluated on the scale "like/dislike". An example is the character of DJ Arnoštek, who can, based on his qualities, hardly arouse sympathies. But he is such a perfect personification of the bad taste of eighties' disco that there is simply no way to dislike the character and the way it is played. The same applies for his hit "Je to fajn."

While the anthological *Prague 5* attracted immediate attention and celebrated success (probably thanks to the time it premiered – in April 1989), the more compact *Smoke* had to wait its turn. Its plot that familiarises us with the heroes and the setting enabled a different kind of reception. When people watch it multiple times, they find multiple layers of pleasure in it. They are drawn back into their favourite "weird" world where they can look for details they missed: did you notice, for instance, all the places that you can see the factory logo reminiscent of a sun disc surrounded by hammers? Another layer of the film is its cult dimension when a viewer

hooked by catchy tunes can recite entire dialogues or perform concrete scenes. You may have already met some of “*Smoke* cultists” yourselves – can you remember which scene or song they recited? Based on personal experience, the author of this text feels that the most frequent is the “Hello, baby...” dialogue.

Value and legacy of *Smoke*

It can be safely said that *Smoke* was being produced both during the previous regime and to spite it, that it is a tragicomic satire of the society and its circumstances, and that, despite being overlooked at first, it is now perceived as one of the noteworthy Czech films produced after the Velvet Revolution. But that is simplifying and obscuring the whole truth. The value of *Smoke* lies in its ambivalence, in every “but” and every “also” that we can add to the above mentioned facts. If the film were a mere mockery of the previous political regime, the project would have been mothballed during the production. But thanks to the foresight and a certain extent of scepticism with which the authors perceived the world, the film remains topical to this day, its timelessness lying in the elegantly included revolutionary plot. By not taking place at Wenceslas Square, it remains universally valid.^[8] *Smoke* is therefore not only a testimony of Czechoslovakia from the turn of the 1980s, but also a more general parable of ever-changing ideologies and enduring systems. But none of that would probably suffice to make *Smoke* the iconic film as we know it today. For that, it owes its thanks to the specific expression method (both in terms of imagery and words) of its author Tomáš Vorel and his friends from the Prague Five.

Sources:

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Notes:

[1] As stated in an interview for *Zemské noviny*, Emil Pražák, Nejlepší filmy se točí v Čechách. *Zemské noviny*, 1997, issue 28 (11th of July), p. 1.

[2] Jan Dvořák, David Vávra, Tomáš Vorel, *Rejža Vorel*. Prague: Pražská scéna 2017, p. 103.

[3] Barrandov Studio a.s., archive, collection: Scénáře a produkční dokumenty, Film: Kouř, Vorel, T: Realisation explication, page 3.

[4] The same

[5] Kamil Fila, Ujeté muzikály. *Cinema*, 2006, issue 5, p. 63.

[6] It is possible that it was a different petition, as Tereza Štréglová points out on page 32 of her bachelor's thesis The Smoke: Origin and further fate of Tomáš Vorel's first film

[7] Both in an interview for a Bontonfilm issued DVD of *Smoke* in 2005

[8] ŠTRÉGLOVÁ, Tereza. The Smoke: Origin and further fate of Tomáš Vorel's first film [online]. Brno, 2010 [quote 2019-12-31]. Available at: <<https://theses.cz/id/vogxvr/>>. Bachelor's thesis. Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University. Thesis Supervisor PhDr. Jaromír Blažejovský, Ph.D.