

MARTIN ŠRAJER / 13. 9. 2023

The End of Old Times

For Vladislav Vančura, films were more than just a hobby. He played a pivotal role in the Czechoslovak film culture of the 1930s as a theorist writing about the new medium – for instance for magazine *Host* – and a practitioner as well. In 1932, one of the most acclaimed Czech writers started to help shape Czechoslovak cinema also as a director and screenwriter. After Karel Nový and Jindřich Plachta put in a good word for him at the A-B Studio, which was at that time building the Barrandov Studios, Vančura got an opportunity to rewrite the story of *Before Graduation* (Před maturitou, 1932) which he subsequently co-directed with Svatopluk Innemann. Positive reception by the viewers and critics opened up a path for Vančura to work on more films. Already before finishing *Before Graduation*, Vančura had considered a modern paraphrase of the story of Baron Munchhausen. He was inspired to work on this project by Julius Schmitt, production director in A-B. At first, Vančura wrote a story titled *Don't Be Shy* (Jen se neostýchejte), then a script simply titled *Prášíl* (Munchhausen). Vančura used the character of the fictional Baron to satirise the snobbish society of Czech landowners and upstarts. He cast his friend Jindřich Plachta to the lead role. The film was supposed to be shot in the newly built Barrandov Studios and on location in a chateau in Louč near Poděbrady. But because of creative disagreement between Vančura and A-B management concerning, among other things, the film's budget, the company didn't approve the project. Vančura then decided to make the film with his own funds. But that didn't happen either and so the story later served as a basis for his novel *The End of Old Times* (Konec starých časů).

The book was first published in 1934. Interest in it was revived decades later thanks to Jiří Menzel's film adaptation. Menzel had Vančura's original script at his disposal, it was given to him in the 1970s by Kamil Pixa, director of *Krátký film*. But as Menzel uncompromisingly states in his memoirs: "Vančura was a great writer, but he didn't know much about film. His script couldn't be used to make a good film."^[1]

Jiří Blažek, director of one of the Barrandov creative groups, wrote a new script in 1987. Blažek became familiar with Vančura during his studies at FAMU when he adapted *Jan Marhoul the Baker* (Pekař Jan Marhoul).^[2] When he tried to simplify the layered text full of various motifs for the big screen, he found out that Menzel longed to film it once and they joined forces.^[3] *The End of Old Times* takes place shortly after the First World War at the stately home Kratochvíle where an unexpected guest appears. However, the charming and well-mannered White Guard Russian exile Megalrogov is, in fact, not a worldly aristocrat, but rather a modern-day Baron Munchhausen or perhaps a Don Quijote who likes to self-assuredly embellish his stories. But he still manages to charm the uneducated people increasing their own importance by a glistening façade and take them back to the times when people didn't earn respect just with wealth but also with gentility. Everything is suddenly centered around Megalrogov. The main motif of Vančura's satiric story and Menzel's nostalgic film adaptation is a conflict between two worlds with different values – the old feudal one and the new capitalist. In his adaptation, Menzel omitted retrospective passages (except the prologue) and tells the story chronologically. Unlike Vančura, he has no ambition to portray complex relationship and the atmosphere of the turning point in history. He accentuates the comic elements by using his trademark methods from silent slapsticks. Jaromír Šofr's cinematography imbues the film with romanticising period tone. Šofr describes his visual concept with the following sentences: "When we discussed the visual depiction and searched for its style, Jiří Menzel wanted the film to use a delicate pastel tonality reminiscent of old period lithographs. The blurry background behind the actors contributes to this visual atmosphere. You can achieve that by abstracting the background or placing tulle behind the actors to blur the background."^[4]

Despite simplification in form and content and overall refinement in line with Menzel's Hrabal adaptations, the film remained relatively faithful to its literary counterpart. That applies also for its rich language and stylised dialogues. However, when looking back at the film, Menzel himself didn't show much appreciation: "In retrospect, I know that my script wasn't very good, the film was boring at times, but there were several good things that turned out well."^[5] The period reviews mention the lack of dramatic elements in the film and the time of its premiere didn't help it either. It was finished in 1989, but the premiere was held in April 1990, after the events of the Velvet

Revolution. That dampened the satirical tone of some replicas aimed at the poor taste and provinciality of people in power whose position doesn't correspond to their abilities. As a depiction of ideological narrow-mindedness and emptiness whose representatives personify the typical traits of Czech national character, however, the film doesn't lose its validity.

The End of Old Times (Konec starých časů, Czechoslovakia 1989), director: Jiří Menzel, script: Jiří Blažek, Jiří Menzel, cinematography: Jaromír Šofr, music: Jiří Šust, cast: Josef Abrhám, Marián Labuda st., Jaromír Hanzlík, Rudolf Hrušínský, Jan Hartl, Jan Hrušínský, Jiří Adamíra, Josef Somr, Chantal Poullain et al. Barrandov Film Studios, 93 min.

Literature:

Luboš Bartošek, *Desátá múza Vladislava Vančury*. Prague: Československý filmový ústav 1973.

Luboš Bartošek, Neznámé libreto Vladislava Vančury. *Panoráma: sborník filmových teoretických statí*, no. 4., 30th September 1976, pp. 71–77.

Jiří Menzel, *Rozmarná léta*. Prague: Sloart 2013.

Pavel Taussig, K filmové seberealizaci Vladislava Vančury. *Filmový sborník historický 1. Film a literatura*. Prague: Československý filmový ústav 1988, pp. 121–130.

Vladislav Vančura, *Konec starých časů*. Prague: Sloart 2013.

Notes:

[1] Jiří Menzel, *Rozmarná léta*. Prague: Sloart 2013, p. 405.

[2] Jiří Patočka, Konec starých časů na zámku Kratochvíl. *Kino*, no. 5 (28th February), 1989, p. 9.

[3] Jan Jurka, Interview with Jiří Blažek. *Zpravodaj československého filmu*, no. 4, 1989, p. 7.

[4] Jiří Patočka, Konec starých časů na zámku Kratochvíl. *Kino*, no. 5 (28th February), 1989, p. 9.

[5] Jiří Menzel, op. cit., p. 407.