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Socialistic alcoholism – alcoholic realism

At the turn of the 1950s and 1960s, several Czech films focused on the problem of alcoholism. However, scepticism and resignation prevailed over their educational mission. In the following reflection, we ask how this tendency was compatible with the propositions about the moral predominance of socialistic over capitalistic rules and about the approaching completion of the construction of socialism in Czechoslovakia.

After 1945, and mainly after February 1948, dealing with topics from contemporary life became the official priority of Czechoslovak film. The goal was not only to capture the present reality, but to participate actively in its construction. Resolutions of the Party^[1] and also supervision of the films tried to transform this requirement into a standard or a doctrine, but its formulation remained quite vague. The resulting propaganda dramas or comedies were usually received only lukewarmly. In the more organic and decentralised model of the dramaturgy of the second half of the 1950s, contemporary topics started to represent a more attractive challenge for film writers. However, the variety of topics was still ideologically directed and the change to the present, including its unhealthy, elements implied many difficulties.

The tension between the phenomena of pessimism and scepticism in film and the task of achieving the construction of socialism as formulated by the 11th Congress of the Czechoslovak Communist Party in 1958 culminated during the 1st Festival of Czechoslovak Film in Banská Bystrica. It was an event organised by the state enterprise, Československý státní film, which took place at the end of February 1959. This was intended to demonstrate the correct course of film production and its connection to working people. However, contemporary films were mostly criticised mercilessly during a parallel conference. František Kahuda, Minister of Education and Culture, concluded his paper by saying emphatically that films of the recent years

emphasised inappropriately marginal social phenomena, and this is how they distorted reality and were incompatible with the irreversible fact that „universal and absolute predominance of our regime over the capitalistic system will soon be proved“. [2]

An article by journalist Jiří Hrbas and published in the *Film a doba* magazine contained a summary of the conflict which had taken place in Banská Bystrica: „There is no use in having so many contemporary films if some writers only ‚pretend‘ to be contemporary, if they choose heroes whose struggle finishes in a bottle of alcohol, if they don't conclude their stories but, on the contrary, make them less clear and blurry so that everyone can choose according to their own taste, if they run away from real conflicts and look for conflicts where they used to be found by literature a hundred years ago.“ [3]

It should be said that even the propaganda films produced immediately after February 1948 did not completely avoid pathological social phenomena. Excessive alcohol consumption suggested itself not only as an attribute of obscurants and the background of a bourgeois yesterday, but in the environment of a new, „progressive“ morality. It was a convenient pretext for the construction of an individual pseudo-conflict, solved in an exemplary way within a conscious group. This is also the case of the occasional alcoholic in the comedy *Pára nad hrncem* (Steam Above a Pot, d. Miroslav Cikán, 1950), and of the pig feeder who is starting to see the light in *Usměvavá zem* (The Smiling Country, d. Václav Gajer, 1952).

In films such as *Tam na konečné* (At the Terminus, d. Ján Kadár, Elmar Klos, 1957) and *Zde jsou lvi* (Hic Sunt Leones, d. Václav Krška, 1958), the topic of alcoholism became an integral part of the film drama. It was no longer merely the backdrop or a circumstance which was easy to overcome. We use three selected films from 1957-1963 in order to discover what exactly the series of „alcoholic dramas“ in Czech film meant and whether we can mention the breaking of a taboo or an aesthetic or genre tendency. In all these films, the topic of alcoholism is situated within the transparent space-time context of that era, but each of them was created on a completely specific screenwriting basis.

The film *Tam na konečné* was based on Ludvík Aškenazy's screenplay. He loosely encapsulated the stories of a few people from a building at the final tram stop into a

melancholic course of four seasons. He provided the dialogues in an almost verse-like structure. On the other hand, *Dnes naposled* (Today for the Last Time, d. Martin Frič, 1958), as a film written by experienced comedy screenwriters František Vlček and Josef Neuberg[4], is built on the conversational harmony of peculiar types of people. The author of the story and writer of the film screenplay, *Naděje* (The Hope, d. Karel Kachyňa, 1963) is Jan Procházka, whose imagination works with symbols and ideas which are incompletely expressed.

Tam na konečné was the third film directed by the duo of Kadár – Klos, after the action drama, *Únos* (Kidnapped, 1952) and the musical comedy, *Hudba z Marsu* (Music from Mars, 1955). Aškenazy's screenplay was a leap into an unusual genre situation, but was used to create almost a symbol of the pessimistic film wave of the 1950s. The story is set in Prague, around the tram turning loop which existed at Pankrác at that time, where several people's life stories intertwine in one building. Although the stories about a pregnant student, whose partner is trying to persuade her to have an abortion, and about an ageing married couple frustrated by their unfulfilled longing for a child, do not head towards a cheerful happy ending, at the same time they do not result in complete hopelessness. However, they are peculiarly framed within the screenplay by the story about the alcoholic, Pešta (Martin Růžek). His character affects the whole narration with its desperation and resignation. At the very beginning of the film, Pešta is thrown out of a wine bar and then takes tram number 3 towards the turning loop, where his young daughter lives. Pešta repeatedly claims his paternal rights, even if he is not able to take care of the child. The scene in the church, where he is trying to pray with little Hanička, but suddenly falls asleep and the child gets lost, is visually and dramatically determining. Even after that, Pešta's character does not change. On New Year's Eve, he takes the tram to the terminal stop, but does not know that the line has been extended. So he ends up in a part of Prague which he does not recognise, but where he heads off to a pub without hesitation.

Before the conflict in Banská Bystrica, the reviews of the film, *Tam na konečné*, were quite positive. However, it was criticised for the unclear connection of the characters – mainly Pešta – with the current social conditions. This objection could have been caused by unwillingness to see that connection. Pešta himself uttered clear allusions to the situation at that time – to striking workers, optimists, newspaper editorials.

„The official assessment of my activities is good. I just drink a bit,“ Pešta characterises himself. He is obviously not a foreign element; he is part of the contemporary system and he is its representative.[5]

Approximately at the same time as when the film *Tam na konečné* was released, Wojciech Jerzy Has's film *Pętlą* (Noose, 1957) was released in Poland. This is the story of Kuba Kowalski (Gustaw Holoubek), which takes place during the last few hours before he starts his planned disulfiram treatment. In both films, there is the metaphor of a loop, with a different origin of each. However, the meaning is similar within the given context. The Polish *Pętlą* is tighter in terms of time and space. It is a study of the alcoholic's intimacy, which also corresponds with the muddy urban location.

Frič's film *Dnes naposled* also has a lot in common with *Pętlą*. Violinist Mašek (Vladimír Ráž), a member of a socially varied group of alcoholics who gather in the U Kroců wine bar, is similar to Kuba Kowalski due to his destructive attitude towards his own young life and his devoted partner's feelings. Out of the three selected Czech films, *Dnes naposled* deals with alcoholism with the most intense, almost research-like thoroughness. It presents not only the different shattered characters of people who have become addicted to alcohol, but also various ways and nuances of drinking itself – in the morning, at noon, in the evening, alone in secret, or with cronies, with routine regularity or with an ostentatious „today for the last time“. Psychiatrist Jaroslav Skála, expert in addiction treatment and pioneer in creating alcoholic rehabilitation centres in Czechoslovakia, participated in the creation of the film as a specialised adviser. The Alcohol Addiction Department of U Apolináře Hospital, which he was in charge of for many years, features in the film. However, it does not represent a superficial saving institution and the film does not show specific options of treatment. When we watch engineer Danda (Zdeněk Štěpánek), another member of the group in U Kroců wine bar, walking along the deserted Apolinářská Street, past walls of flaking plaster and barred windows, it definitely does not arouse optimism at first glance.

Similarly to the film *Tam na konečné*, the film *Dnes naposled* was also acknowledged by critics as a mature film in terms of direction and acting, but its connection to reality was questioned or at least relativised. Ivan Dvořák's review for *Kino* magazine

seems even slightly absurd with its confrontation of the artistic statement with statistical data:

„Screenwriters Josef Neuberg and František Vlček wrote the story of the film ‚It was a cheerful bunch‘, which dealt with the problem of alcoholism and with the destructive influence of alcohol on everything forming the content of human life. But before the story turned into a screenplay and finally into Martin Frič’s film, *Dnes naposled*, we witnessed a series of social and administrative interventions to solve the horribly growing problem of alcoholism. These were in the form of interventions such as the extension of alcoholic rehabilitation centres and counselling for alcoholics, mobilisation of public interest in the culture of lifestyle and, last but not least, also increase in the prices of alcoholic beverages. After six months, this resulted in an average 13 % decrease in alcohol consumption in the whole country.“^[6]

Procházka and Kachyňa’s film *Naděje* dates back to the 1960s (it was released in January 1964). We may certainly see it within a different context. However, we follow the line of films on alcoholics which we have been following since the second half of the 1950s and in which *Naděje* also has a place. Unlike the purely urban films which we have focused on until now, the fragile relationship between Lucin (Rudolf Hrušínský) and Magdalena (Hana Hegerová) in *Naděje* develops in the ugly setting of a big gravel pit.

The character of Lucin, which was written specially for Rudolf Hrušínský,^[7] is the most precisely depicted one out of all the aforementioned film alcoholics. Procházka does not screen his activities; he does not create a man without a past or an artificially determined character. Already in his short film story of 1962 he plastically depicted Lucin in his contradictions, using his typical condensation: „Drunkard. He has already drunk the Danube. But he never looks like he has drunk anything. These are the worst. He is forty-three. Corpulent. He likes to eat. He would like to eat regularly one day. He has already achieved it twice in his life, the first time during military service, the second time in prison. He does not have happy memories of either. He is a liar. And sometimes also the other thing. [...] But he says: – I have never lain face down in the mud! I have lain down many times, yes, but never face downwards! – He takes a lot of pride in this. You only need to tell him: – ‘I saw you the other day somewhere lying face down’ – and he will start protesting right away.“^[8]

Lucin's character combines childishness and aggression, cynicism and emotion. Procházka managed to use his scenes to depict his influence on his surroundings with admirable precision in small episodic situations. One of these, for instance, is when Lucin asks the shop assistant in a station snack bar for a shot of spirits after opening hours: „She looked at Lucin mistrustfully in a friendly way, probably just as if a whale had suddenly emerged from the tracks and leaned its fins against her sandwich counter.“^[9]

Both Lucin and Magdalena are outsiders – he is excluded because of his drinking, she because of her reputation as a prostitute. The explanation in the introduction to the screenplay^[10] already shows that in the first half of the 1960s, the writers still saw it as a potential problem. They suitably referred to the functioning of socialist society, where everybody had a right to dignity, and also to the fact that the protagonists were „fighting“ for this dignity. Struggles and battles were a favourite part of the ideological rhetoric, but Lucin and Magdalena are uplifted mainly by desire and emotion. Procházka's work with biblical motifs and other symbols is inconsistent and too important for the narrative of the film. However, it includes this uplifting and purification of the protagonists from what they apparently definitively are. Both are almost magnetically attracted by the colour white – the colour of purity.

At the turn of the 1950s and 1960s, the topic of alcoholism was connected with progressive cinematographic tendencies. Even contemporary reviews admitted that the treatment of the topic was impressive and professional, despite asking at the same time for an explanation of the protagonists' situation or even for its solution. Educational short films had the ambition of looking for a way out. One of these was even called *Východisko* (Way Out, d. Hanuš Burger, 1955). However, the style and method of narration in the aforementioned feature films were subject to different intentions, and for this reason they can be classified together with foreign films on the same topic. The film *Dnes naposled* and the Polish *Pętla* could be compared with the Oscar-winning *Lost Weekend* (d. Billy Wilder, 1945) from the point of view of their dramaturgical composition. „Alcoholic films“ of high quality already also had a tradition in the Czech environment. For example, we may mention the silent film, *Batalion* (Battalion, d. Přemysl Pražský, 1927).

Contemporary reactions were that the affiliation with a tradition and with a certain „genre“ was connected to the opinion that the topic of alcoholism was simply attractive for film and for its aesthetic possibilities, but that the final value of the film was often limited. The interpretation of the disintegration of the alcoholic's personality as an expression of general disillusion was suppressed, while the paradoxical statement was strengthened that films about people and phenomena from the „margins of society“, however elaborated they were, were in fact isolated from reality. Jan Žalman unequivocally protested against the persistence of these statements in connection with the film, *Naděje*, when he introduced his admiring review in the *Film a doba* magazine with the following words: „A new human being is being born in our country, a socialistic human being... How many times did we declare this, not such a long time ago? And one day it turned out that it is much easier to give birth to a phrase than to give birth to a new human being.“^[11]

Notes:

[1] Za vysokou ideovou a uměleckou úroveň československého filmu. *Rudé právo* 30, 1950, No. 92 (19. 4.), p. 1, 3.

[2] František Kahuda, Za užší sepětí filmové tvorby se životem lidu. 1959, February 23, Banská Bystrica. – Published version of Minister of Education and Culture František Kahuda's during the conference which took place within the 1st Festival of Czechoslovak Film in Banská Bystrica. *Illuminace* 16, 2004, No. 4, p. 178.

[3] Jiří Hrbas, Jaké jsou perspektivy našeho filmového umění. *Film a doba* 5, 1959, No. 5, p. 302.

[4] They worked, for example, with Bořivoj Zeman on the films *Dovolená s Andělem* (Anděl on Vacation, 1952) a *Anděl na horách* (Anděl in the Mountains, 1955).

[5] As Václav Macek observes in his book about Ján Kadár, the character of alcoholic Pešta can be seen as a character with the immunity of a clown who can say lines which could not be uttered by any other character. Comp. Václav Macek, *Ján Kadár*. Bratislava: Slovenský filmový ústav 2008, p. 80.

[6] Ivan Dvořák, Dnes naposled. *Kino* 13, 1958, No. 25 (4. 12.), p. 396.

[7] O filmu „Naděje“ hovoří režisér Karel Kachyňa. *Filmové informace* 15, 1964, No. 2, p. 3.

[8] Jan Procházka, *Naděje. Filmová povídka*. Praha: Filmové studio Barrandov 1962, pp. 5–6.

[9] Ibid, p. 31.

[10] Jan Procházka – Karel Kachyňa, *Naděje*. Literární scénář. Praha: Filmové studio Barrandov 1962.

[11] Jan Žalman [Antonín Novák], Čtvrtý v řadě. *Film a doba* 10, 1964, No. 3, p. 161.