

MARTIN ŠRAJER / 19. 8. 2023

Václav Gajer

“I set my own goal to make only contemporary films. But not in the way it was sometimes perceived. Even contemporary films can be old. By the same logic, I don't differentiate between old and young filmmakers, as even young filmmakers can be old. I have always built on what I find interesting (it doesn't have to be recent, but you need to look at it with modern eyes). I very much feel to be a Czech and I'm proud of it. Experience taught me that my roots are deep here and that I couldn't work outside.”^[1]

In the 1950s, Václav Gajer was one of the youngest Czechoslovak directors. And also one of the most engaged. His early films consistently fulfilled the doctrine of socialist realism, both ideologically and stylistically. After 1968, he was, however banned from filmmaking. One of the reasons was his joyless existential drama *Catherine and Her Children* (Kateřina a její děti, 1969).

Václav Gajer was born on 19th August 1923 in Šumavské Hoštice in South Bohemia. He often returned because of his family, landscape and film. After finishing secondary business academy, he gravitated towards theatre and music. Eventually, he chose a third option and in 1943, he started working as a messenger and telephone operator in Nationalfilm (along with Lucerna film, it was the only film company during the Protectorate). In the following years, he worked as an assistant on films by Miroslav Cikán and Martin Frič.

Shortly after the war, Gajer became an employee of Czechoslovak State film and worked as an assistant director on the social drama *The Strike* (Siréna, 1947) for which director Karel Steklý won the Golden Lion in Venice. Collaboration with several renowned filmmakers won Gajer a reputation as a reliable filmmaker. In 1948, when he was only 25 years old, he was able to make his first film. Detective comedy *The Three of Clubs* (Křížová trojka, 1948) was produced by the production group of Jiří Weiss.

Gajer was his assistant on films *Raptors* (Dravci, 1947) and *The Stolen Frontier* (Uloupená hranice, 1947).

The Three of Clubs, a film set among students, was shot during spring 1948 on locations close to Gajer – near Vimperk in South Bohemia and Červená Lhota Chateau. Weiss personally oversaw the production. Due to many documentary shots, documentary filmmaker Vladimír Kabelík was asked to be the second head of production. Just like in other socialist detective stories, an attempted theft of an antique served as a basis for an educational message.

The film's young and undisciplined heroes need to be brought in line by their ideologically conscious tutor. In line with the ideology, nobility is portrayed in a stereotypical manner. Capitalists and Nazis in Gajer's following film, psychological drama *Mr. Habětín is Leaving* (Pan Habětín odchází, 1949) are also caricatures. Before the war, factory owner Habětín exploits the workers and during the Protectorate, he collaborates with the invaders. After the events of February 1948, he is punished by enraged labourers.

Due to its increased social importance, *Mr. Habětín's* post-production was a priority and it was finished before *The Three of Clubs*. The generously conceived portrayal of the unscrupulous industrialist was premiered at the 4th Mariánské Lázně Festival where it was awarded a Special Mention. Only after that, Gajer's directorial debut entered distribution. Due to the lower age and experience of the director, both films were scrutinised by the press.

Gajer passed the test. In the eyes of the nationalised cinema industry, he proved his artistic skill and the ability to clearly express political "truths". Beginning with *Mr. Habětín*, his passion for socialism began manifesting in his active search for suitable themes and literary works. He also began writing his own technical scripts. Gajer was originally supposed to film the drama *The Trap* (Past, 1950) taking place during the occupation. But the director's chair was eventually assigned to Martin Frič and Gajer only helped to write the script of this acclaimed film.

The reason was Gajer's pulmonary disease he had been fighting for some time. His promising film career was slowed down by his stay in a sanatorium, the setting of one of his future films *Dreams for Sunday* (Sny na neděli, 1959). He returned to filmmaking

after his recovery in 1952 with a model socialism-building drama *The Smiling Country* (Usměvavá zem, 1952) based on a script by František Vlček embodying the principles of social realism.

The film depicting a socialist transformation of a Czech village was filmed near Strakonice in South Bohemia. The joyful collectivised life in the country is spoiled by backward kulaks. But the Unified Farmers' Cooperative puts everything in order. *The Smiling Country*, created in close collaboration with the Central Dramaturgy and the Film Council, dutifully propagated socialism and implemented the cultural and political directive of the Central Committee of the Communist Party from April 1950 which was supposed to finally bind the film industry to the centre of Communist power.

Another Gajer's propaganda film set in the countryside was a thrilling agitprop *They Come from the Dark* (Přicházejí z tmy, 1953). In a South Bohemian village, a sabotage group is revealed. Supported by Western agents, the group is trying to discourage farmers from joining a farmers' cooperative. But even for the period critics, this film with all-star cast (Jiřina Švorcová, Eduard Cupák, Dana Medřická) was too schematic and implausible, at times even ridiculous. It was mainly due to bad script.^[2]

In 1951, Václav Gajer, not even 30 years old at that time, started teaching at FAMU where he shared his experience with students of direction. As a pedagogue, he was in charge of graduate films of Petr Solan and Pavel Hobl. In addition, he was also the faculty's subdean. Contact with younger generation could have been the reason why Gajer started focusing on films for young adults in the second half of the 1950s. These films made up a majority of his filmography also during the period of Normalisation.

Morality *Vladimír Olmer's Guilt* (Vina Vladimíra Olmera, 1956) revolves around city youth falling into bad ways. A medicine student finds himself in violation of the law because of his irresponsible friends. "Particularly in the scenes where he leads the actors to passion and effect, he betrays the necessary genre of his work, an intimate tone would have been more beneficial," writes Stanislav Zvoníček in a period review.^[3] But despite similar reservations, *Guilt* attracted attention at the Karlovy Vary IFF where Jan Kališ won an award for cinematography, and it was also screened at the Edinburgh Festival.

Co-production *Those Born in 21* (Ročník 21, 1957), produced in Germany, also follows young protagonists. This romance filmed in the austere style of Italian neo-realism, without idealisation and pathos of Gajer's previous films, portrays the stories of Czech boys taken to Germany where they become forced workers. While clearing the debris after an air raid, one of them falls in love with a local nurse.

Using a script by his friend Ota Hofman, Gajer made another intimate romance, the aforementioned *Dreams for Sunday* set in a sanatorium. With the same screenwriter, Gajer worked on three more films: *The Seventh Continent* (Sedmý kontinent, 1960), *Rabbits in the Tall Grass* (Králičí ve vysoké trávě, 1961) and *Ruffled Surface* (Neklidnou hladinou, 1962). In contrast with formally fresh films by the new generation, Gajer's films from the 1960s seemed rather rigid which manifested itself in a decreased interest from the public.

But *Rabbits in the Tall Grass*, a psychological study of a village boy affected by the hypocrisy of his bigoted mother, father and the local priest, received praise from the critics. For its moral profundity and emotional poignancy, Otakar Váňa described it as "perhaps the best work of Gajer's life".^[4] It earned praise also from Jan Žalman who thought that "In *Rabbits*, perhaps for the first time, we don't see Gajer's traditional contrast between an artistic invention and its result. For the first time, we see an artistically mature work whose take on reality isn't affected by traces of naivety and empty creative enthusiasm."^[5]

In 1964, Gajer filmed a story written by Antonín Máša titled *How to Harden Steel* (Jak se kalí ocel) to the anthology film *A Place in the Group* (Místo v houfu, 1964). The highlight of his career in the 1960s is a mid-length tragicomedy *Hot Air* (Horký vzduch, 1965) using a cinema verité style to depict the everyday routines of several old men in the countryside. The film boasts an excellent script written by then 24-year-old Jiří Křižan and outstanding performances by acclaimed actors such as Zdeněk Štěpánek and Jaroslav Marvan. The film was, however, banned right after its completion as Czechoslovak President Novotný allegedly didn't like it.

In the atmosphere of easing the grip of the Communist Party, Gajer adapted Ilona Borská's story *Vdovec po snu* published originally in the *Plamen* magazine. This "tragicomedy of middle age"^[6] about the generational clash between a radio

presenter (Václav Voska) and editor of a women's programme (Jiřina Jirásková) *How to Get Rid of Helen* (Jak se zbavit Helenky, 1967) is one of Gajer's more relaxed films. It utilises the knowledge of the inner workings of a radio station. In addition to the story's author, film's dramaturge František Kožík also worked in the radio.

Josef Škvorecký's novel *Miss Silver's Past* (Lvíče) served as a basis for a romantic comedy with a detective twist titled *A Flirt with Miss Stříbrná* (Flirt se slečnou stříbrnou, 1969). Gajer's discovered the book updating the tragedy of Antigona thanks to Zdeněk Mahler who wrote the script of *Helen*. Mahler's and Gajer's technical script for *A Flirt* was finished in August 1968. But the arrival of Soviet tanks postponed the production by several months. The premiere was held in September 1969 without Škvorecký who had already lectured at the Toronto University at that time. His name in the credits brought about a ban on further screenings of the film.

After it was finished, naturalistic drama *Catherine and Her Children* (Kateřina a její děti, 1970) couldn't be screened in the cinemas. The film, depicting the story of an ordinary village woman and her three daughters, entered distribution five years after it was made. The literary script, co-written with the director by the author of *A Squandered Sunday* (Zabitá neděle, 1969) Jiří Křenek, was approved by the old studio management in July 1969. The production took place in the first half of 1970. The first cut didn't get the approval of the censorship committee. Not even cutting some material changed their minds. According to the findings of Štěpán Hulík, the film was supposed to be destroyed in May 1972. That eventually didn't happen and the film's censored version entered a limited distribution in September 1975. In the meantime, Gajer was subjected to an investigation by the party. He was supposed to clarify why he, as a member of the board of the Czechoslovak Union of Workers in Art and Culture, promoted the requirement of "unions without Communists." He also manifested his support of the reformed development by getting involved in the Coordination Committee of Creative Associations.

One of the most important Communist filmmakers of the 1950s, who once proudly celebrated Communist ideals was expelled from the Czechoslovak Communist Party after a party vetting and suspended from director to an assistant director. He returned to the position of director after nine years. In the meantime he worked as an assistant director on films *Golden Wedding* (Zlatá svatba, 1972) and *Death of a Fly*

(Smrt mouchy, 1976).

While Gajer's films from the 1950s are now mostly forgotten, he is remembered for his Normalisation era triptych of family films starring Tomáš Holý and Gustav Valach: *Beneath Badger Rock* (Pod Jezevčí skálou, 1978), *On the Poacher's Path* (Na pytlácké stezce, 1978) and *Behind the Blackthorn* (Za trnkovým keřem, 1980). The protagonists, gamekeeper and his city grandson, find a way to each other on the backdrop of the picturesque Šumava mountains.

Gajer had a chance to rehabilitate himself through a politically harmless work for children and young adults thanks to the support of his friend, established screenwriter and dramaturge Ota Hofman. Gajer continued making films about children from the city and their relation to nature. Unlike films for children by Marie Poledňáková and Milan Vošmik, Gajer's films were characterised by higher seriousness and urgency – it had something to do with using the genre conventions of adventure and detective film.

Václav Gajer closed his career with adaptations of novels for children by Bohumil Říha *The Horse Ryn* (Divoký koník Ryn, 1981) and *Two Boys Under Fire* (Dva kluci v palbě, 1983). In the 1990s, he started working on a documentary about the legacy of philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer and planned to adapt Zdena Salivarová's novel *Honzlová* but didn't finish any of the projects. The director, whose career went through a similarly remarkable development as post-war Czechoslovakia, died on 1st July 1998 in Prague, aged 74.

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Notes:

[1] Lubomír Procházka, Rozhovor o současnosti s režisérem Václavem Gajerem. *Film a doba* 5, 1959, no. 8, p. 549.

[2] See e.g. Miroslav Česal, Kritika filmu Přicházejí z tmy. *Film a doba: otázky a problémy československé a světové kinematografie*, no. 7, 1954, pp. 452–456; Ludvík Veselý, Uchvátit srdce i mysl diváků! *Literární noviny*, no. 25 (29th June), 1954, p. 7.

[3] Stanislav Zvoníček, O filmu Vina Vladimíra Olmera. *Film a doba* 2, 1956, no. 10, p. 673.

[4] Otakar Váňa, Kronika psaná světlem a stínem – XIII. *Kino* 20, 1965, no. 21 (21st October), p. 2.

[5] Jan Žalman, Na krok od tragédie. *Kultura* 6, 1962, no. 13 (29th March), p. 4.

[6] Bohumíra Psychlová, Klamání veřejnosti. *Kino* 22, 1967, no. 21 (19th October), p. 2.