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The End of August at the Hotel Ozone: the social-political archetype and its allegorical depiction

“Fifty years have passed since the last hydrogen bomb hit the Earth. There is nothing. No rocks, no cities, no people. But wait! Twelve women march through the landscape. They’ve been walking for many years, led by an old woman who remembers the war. The women following her are the children of those who survived... There is but a knot of people, living wildly on the remains of the world and dying out, at a fast pace, of leukaemia and other aftermaths of the war.” August 22, 1958)[1]

That is how Pavel Juráček first described *Konec srpna v hotelu Ozon* (The End of August at the Hotel Ozone, 1958), a short story he wrote during his studies of dramaturgy at the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (FAMU) and what was to become the subject of a film of the same name by Jan Schmidt.[2] The main message and theme of the story that the film is based on however somewhat changed during the years that separated the creation of the literary text and Schmidt’s film, because so did the social-political circumstances under which the story was written. While the story and the film both thematize the threat of a nuclear war and the lives of people that would survive such event[3], they differ in the encrypted allegoric depiction of social-political context that they carry. This context can be reconstructed using Zdeněk Mathauser’s theoretical propositions included in *Metodologické meditace aneb Tajemství symbolu* (Methodological Meditations or Secret of the Symbol, 1989)[4] that are mainly based on his understanding of the concept of allegory. And, furthermore, based on the assumption that allegorization “as a poetic process producing allegoric texts”[5] was Juráček’s

(alternatively Schmidt's) either conscious or unconscious intention when producing both the short story and the literary preparation texts for the film. Allegory, as a poetic process in art, has, according to Mathauser, an "analytical and dualistic" nature, which means that it is composed of two elements – an *a priori* idea and a secondary image. The *a priori* idea represents what is being allegorized, the element being converted into an artistic form (i.e. a political system that is being viewed critically, or a general human characteristic); the secondary image represents the specific artistic depiction of such reality, captured through a media manifestation of the artwork, in this case in a short story and a film. The *a priori* idea thus holds a crucial position within the allegory as the objective of the artist is to use the secondary image to discover the *a priori* idea that this image represents. Based on this thesis, the following text will focus primarily on describing the individual principles of the allegories that were used in *The End of August at the Hotel Ozone*. The denomination of allegory was attributed to Juráček's and Schmidt's film also by Stanislava Přádná, who, in her study *Démanty všednosti* (Diamonds of ordinariness, 2002)[6] refers to the film within the chapter *Podobenství* (Parables) and emphasises the allegorical nature of the character of the Old Woman whom she considers a personification of memory. Jan Žalman also alludes to the allegorical character of *Ozone*. In his anthology *Umlčený film* (Silenced film) he describes the motion picture as "a variation of the Revelation to John 'done our way'"[7], thus makes reference to a biblical allegory, a parable from the New Testament portraying the apocalypse. Despite the fact that the film is classified as an allegory/parable by various texts, the denomination is not completely unequivocal – it is rendered more difficult by the existence of a thin line between allegory and symbol[8] as well as a frequent blending of elements of different genres and the artistic processes that these entail. In terms of genres that often resort to allegory as a poetical process, Mathauser mentions fables and morality plays. Genre-wise, *Hotel Ozone* is often considered to be science fiction (Jan Lukeš [9] or the article *Filosofický sci-fi film* [Philosophical sci-fi film]) [10] or a utopic vision (Galina Kopaněva)[11], a fact confirmed by its director Jan Schmidt in several interviews: "The film has certain sci-fi elements, but the most precise would be to call it a vision." [12] Schmidt's view arises from the fact that the *Hotel Ozone* portrays one of the possible outlooks of how – based on the development of society – the world could look like one day. Juráček, on the other hand, labelled the theme of the story as "fantastic" when he invented it.[13] Following Mathauser

who links allegory with morality plays, we can also speak of elements of morality in *Hotel Ozone*. They relate mostly to the portrayal and critique of human cruelty, which only confirms the use of allegory as one of the poetic processes. Similarly, Antonín Liehm describes Schmidt's film as a morality play, one that strives to highlight the issues of society by picturing cruelties in a naturalistic way: "...It is an art to be a moralist without moralizing. Schmidt managed to shoot his morality play as an evil, unobscured reality. That is why it stands a chance that people will actually hear its voice and message."^[14]

According to Mathauser, allegories are created in a specific period in time. In consequence, his conception emphasizes the dependence of the allegory on a historical context: one that surrounded it at the time of its origin, and one in which the allegorical interpretation, that is the "hermeneutical approach, through which we perceive allegoric texts," takes place.^[15] In order to understand allegories correctly, we must differentiate between the genesis and the function of the artwork. According to Mathauser, genesis is the original intention of the work, i.e. the allegorization of the work (the above mentioned "poetic process that produces allegoric texts")^[16] that is linked to the time of its creation. By function, on the other hand, he understands the interpretation/perception of the artwork. This interpretation takes place within a different time period and is thus somewhat updated and transformed. If we were to apply these criteria to *The End of August at the Hotel Ozone*, the short story by Pavel Juráček would constitute its genesis – an allegorization of the original message of the text. The primary meaning of this message however changed with the film adaptation in 1966. Whereas in 1958, the conflict between the East and the West escalated (in consequence of the harsh repression of the Hungarian revolution which did not fall in line with the expected social-political loosening, for instance), in 1966 the threat of a nuclear war became daily routine. When (wilfully or unwilfully) ignoring the initial allegoric intent of the original story, it was possible to find new references in the text, this time related to the period of its interpretation. Juráček's unpublished story allegorized the social-political context of the second half of the 1950s, the „climax of the Cold War“, and thus accentuated at much greater extent than the film an end of the world caused by a third world war. This is evident from a certain engagement of the story – an effort to appeal to the readers and show them how a potential nuclear catastrophe would affect their lives and the world around them. As

we learn from Juráček's diary entries: "They may be taken aback by the certainty with which I write about a destroyed world; they will reject it at first (the certainty) and fail to acknowledge that it is precisely this certainty that constitutes the most efficient tool for people to believe without resistance that this is HOW it could end."

[17]

The short story simultaneously emphasizes cruelty, it applies to the humankind that caused the war as well as to the people that survived it. Besides the dysfunctionality of the socialist system, it is cruelty that appears as one of the primary topics in other Juráček's stories from the same period, for instance in: *Rostou nám krásní lidé* (Beautiful People are Maturing, 1957), *Prostřednictvím kočky* (Through a Cat, 1958) or *Nejzatracenější týden v roce* (The Damnest Week of the Year, 1958). [18] In case of the people that lived – the protagonists of *Hotel Ozone* – cruelty is induced unnaturally, by means of a kind of historical twist/pressure, same as it actually happened in history. It was precisely because of this "directly" interpretable allegory of the social-political context of the day that the first attempt to adapt the story – as Jan Schmidt's graduation film – faced production issues and, alternatively, pushed Schmidt to make *Black and White Sylva* (Černobílá Sylva, 1961) instead, also based on Juráček's screenplay.

In the second half of the 1960s, the historical context changes, the theme of an apocalyptic vision caused by a third world war seems, as Josef Škvorecký put it in 1966, "somewhat anachronistic". [19] Seven years later (the literary preparation of the film initiated in 1965), in a different social-political context, the original topic acquires a completely new meaning. The author of both the original theme and the supporting texts for the film is aware of this shift, and the audience and the critics are too (articles by A. J. Liehm [21] and G. Kopaněva) [22]. The short story that Pavel Juráček allegorized in relation to the historical framework of the second half of the 1950s is thus re-interpreted in the mid-1960s, this time in a different context; and based on this interpretation a film is made as a result of a new allegorization. In consequence, an opposition is established between the story as the film in terms of what they primarily portray – "what can the Cold War lead to" and "what has it led to and what are the consequences". Whereas the story depicts the nuclear catastrophe as a possible/probable future and its characters as potential survivors, the film refers to the present – to the period when the catastrophe takes place – rather than

to the future. As in Juráček's and Schmidt's film *Joseph Kilian* (Postava k podpírání, 1963), historical circumstances lead people into an existential crisis, to mutual estrangement, to an inability to communicate. This affects the generation that is partially responsible for the situation, guilty of venerating higher ideals, as well as the younger generation that is predominantly passive and who lacks any fundamental life values. The threat of a third world war therefore falls into the background in the film adaption. It is the passivity and indifference of the young generation that emerges as one of the central themes of the allegorization. This attitude leads to a conflict with the older generation which Juráček reflects on in his *Diary* (Deník, 2003) by comparing student riots that erupted on the occasion of the May student celebrations in 1956 and later in 1962: "In 1956, students felt engaged and wanted to participate. This year they were anarchistic. They stood in opposition, but they didn't want anything, they didn't know what they should want, because the gap between them and the social reality they lived in grew. In 1962 they do not feel a shared responsibility, they dissociate from it, whereas in 1956 it was just about that (...) This generation no longer wishes to work together, to negotiate, to argue. For this generation it is no longer worth it, because, without ever being reactive, they've stopped believing. They profess nonconformism at all cost."[23].

In *Hotel Ozone*, the allegory of the younger generation is embodied by a group of young women who have survived the war and now represent the last of humankind, uprooted from a natural way of life, born into a world of decay and crumbling values, where the only link to the old world left is the Old Woman. The purpose of their journey is sacred and natural only to her; for the girls that have never known it, it remains alien. They are not interested, and they approach it passively. In the words of Galina Kopaněva: "A new generation has matured, unperturbed by nuclear bombs or space flights. They view them as self-evident, worthy of less attention than a newly released Beatles song. It seems as if there were young 'strangers' living among us. Not unlike those represented by the girls group in Schmidt's film."[24] In the film its most apparent when one of the girls reads mechanically, with no emotion or a clearer idea, a love letter from the old world whose author was probably the same age as the girls. His problems, revolving around love and jealousy, are nonetheless extremely different from the everyday reality of the girls whose circumstances and daily struggle to stay alive have drained them emotionally. This element is also reflected in the

scenes in which the girls fail to share the excitement of the Old Woman when they discover a person. It is more explicitly shown in the film story that preceded the screen adaptation: “People – they were the faith and the Old Woman was its apostle. That’s how it was with the world before. But the girls didn’t know it, they only heard about it from her. Wasn’t it more reasonable to think that the cities they were passing through, the canned food they ate, the clothes they wore, just existed on their own, as does grass or water or a cloud? The Old Woman was now screaming People! It had nothing to do with them, it was something only she understood. And so, they stood above her calmly and waited. She got mad: “What are you looking at? Why aren’t you happy?” [25] In their indifference and their understanding of the dehumanized and shattered world that surrounds them as something self-evident, the girls gradually stop being human and start to adapt to the cruel laws of nature that are the only ones that they have known in their lives.

Antonín Liehm talks about dehumanization as a result of a decay of human relationships and values that is accompanied by a complete unconcern towards other people and the commonest of people’s problems: „A person that has been left in a world without people isn’t but a desperate and hopeless caricature of a human being. This is what it’s all about, not about a world apocalypse, a voice warning humankind against self-destruction, although this message can be deduced from the film as well. (...) We stand before a philosophical reflexion that goes beyond, or gets closer, if you will. It also shows that all dehumanization of the world – including deliberately an inhabited world, one that has not been destroyed by a nuclear cataclysm, but a world where all values and relationships that make people human have been or are being destroyed – leads to people becoming less human, creates something that closely resembles (...) some young people that we see around us today.“ [26] Despite the fact that the girl characters have names, they do not look like real people, there is no psychology to them, they are defined by their actions and their appearance rather than their thoughts. Their names, which in a normal society would conventionally emphasize their individuality, disappear behind their behaviour, a specific act: that who killed the dog; that who shot the old man; that who caught a snake; that who set the petrol can on fire, etc. These deeds however do not make the girls unique – they share the same character and any one of them could have committed it, a fact that suggests a collective/common status rather than an individual one. Their individual

actions are in fact collective actions of the whole group and they partially serve as a tool of expression of their relationship towards the world around them. Antonín Liehm interprets this behaviour as follows: „These deeds represent philosophical definitions of people and relationships. Not only relationships between people, but relationships of people towards their surroundings, nature, life.”^[27] While at the end, the girls are pursuing an imaginary goal established by their leader – find other people, have children and restore the balance of the world – due to their distorted values and natural ignorance, it is unlikely that they will be able to fulfil their mission. Another character that is portrayed allegorically is Herold – besides the Old Woman another representative of the older generation, responsible to a great extent for the physical and psychological deformation of the world and its people, therefore for the lack of mutual understanding and the estrangement occurred. After meeting the group, the Old Man focuses purely on his own interests – he doesn't want to be alone, so he tries to ensure that the girls stay with him even at the cost of them failing to accomplish their goal. His passivity and hypocrisy come through also when he abandons the girls in their search for new people even though he pretended to share the Old Woman's convictions and faith in her presence. The character of Herold simultaneously exposes the indifference and shallowness in how the older, wiser people treat the younger generation. It is apparent when he calls the girls “heartless animals” without admitting to himself that their behaviour is mostly caused by the failure of his own generation. The Old Woman is Herold's counterpart. She could, from a certain point of view, represent a part of the older generation that has realized its own error, then experienced certain disillusion and finally has come back to elemental life values – the rediscovery of life and the world. Unlike the Old Man, she acknowledges the debt of the older generation towards the younger one and bases her leadership on selflessness. The Old Woman holds a completely unique role in the film – through deeper psychology and the way she takes her faith into her own hands, her character transcends the concept of allegory and almost becomes a symbol. As opposed to the other characters, the Old Woman breaks away from her archetype/a priori idea. It is her portrayal/secondary depiction that is more connected to the world that is starting to prevail. Her presence in the story is less static and more difficult to interpret – she can constitute a symbol of age, memory, history faith, the old world, etc. This is supported by the way her character is shot – unlike the girls who are captured in a naturalistic way, the scenes with the Old Woman are more

stylized.

The primary archetype of social-political allegorization in Schmidt's and Juráček's film is therefore not the threat of a nuclear war, as it was the case in the short story, but rather a more general issue – the dehumanization of people linked to a loss of values, meaning of life and certain life ideas, further supported by estrangement and a lack of intergenerational understanding. That is why the characters that represent opposing generations are the ones that are the objects and bearers of allegorization. By thematizing generational conflict and existential crises of young people and humans in general, *Hotel Ozon* reminds us of other Juráček's films such as *Joseph Kilian*, *Every Young Man* (*Každý mladý muž*, 1965), *Case for a Rookie Hangman* (*Případ pro začínajícího kata*, 1969) and screenplays (*Daisies* [*Sedmikrásky*, 1966]), and simultaneously falls in line with the tradition of “existential films” of the Czechoslovak New Wave.

Notes:

[1] Juráček, Pavel, *Deník 2. 1956–1959*. Vyd. 1. Praha: Torst, 2017, p. 565.

[2] Another joint projects of Pavel Juráček and Jan Schmidt include Schmidt's student documentary film *Cars without a Home* (*Auta bez domova*, 1959) and his graduation film *Black and White Sylva* (*Černobílá Sylva*, 1961), which Juráček wrote a script for. Their cooperation culminated with the short film *Joseph Kilian* (*Postava k podpírání*, 1963), based once again on Juráček's idea but with the difference that this time Juráček directed the film himself (see Schnapková, Andrea a kol., *Postava k podpírání: kritické a analytické studie* [A Character in Need of Support: a critical and analytical study]. Praha: Casablanca, 2017.).

[3] Other representatives of the so called Czechoslovak New Wave expressed their views on the topic of a nuclear threat as well. For instance, Jaromil Jireš in *The Cry* (*Křik*, 1963), Věra Chytilová in *Daisies* (*Sedmikrásky*, 1969) or Juraj Jakubisko in his story *Pútnici* (*Nomads*), the final part of the triptych of stories called *The Deserter and the Nomads* (*Zběhovia a pútnici*, 1968).

[4] Mathauser, Zdeněk, *Metodologické meditace aneb Tajemství symbolu*. Brno: Blok, 1989. Mathauser outlines the problematic of allegory primarily through its relation to symbols, the main object of research of his monography. To describe it he uses theoretical premises of structuralism (Jan Mukařovský) and semiotics (mainly the foundations of the Tartu School and Paul Ricoeur). Besides these two approaches, in his Methodological Meditations he equally acknowledges the bases of phenomenology, formalism, hermeneutics or French structuralism. Mathauser's concept also builds on the traditional concept of symbol and allegory established by Johann Wolfgang Goethe, a concept so significant, that it has been adopted unchanged in the formulations of other theoreticians who've further developed and specified it.

[5] *Lexikon teorie literatury a kultury: koncepce, osobnosti, základní pojmy*. Brno: Host, 2006, p. 27.

[6] Příkladná, Stanislava, Poetika postav, typů, (ne)herců. In Cieslar, Jiří, Příkladná, Stanislava a Škapová, Zdena, *Démanty všednosti: český a slovenský film 60. let: kapitoly o nové vlně*. Praha: Pražská scéna, 2002, pp. 224–237.

[7] Žalman, Jan. *Umlčený film*. Praha: KMa, 2008.

[8] The issue of allegory and symbol, i.e. the transitions and intertwining of both processes, was pursued by F. W. J. Schelling and J. W. Goethe, who were later followed by J. Mukařovský, G. Lukács, T. Todorov and particularly by Paul Ricoeur. The fundamental differentiation between these entities is characterized by Mathauser as follows: "A symbol is an allegory that has been embezzled in itself and has chosen to exist independently. (...) In a way it has become "immanent", it has started to attract more attention to its outer form". (Mathauser, *Metodologické meditace aneb Tajemství symbolu*, p. 53.). For this reason, it is impossible to reduce works of art as *The End of August at the Hotel Ozone* to works that are built uniquely on the principal of allegory, because, although they may sprout from this principle, they gradually outgrow it in favour of the symbolic principle.

[9] *Československý filmový zázrak 14: Hledání tvaru*. Directed by Martin Šulík. Czech Rep, 2014.

- [10] Filosofický sci-fi film, *Svobodné slovo* 23, 1967, No. 45, p. 4.
- [11] Kopaněva, Galina, Zánik sveta v jednej vízii. *Film a divadlo* 11, 1967, No. 12, p. 9.
- [12] Filosofický sci-fi film. *Svobodné slovo* 23, 1967, No. 45, p. 4.
- [13] Juráček, Pavel, *Deník. 2. 1956–1959*. Praha: Torst, 2017, p. 565.
- [14] Liehm, A. J, Jiný, a přece z nich. *Film a doba* 13, 1967, No. 2, p. 97.
- [15] *Lexikon teorie literatury a kultury: koncepce, osobnosti, základní pojmy*. Brno: Host, 2006, p. 27.
- [16] Ibid, p. 27.
- [17] Juráček, Pavel, *Deník. 2. 1956–1959*. Praha: Torst, 2017, p. 567.
- [18] All stories were published in the compilation *Prostřednictvím kočky* (Juráček, Pavel, *Prostřednictvím kočky: texty z let 1951–1958*; edited by Pavel Hájek). Praha: Knihovna Václava Havla, 2014.
- [19] Škvorecký, Josef, *Všichni ti bystří mladí muži a ženy: osobní historie českého filmu*. Praha: Horizont, 1991, p. 201.
- [20] Pavel Juráček's letter to Fana Abramovna Gecelevič from September 27th, 1966:
“I based the script of *Ozone* on a short story I wrote nine years ago while at FAMU. I personally think it has lost its meaning in the meantime, but the Army Film was interested in it, so I wrote the script. (...) When we were discussing it at the Ministry of Home Defence, someone said the film would irritate the Americans and the Chinese. Because it is a film that speaks for people who, under certain circumstances, can be nothing other than victims” (Juráček, Pavel, *Deník. 3. 1959–1974*. Praha: Torst, 2018, p. 575.)
- [21] Liehm, A. J. Jiný, a přece z nich. *Film a doba* 13, 1967, No 2, p. 97.
- [22] Kopaněva, Galina, Zánik sveta v jednej vízii. *Film a divadlo* 11, 1967, No 12, p. 9.
- [23] Juráček, Pavel, *Deník (1959–1974)*. Praha: Národní filmový archiv, 2003, p. 310.

[24] Kopaněva, Galina, Zánik sveta v jednej vízii. *Film a divadlo* 11, 1967, No. 12, p. 9.

[25] The film story was published in the compilation Juráček, Pavel, Fikejz, Miloš, Cieslar, Jiří. *Postava k podpírání*. Praha: Havran, 2001, p. 105.

[26] Liehm, A. J, Jiný, a přece z nich. *Film a doba* 13, 1967, No. 2, p. 96.

[27] Ibid, p. 97.